

Instrumental or Immersed Experience: Pleasure, Pain and Object Perception in Locke

Lisa Shapiro*

Abstract This paper aims to draw out two distinct strands in Locke's account of our simple ideas of experience: an instrumental and an immersed model of experience. The place of pleasure and pain in sensation is key to the distinction between these two models. After showing this equivocation in Locke's account, I consider its implications for his account of object perception, or our ideas of particular substances, and suggest that considering these issues in Locke might afford insight into contemporary discussions of the Binding Problem. I conclude by showing how Berkeley and Condillac resolve this equivocation in Locke and considering why Locke himself might have failed to do so.

1 Introduction

In this paper I aim to problematize a pervasive yet unstated assumption about Locke's account of, at least, our simple experience. Most readers take Locke to conceive of simple experience as simply conveying information about the properties objects in the world are meant to have independently of human efforts to engage with that world. It is as if our sense organs are like instruments designed to detect the properties of objects, and our experience of the world might as well be disembodied. While this line of thought is to be found in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,¹ I aim to show that Locke's view wavers between this disembodied or instrumental conception of our experience and one that takes us to

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¹ Cited internally as ECHU with reference to book, chapter and paragraph.

L. Shapiro

Department of Philosophy, Simon Fraser University

be essentially immersed in the world and our experience to be essentially affective. Once I establish the points of tension in Locke's account of our simple experience, I explore one implication of this tension: Locke's account of how we come to perceive objects, or what he terms particular substances, from our simple ideas. Contemporary cognitive psychologists refer to this issue as the Binding Problem – that of how information from different sense modalities gets bound together – and understanding the challenges of Locke's account might afford insight into contemporary discussion of similar issues. Just as we can ask what contemporary import attention to this tension in Locke has, so too can we ask why Locke himself did not resolve this tension, especially since several Lockean adopt a model of immersed experience. I present some thoughts on this matter as well. However, my focus is to elucidate the tension in Locke's account of experience between an instrumental and an immersed conception of embodiment.

In Section 2, I clarify the sense in which Locke's conception of simple experience might as well be disembodied by considering what Locke might mean by asserting that our senses are 'fitted' to the world around us. On one reading, while our simple ideas might well depend on the body we have, our embodied condition does not affect the information those simple ideas provide us with – their content – and in it is in this sense that our experience might as well be disembodied. There is a second possible reading of Locke's notion of 'fittedness', one which is aligned with an alternative immersed conception of simple experience that was prevalent in the early modern period in thinkers such as Descartes, Spinoza, as well as in canonical empiricists such as Berkeley and Condillac. On this alternative account, sensory experience also conveys information about the world, but that information incorporates the way things affect our well-being; pleasure and pain are integral to our sensory ideas. On this line, our embodied condition does affect the content of our sensory ideas. With this distinction in mind, I turn in Section 3 to consider Locke's account of our ideas of pleasure and pain, and identify some tensions and equivocations in that account. In Section 4, I argue further that these issues infect Locke's account of our perceptions of objects. In this section I also consider how contemporary cognitive scientists might gain insight from this point. In Section 5, I briefly note how some empiricists who self-consciously follow Locke resolve his equivocation regarding our ideas of pleasure and pain. They seem to adopt the model of immersed experience. Finally, in Section 6 I speculate about the reasons Locke himself might not have resolved the tension between instrumental and immersed experience in his work.

2 Locke's Account of Sensation as Fitted to our Surroundings

I have claimed that insofar as Locke models sensation as importing information about properties of objects instrumentally, he might as well take sense perception to be disembodied. This claim demands an obvious qualification. It has been widely remarked that Locke is deeply engaged with the scientific developments of the

latter half of the seventeenth century.² This engagement with the contemporary scientific landscape also impacts his discussion of sensation. Not only does Locke admit that we might have had different sorts of simple ideas had we different sensory organs than we do have,³ he also considers the impact of the constitution of the sensory organs we do have on the content of the sorts of simple ideas humans have. He writes:

Had we senses acute enough to discern the minute particles of bodies and the real constitution on which their sensible qualities depend, I doubt not but they would produce quite different ideas in us; and that which is now the yellow colour of Gold would then disappear, and instead of it we should see an admirable texture of parts of a certain size and figure... (ECHU 2.23.8)⁴

Locke, here, is explicitly concerned to make sense of the microscope and the ways in which that piece of technology changes our perceptions, but the general point is nonetheless instructive. Locke seems to acknowledge that we perceive the qualities of things we do because we have the sense organs we have. In this way, Locke does suggest that the content of our sensations is importantly tied to the bodies we have.

This simple sense in which we can understand our bodies as figuring in sensation is, not, however, opposed to an instrumental conception of embodiment. To clarify the distinction between what I am calling instrumental and immersed embodiment and experience, let me consider in more detail the context of the passage quoted above. There Locke asserts that our senses "are fitted ... for the neighborhood of the bodies that surround us, and we have do with" (ECHU 2.23.13). We can elucidate the distinction at issue here by fleshing out this notion of 'fittedness'.

It is clear that, for Locke, our senses are 'fitted' to our surroundings insofar as they serve our purposes. As Locke puts it: "We are able, by our senses, to know, and distinguish things; and to examine them so far, as to apply them to our uses, and several ways to accommodate the exigencies of this life" (ECHU 2.23.12). But we can distinguish two distinct ways in which our sensory experiences can

²This engagement is announced in the *Epistle to the Reader* of the *Essay*, with Locke's self-description as "an under-labourer in clearing ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge" of the sort that Boyle, Sydenham, Huygens, and 'the incomparable Mr. Newton' were pursuing, and is evident in his appropriation of Boyle's brand of the mechanical philosophy in detailing the inner workings of bodies. In recent years, Locke's scientific interests have been well-discussed. Relatively early discussions include: Sanchez-Gonzalez 1990, Wilson 1995, Stein 1990, and Downing 1997, 1998. For more recent discussion see: Anstey and Harris 2006, Jones 2007, Keating 2002, Meynell 2003, Milton 2001 and Walmsley 2009.

³See for instance ECHU 2.2.3: "This is the reason why, though we cannot believe it impossible to God to make a creature with other organs, and more ways to convey into the understanding the notice of Corporeal things, than those five, as they are usually counted, which he has given to man. Yet I think it is not possible for any one to imagine any other qualities in bodies, however constituted, whereby they can be taken notice of, besides, sounds, tastes, smells, visible and tangible qualities."

⁴See also ECHU 2.1.23–24 and 2.23.13.

serve our purposes. On the one hand, our senses can be said to serve our purposes insofar as they provide us with information that we can go on to use to achieve our ends. On this view, there is no essential connection between the sensory information we receive and the purposes we have. It just happily turns out that the two fit together. Our sense organs are instruments that are capable of detecting certain properties, or qualities, in the world. While these instruments might be designed so as to detect the properties they do, and so 'be fitted to our surroundings', nothing in that design requires us to *use* that information. My eyes might be fitted to convey information about the numbers of hairs on each person's head, but that information need not serve any purpose. If I decide, quite independently, that I want to be a hairdresser, then maybe I can put that information to good use. It is central to this *instrumental* way of understanding the way our bodies figure in sensation that the sensory content, the information we receive, is not in principle tied to the purposes to which we might put that information. In the first instance, the information we get is not dependent on any purposes we might have, nor need our purposes derive from the information we gain through sensory experience.

This model of fittedness does seem to be what Locke intends in the passages I have pointed to. Indeed, the most familiar parts of Locke's account of sensation accord well with this conception of our sensory experience. Locke characterizes the origin of our simple ideas as a matter of the senses 'conveying into the Mind' those perceptions proper to the way sensible objects affect our sense modalities (ECHU 2.1.3), thereby suggesting that sense perception amounts to the input of information about objects, information which is meant to be true of them irrespective of the receiver of that information, and his, her or its purposes. This same line of thought would seem to permeate Locke's discussion of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities and our ideas of them. Qualities, for him, are simply powers to produce simple ideas in us; we get information about the properties of bodies straightforwardly in our ideas of primary qualities in virtue of the resemblance between those ideas and the qualities themselves. This resemblance relation has nothing to do with the uses to which we might put the information about the primary qualities of bodies. Moreover, it seems that Locke takes our ideas of secondary qualities to provide us with some information about properties of bodies even though those ideas do not resemble their causes. After all, our ideas of secondary qualities are still produced in us by some complicated array of primary qualities, and so they would seem to encode some information about those primary qualities. We might have to crack that code, but the information that is conveyed, again, makes no reference to the uses to which that information might be put.⁵

⁵There is no doubt much more to say here. Understanding the relation between our ideas of primary and secondary qualities for Locke is a vexed topic. As I note below, sometimes Locke does suggest that secondary qualities are analogous to pleasures and pains, and so do potentially give us some information bearing on our welfare. I say 'potentially' here because not only will this depend on the dimensions of analogy but also on the conception of pleasure and pain in play, as will become clear in the next section.

There is, however, a second way in which we might take our sensory experiences to be fitted to our surroundings. On this view, the very content of our simple sense perceptions *is* tied to our purposes, and in particular, to our end of self-preservation. Immediately prior to Locke, this sort of account of sensory experience is seen most clearly in Descartes, though it is also found in Spinoza, and arguably Hobbes, as well.⁶ In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes maintains that

the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; and to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct. But I misuse them by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us. (7:83; 2:57–8)⁷

Rather than informing us about properties of things in the world, for Descartes, our sensations inform us about how things are *in relation to us*, how they benefit and harm us, and in general how they affect our well-being.⁸ Though Descartes recognizes we can be mistaken about the benefits and harms things offer us – for instance, we can feel thirsty when we ought not to take in more fluids – for him, we still experience the sensations we do in accord with the system which “is most especially and most frequently conducive to the preservation of the healthy man” (7:88; 2:60).

One might well ask how, on this view, our sensations give us this kind of information. Does the input into one sense modality or another contain information about the way things in the world impact us? Some medieval thinkers seem to have espoused a model somewhat like this. According to Aquinas, for instance, all animals were able to register the way things in the world stood to affect their very existence through a separate sensory faculty, the *vis estimativa*. Famously, through this faculty, a sheep is able to perceive a wolf as dangerous – that is, as capable of causing that sheep harm.⁹ Similarly, through this faculty we able to perceive various threats in our environment, as well as those things that stand to benefit us.

Descartes, however, does not want to go the route of this simple sort of sensory model. Rather, for him, two aspects of our sensory experience serve to provide us with information. First, the *variation* in sensory input conveys information about the ways things benefit and harm us as unions of mind and body. He writes:

⁶It is hard to know just what Spinoza's account of sensation is – he himself does not use the term – but Spinoza is clear that “the ideas which we have of external bodies indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies” (*Ethics* IIP16Cor2 in Spinoza 1985). At the basis of this claim is Spinoza's claim that our *conatus* is our essence (EIIIP7). Like it is for Spinoza, *conatus* is at the centre of Hobbes's philosophy, and one might well argue that our drive to persevere shapes the content of our sensory experiences had through the working of the machine of our body.

⁷Citations of Descartes's works follow this format: (Volume: page of AT; Volume: page of CSM/K). 'AT' refers to Descartes (1996/1908). 'CSM' and 'CSMK' refer respectively to Vols 1–2 and to Vol 3 of Descartes (1985–1991).

⁸Simmons 1999 makes a similar point.

⁹See, for instance, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.78, art.4. (Aquinas 2002).

And from the fact that I perceive by my senses a great *variety* of colours, sounds, smells and tastes, as well as differences in heat, hardness and the like, I am correct in inferring that the bodies which are the source of these various sensory perceptions possess differences corresponding to them, though perhaps not resembling them. Also, the fact that *some of the perceptions are agreeable to me while others are disagreeable* make it quite certain that my body or rather my whole self, in so far as I am a combination of body and mind, can be affected by the various beneficial or harmful bodies which surround it. (7:81; 2:56; emphasis added)

Thus, our sensations of colour all on its own does not tell us anything about the world, let alone about any real colours in the world. Rather, variations in our sensations of colour convey information about real variations in the world. Second, in this passage Descartes suggests that these sensations themselves are either agreeable or disagreeable, and through this aspect of our sensations we are steered towards what is beneficial and away from what is harmful to us. For Descartes, sensations seem *intrinsically* to involve pleasure and pain. It is thus no accident that in the Sixth Meditation, the paradigm sensations are hunger and thirst, two sensations that do seem to involve some kind of pain. Insofar as Descartes does take our sensory experiences to have this intrinsic affective aspect he builds a certain sort of teleology into our sense perception. For we feel pleasure and pain as is most conducive to our preservation. That is, for Descartes, the content of our sensations *contains* an end of self-preservation. In this important way our experiences contain our purposes, or at least one central purpose. On this model, our cognitive contact with the world comes as we are immersed in a world, situated with respect to things that impact on our well-being; our senses are fitted to our surroundings insofar as they are geared to enabling us to achieve our end of self-preservation.

From the perspective of this second way of understanding our senses as fitted to our surroundings, one thing is quite notable in Locke's account of our simple ideas of sensation, at least as I have presented it so far: Locke makes no mention of pleasure and pain in his discussion of the ideas we receive through the five canonical sense modalities. Insofar as Locke would seem to think that our sensory ideas, in and of themselves, do not involve pleasure and pain, he would also take it that our sensory ideas contain no information about how things in the world impact on our welfare, and in general our ability to preserve ourselves.

3 Pleasure and Pain in Locke's Account of Our Simple Ideas of Sensation

Of course, Locke does not ignore the fact that we have sensations of pleasure and pain. Indeed, Locke counts pleasure and pain as those simple ideas that we can have either through sensation and reflection. Locke's discussion, however, is far from systematic. In this section, I identify two equivocations in Locke's account.

First, it is unclear whether Locke takes pain and pleasure to contain intrinsically information about our well being. On the one hand, when Locke first introduces the

simple ideas of pain and pleasure, he seems to tie those perceptions to our welfare. The fact that we often feel both pleasure and pain towards the same object

gives us new occasion of admiring the wisdom and goodness of our Maker: Who, designing the preservation of our being, has annexed pain to the application of many things to our bodies, *to warn us of the harm that they will do*, and as advices to withdraw from them. (ECHU 2.7.4, emphasis added)

Pleasure and pain thus seem to carry with them information about the ways things can benefit and harm us. Yet Locke defines good and evil with reference to pain and pleasure.

That we call *good*, which is *apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us; or else to procure or preserve us the possession of any other good, or absence of any evil*. ... [W]e name that *evil*, which is *apt to produce or increase any pain, or diminish any pleasure in us; or us to procure us any evil, or deprive us of any good*. (ECHU 2.2.2)

It seems here that Locke is taking pleasure and pain as primitive feelings which themselves cannot be explained. Pleasure and pain, on this line, are not indicators of any objective benefit or harm that might visit us. Rather benefits and harms, or good and evil, are defined in virtue of what we happen to feel. If putting a hand in a roaring fire brings pleasure, then it is by definition good. Yet in the very next paragraph Locke seems to switch tacks to assert that good and evil *cause* pleasure and pain, as if there were facts of the matter about what was good and bad, and our feelings of pleasure and pain indicate those matters of fact to us (ECHU 2.20.3). This claim, however, does not sit well with the definitions of the various passions that follow. In those definitions it seems that these species of pleasure and pain are a matter of mere subjective feeling, which then by accident shape our ascriptions of good and evil. For instance, we love grapes simply because their taste brings delight. Without that feeling of delight, the grapes cease to be good, and we no longer love them (ECHU 2.20.4). It seems then that we are supposed to read the first half of the first sentence of ECHU 2.20.3 as concerning what we *call* good and evil rather than any real relation of benefit or harm.¹⁰

A similar tension appears in Locke's remarks concerning skepticism about the existence of the external world. In Book IV, when Locke first considers our knowledge of 'real existence', he challenges anyone who experiences the pain of being in a fire to assert that he is dreaming. His point here is that some ideas, simply in their phenomenology, give us sufficient information to conclude that a world exists beyond our ideas. However, he does not maintain that in learning that something exists which also causes us (in this case) pain we also learn something about the way that something might benefit or harm us.¹¹ Yet when Locke turns to consider our 'knowledge of the existence of other things' in more detail in ECHU 4.11, he seems to admit that pleasures and pains *do* tell us about various benefits and harms in the world. He writes:

¹⁰ ECHU 2.21.42 supports this reading. There Locke asserts that "whatever has an aptness to produce pleasure in us, is that we call *Good*, and what is apt to produce Pain in us, we call *Evil*, for no other reason, but for its aptness to produce pleasure and pain in us."

¹¹ See for instance ECHU 4.2.14.

That *the certainty of things existing in rerum Natura*, when we have the testimony of our senses for it, is not only *as great* as our frame can attain to, but *as our condition needs*. (ECHU 4.11.8; original emphasis)

And as he fleshes this out, it is clear that the 'condition' he refers to is that of our general well-being.

For he that sees a candle burning, and hath experimented the force of its flame by putting his finger in it, will little doubt that this something existing without him, *which does him great harm, and puts him to great pain*: which is assurance enough, when no man requires greater certainty to govern his actions by that what is as certain as his actions themselves. (ECHU 4.11.8, emphasis added)

Locke thus seems in the end to allow that pleasures and pains do, for the purposes of action at least, inform us about the ways things in the world can benefit or harm us. Insofar as he does, Locke might well conceive of our bodies not as mere instruments with which to detect properties in the world but rather as immersed in it. At least our sensations of pleasure and pain inform us of how other bodies stand in relations to us and our purpose of self-preservation.

Even if we do allow that Locke takes our sensations of pleasure and pain to contain information about the way things benefit and harm us,¹² there is a second

¹² There might well be a third alternative to consider here. Our ideas of pleasure and pain might give us information about the world, just not about the way things benefit and harm us. On this line, ideas of pleasure and pain would be akin to our ideas of secondary qualities. Though these ideas do not represent (by resemblance) qualities of objects, we can gain some information about the world if we could adduce the causal relation between primary qualities and our ideas of secondary qualities. Similarly, this line would go, if we properly understood the causes of our pains and pleasures, those ideas could give us information about primary qualities. Locke seems to be suggesting this in a comparison he draws between ideas of secondary qualities and our ideas of pain in ECHU 2.8.16 and ECHU 2.8.18:

And yet he that will consider that the same fire, that at one distance produces in us the sensation of warmth, does at a nearer approach produce in us the far different sensation of pain, ought to bethink himself what reason he has to say, that his idea of warmth, which was produced in him by the fire, is actually in the fire; and *his idea of pain, which the same fire produced in him the same way, is not in the fire*. Why are whiteness and coldness in snow, and pain not, when it produces the one and the other idea in us; and can do neither, but by the bulk, figure, number, and motion of its solid parts? (ECHU 2.8.16, emphasis mine).

Besides, manna, by the bulk, figure, texture, and motion of its parts, has a power to produce the sensations of sickness, and sometimes of acute pains or gripings in us. *That these ideas of sickness and pain are not in the manna, but effects of its operations on us, and are nowhere when we feel them nor*; this also every one readily agrees to. And yet men are hardly to be brought to think, that sweetness and whiteness are not really in manna; which are but the effects of the operations of manna by the motion, size, and figure of its particles on the eyes and palate; as the pain and sickness caused by manna are confessedly nothing but the effects of its operations on the stomach and guts, by the size, motion, and figure of its insensible parts (for by nothing else can a body operate, as has been proved). (ECHU 2.8.18, emphasis added).

These passages, interestingly, raise a question about how we are to distinguish between our ideas of secondary qualities and pleasures and pains. Hume, in his *Treatise on Human Nature*, raises just such a question in his discussion of scepticism with regard to the senses (THN 1.4.2.12), a section I take to be largely about the empiricist prospects for an account of object perception. This would seem to bear on my discussion later in this paper.

point of equivocation in Locke's account of our simple ideas of pleasure and pain, one that bears on whether Locke can be taken to have a conception of immersed experience. For Locke, each of our simple ideas, whether they be of sensation or reflection, are conveyed into the mind independently of one another, and it is central to his account that these simple ideas be unanalyzable. Given this assumption it certainly seems as if our ideas of pleasure and pain ought to be distinct from our other simple ideas. And often Locke's discussion of pleasure and pain does take this line. In ECHU 2.7.2 Locke writes,

Delight or uneasiness, one or other of them, join themselves to almost all our ideas, both of sensation and reflection: And there is scarce any affection of our senses from without, any retired thought of our mind within, which is not able to produce in us pleasure or pain. By pleasure and pain I would be understood to signify whatsoever delights or molests us ...

Locke here makes two distinct claims. First, he notes that almost all of our ideas are joined to an idea of pleasure and pain, and in doing so he certainly suggests that each of the ideas that are joined together are distinct from one another. Second, he suggests that our ideas of pleasure and pain are *caused* by other ideas. While this second claim also presupposes that ideas of pleasure and pain are distinct ideas, it is puzzling with respect to ideas of sensation. Presumably, our sensory ideas of pleasure and pain derive directly from the workings of the world on our bodies, and not from the workings of our mind on itself. But in any case, it seems clear that Locke takes our ideas of pleasure and pain to be distinct from our other ideas.

This clear distinction, however, becomes somewhat murky in the very next paragraph. There Locke maintains that our creator,

having also given a power to our minds in several instances, to choose, amongst its ideas, which it will think on, and to pursue the enquiry of this or that subject with consideration and attention, to excite us to these actions of thinking and motion that we are capable of; has been pleased *to join to several thoughts, and several sensations, a perception of delight. If this were wholly separated from all our outward sensations and inward thoughts, we should have no reason to prefer one thought or action to another; negligence to attention, or motion to rest* It has therefore pleased our wise Creator to *annex to several objects, and the ideas which we receive from them, as also to several of our thoughts, a concomitant pleasure, and that in several objects, to several degrees; that those faculties which he had endowed us with might not remain wholly idle and unemployed by us.* (ECHU 2.7.3, emphasis added)

While in this passage Locke still talks of pleasure and pain as joined to our thoughts, in almost the same breath he denies that pleasures and pains are 'wholly separated' from our sensations and reflections. Along the same lines, it is hard to know what Locke means when he claims that pleasures and pains are 'annexed' to our ideas of objects. Does he take the annexation to result in a simple idea, with aspects only distinguishable by reason? Or does the annexation amount to forming a complex idea? It is hard to say. In ECHU 2.7.5 he maintains that pleasure and pain are "blended ... together in almost all that our thoughts and senses have to do with." Again we can ask how we are to understand this 'blending'.

It seems important to Locke to maintain that pain and pleasure *are* distinct ideas; he seems to be bending over backwards to preserve their distinctness. Yet he realizes that this position faces some explanatory challenges. Pleasures and pains, for him, seem to function as the vehicles through which our attention is directed to one idea or another. But, of course, they cannot serve this function if there is no explanation of how the two come to be joined together. It is for this reason Locke seems to want to qualify the distinctness of *all* our simple ideas from one another and to deny that pleasure and pain are wholly separate.

While Locke says relatively little about pleasure and pain, what he does say is fraught with equivocations. Sometimes he takes pain and pleasure to be essentially contentless, simply feelings of delight or uneasiness, which, while they ground our evaluations and move us to action, tell us nothing about the world. At other times, Locke takes pleasure and pain to indicate the ways things benefit and harm us, or otherwise impact on our well-being. Insofar as Locke does sometimes suggest the latter view, his account of experience might not be as instrumentally embodied as it initially seems. However, Locke is far from taking our experience to be essentially immersed insofar as he takes pleasures and pains to be distinct from our other simple ideas. Insofar as we can separate the sensory contents from pains and pleasures, Locke must take it that sensory information is gained *independently* of any information afforded by pleasure and pain, that is, independently of concern with self-preservation. This separability of sensory experience from any ends we might have is at the heart of the account of experience that takes our bodies as detecting instruments.

4 Pleasure and Pain and Our Ideas of Particular Substances

It might be tempting to note these equivocations in Locke's account of pleasure and pain but to discount them as on the whole unimportant. However, Locke's equivocation regarding the place of pleasure and pain in our *cognitive* economy does extend to other aspects of his account that philosophers have taken to be central. In this section, I focus on the implications of Locke's mixed mind regarding pleasure and pain, and so instrumental and immersed models of experience, on his account of particular substances.¹³

According to Locke, we form our ideas of objects, or what he terms particular substances,¹⁴ in virtue of our noticing that "a certain number of these simple ideas

¹³In an extended treatment of this problematic, I would also want to consider in more detail Locke's epistemology, for it seems to me that we can think about the importance of the distinction there between intuitive and demonstrative knowledge, on the one hand, and sensitive knowledge on the other, as importantly dependant on the separability of pleasure and pain from our other simple ideas, and so dependent on an instrumentalist conception of embodiment.

¹⁴It might well be that for Locke our ideas of particular substances are ideas of *kinds* of objects, rather than of individual objects. Nonetheless, those ideas would presuppose, for him, ideas of individuals, and Locke owes his readers an account of our perceptions of objects. I don't see that that account of our ideas of individuals would be very different from his story about our ideas of particular substances.

go constantly together" (ECHU 2.23.1). We receive an ever changing set of simple ideas in the course of our experience, and, so the story goes, we notice that some of those simple ideas always seem to come into our mind together. We "collect ... such combinations of simple ideas" together and form a complex idea. Locke takes it to be natural to seek an explanation of why those simple ideas do come into the mind together, and he posits that the qualities which cause those simple ideas all inhere in one underlying "something, I know not what" or pure substance in general. While readers usually focus on Locke's entitlement to this supposition, or how best to understand pure substance in general, or if Locke's account allows for particular substances to have real essences, these lines of inquiry take for granted that Locke can make sense of our ability to notice that some simple ideas come together in experience.

But how is that supposed to happen on Locke's view? As William James puts it, albeit two centuries after Locke, our first experience of the world is as of "one great blooming, buzzing confusion."¹⁵ James is far from being the first to conceive of our experience in this way. We have already seen the shades of a similar position articulated in Descartes's Sixth Meditation, where Descartes presents us as perceiving various colours, sounds, smells, tastes, and so on, that must be organized in some way.¹⁶ It would seem that Locke conceives of our experience in a similar way, at least at the beginning of his account. Locke makes no mention of any filter to control the conveyance of ideas into the mind, and a simple introspection reveals that the simple ideas I do sometimes collect together to form an idea of an object not only are not always joined together but also are sometimes joined with other ideas. Indeed, this seems to be part of the point of Descartes's meditator's consideration of the piece of wax. We cannot, according to this account, know by sensation the piece of wax – or, one might say, take there to be a single piece of wax, an object, before us – because the sensible qualities we perceive are constantly changing, and we cannot imagine the uncountable changes it might further undergo. The meditator requires and does not find within sensation itself a principle for grouping sensible qualities together into an object. The problem is not simply one of building up a complex idea from simple ideas of sensation, but also one of breaking down the manifold of our experience into objects. In peering into my dining area, I not only see my kitchen table, I also see the table cloth covering it, the light

¹⁵James 1950/1918, 462.

¹⁶Descartes's account of the three grades of sensation in his *Replies to the Sixth Objections* fits this reading well. On that account, the first grade of sensation consists simply in the physiological changes in our sense organs. The second and third grades both concern our sense perceptions, that is, sensations as mental states. The second grade of sensation consists of ideas of the various sensible qualities that are available to us. These sense perceptions do not yet allow us to form ideas of object, though there may be patterns to our perceptions. Descartes describes the third grade of sensation as our judgements of something before us – that we see a bent stick in water, for instance. (See 7:436ff; 2:294ff) It is hard to know how to read 'judgement' here. It seems clear that Descartes does not intend the sort of judgement that is the focus of the Fourth Meditation. I am inclined to read him as accounting for the way we reify the patterns we perceive into objects.

streaming through the window, the chairs around it, the floor it sits on, and so on, and one might say similar things about my tactile and auditory experiences of the table as well. One wants an account of how the simple ideas I receive all at once get grouped together into an array of complex ideas that constitute my idea of objects. To my knowledge, Locke does not explicitly offer any such account.

Descartes does not explicitly offer such an account either, but his remarks in the Sixth Meditation are suggestive. Recall there were two aspects to Descartes's account of sense perception. First, variations in our sense perceptions were taken to indicate real variation in the world, and second, our sense perceptions themselves were taken to be intrinsically agreeable or disagreeable, that is, pleasant or painful. While I cannot fully argue for it here, I want to suggest that these two aspects work together to afford us perceptions of objects. That our perceptions admit of variation in and of itself is insufficient to get us an idea of an object. Someone with poor vision need only take off her glasses to get this point: perceiving sensible qualities, even if we can perceive variations in those qualities is not the same thing as having an idea of an object. Rather we delimit objects in the varied landscape of our sensory experience by the pleasures and pains we experience. These pleasures and pains, for Descartes unequivocally, indicate the way things benefit and harm us and with this information we can, through a kind of judgement, form an idea of a well-delimited object.¹⁷

It is particularly noteworthy that Locke mentions nothing about pleasure and pain in his discussion about particular substances. Locke's equivocations regarding pain and pleasure preclude his telling a Cartesian story about how we manage to collect our simple ideas together in the first place, so as to form ideas of particular substances. If Locke takes ideas of pain and pleasure to be primitive simple ideas, providing no information about benefit and harm, they are just like any other of our many ideas of experience that need to be organized in some way. And insofar as they are not information bearing it is not clear what sort of role they could possibly play in any account of our complex ideas of objects. If he takes our pains and pleasures to provide us with information about benefits and harms, Locke might have a resource to draw on in providing an explanation of how we form ideas of objects similar to that of Descartes. Indeed, Locke's account of the role pleasure and pain play in focusing our mind's attention on one idea or another would seem to provide the beginning of such an account. However, this path is only open to him if he takes our sensations to be intrinsically pleasant or painful, that is, so long as he takes our bodies to be immersed in the world. If he takes our bodies instrumentally, that is, if he maintains that pleasure and pain are distinct and separable simple ideas, he cannot appeal to any information regarding benefit and harm as attention-focusing until he accounts for how those pleasures and pains come to be joined with our other simple ideas. But of course this is the problem for which we are seeking a solution in the first place.

¹⁷ Again, the sense of judgement in play here cannot be that of the Fourth Meditation. (See n.16 above.)

Locke himself, even if he does explicitly mark a problem here, does recognize he must say something about how we form ideas of particular substances from simple ideas. In ECHU 3.6.28, he claims that

the Mind, in making its complex *Ideas* of Substances, only follows Nature; and puts none together, which are not supposed to have a union in Nature. No body joins the Voice of a Sheep, with the Shape of a Horse; nor the Colour of Lead, with the Weight and Fixedness of Gold, to be the complex *Ideas* of any real Substances; unless he has a mind to fill his Head with *Chimeras*.

Here Locke simply asserts that our simple ideas are packaged into complex ideas in the mind in a way that conforms to the way the properties they represent are packaged in nature. While if this were so, it would solve the problem facing his account of particular substances, it is not clear how he is entitled to the claim. Even if we concede that our ideas of primary qualities do resemble the actual primary qualities of bodies, our holding these qualities in mind does not entail that we also hold the relations between them. Indeed, Locke's atomism about simple ideas suggests that they do *not* contain this relational content that is crucial to the story Locke is trying to tell here. Locke's professed realism here might well solve his problems but it is far from clear whether this strong a realist claim conforms to his empiricist methodological commitments.

It is intriguing that the problem of object perception in Locke seems analogous to what contemporary cognitive scientists call the Binding Problem. Consideration of Locke's mixed mind about the place of pleasure and pain in sense perceptions on his account of object perception can perhaps lend some insight to current discussion. The Binding Problem at its most basic level is the problem of how to understand our ability to represent a thing as having certain properties. As such, any solution to this problem must explain both how we come to represent a particular thing (i.e., have an idea of a particular substance, in Locke's parlance) and how we take that thing to be possessed of certain properties.¹⁸ Clearly, different answers will turn on whether one takes representation to involve conscious awareness, how one models the ways in which properties can come to be 'bound' with one another, and more generally, the models of information processing available, as well as other factors.¹⁹ Interestingly, standard answers to the Binding Problem, like Locke, ignore any affective dimension to our experience. Now there might well be pragmatic reasons for this. Models of neuroprocessing are still very much in development, and so merely meant to approximate the way our minds do work. Nonetheless, cognitive scientists might well want to evaluate the assumptions they tacitly make about the character of the information being processed. They seem to assume a kind of instrumental conception of experience, in a way similar to the reading of Locke I have been problematizing here. However, as I have shown, Locke himself

¹⁸ For a helpful overview of this problem see Plate 2007. Other recent philosophically informed work includes Pylyshyn 2007 and Bermudez 2007.

¹⁹ Of course, if one does not begin from a Lockean perspective, assuming that sensory information is simply brought into the mind to be processed, one might reject the Binding Problem as a genuine problem. See for instance, O'Reagan and Noë 2001.

seems to have wavered between conceiving of our experience as instrumental and immersed in the world. Contemporary investigations of human understanding might well benefit from rethinking the models of sensory input, so that they include the affective dimension proper to an immersed conception of experience. Doing so might well lead to progress in solving the Binding Problem.

5 Resolving the Tensions in Locke: a Brief Overview of Empiricist Responses

Interestingly, at least some central figures in eighteenth century empiricist thought do seem to take our experience to be essentially immersed in the world. That is, they resolve the equivocations that I have pointed to in Locke's account of pleasure and pain in a particular way: they take our sensory experience to contain essentially an affective dimension. I here focus on Berkeley and Condillac to illustrate this point, but other figures to consider include Hutcheson, Diderot and Rousseau.

5.1 Berkeley

Berkeley's *A New Theory of Vision* is principally concerned with arguing against a geometrical, so rationalist, account of visual perception of distant objects and proposing an empiricist alternative, and in it he says very little about pleasure and pain. Nonetheless there we can see the beginnings of a view that would, unlike Locke, take at least some of our sense perceptions to involve some sense of benefit or harm. In a.59, in beginning to lay out the relation between ideas of sight and those of touch, he writes:

We regard the objects that environ us in proportion as they are adapted to benefit or injure our own bodies, and thereby produce in our minds the sensation of pleasure or pain. Now bodies operating on our organs, by an immediate application, and the hurt or advantage arising therefrom, depending altogether on the tangible, and not at all on the visible, qualities of any object... (NTV, a.59)

Here Berkeley maintains that through our sense of touch we are able to sense the various benefits and harms the world might afford us. We do not, he here maintains, gain similar information directly through vision, though from past correlations between visual sensations and tactile ones, we can use our sense of sight to anticipate things we come across benefiting or harming us.²⁰

²⁰ It is important to note that the distinction between touch and vision does not correspond to a distinction between ideas of secondary and primary qualities. This is certainly the case for Berkeley who rejects the distinction, but it is also the case for Locke. Touch, after all, allows us to have ideas of shape just as well as vision, not to mention solidity.

In the *Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, however, Berkeley seems to extend his position on touch to *all* our sensory ideas. In reading the *Dialogues*, commentators have typically focused on Berkeley's criticisms there of Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, and on his argument following from the premise of both that criticism and Locke's own methodology – that what we immediately perceive are ideas – against the inference to the existence of any extra-mental cause of our ideas. However, with Locke's equivocation regarding the place of pleasure and pain in sensation at the fore, Berkeley's commitment to a central tenet of an immersed conception of experience comes out clearly. It begins to emerge as Berkeley's alter-ego Philonous prompts Hylas to recognize that all sensations of great heat or cold are “nothing distinct” from a “sensible pain”:

- Phil. Seeing therefore they are both immediately perceived at the same time, and the fire affects you only with one simple or uncompounded idea, it follows that this same simple idea is both the intense heat immediately perceived, and the pain; and, consequently, that the intense heat immediately perceived is nothing distinct from a particular sort of pain.
- Hyl. It seems so.
- Phil. Again, try in your thoughts, Hylas, if you can conceive a vehement sensation to be without pain or pleasure.
- Hyl. I cannot.
- Phil. Or can you frame to yourself an idea of sensible pain or pleasure in general, abstracted from every particular idea of heat, cold, tastes, smells? &c.
- Hyl. I do not find that I can.
- Phil. Doth it not therefore follow, that sensible pain is nothing distinct from those sensations or ideas, in an intense degree?
- Hyl. It is undeniable; and, to speak the truth, I begin to suspect a very great heat cannot exist but in a mind perceiving it. (*Dialogues*, 12–13)

Note that Berkeley here makes a point of treating our sensation of heat as a simple idea, and from there concludes that the heat must be a kind of pain. As the discussion continues it becomes clear that Berkeley applies the same line of reasoning to all our sensations: they are all species of pleasure and pain. Here Hylas tries to recoil from that conclusion, but to no avail:

- Hyl. Hold, Philonous, I now see what it was deluded me all this time. You asked whether heat and cold, sweetness at were not particular sorts of pleasure and pain; to which I answered simply, that they were. Whereas I should have thus distinguished: – those qualities, as perceived by us, are pleasures or pains but not as existing in the external objects. We must not therefore conclude absolutely, that there is no heat in the fire, or sweetness in the sugar, but only that heat or sweetness, as perceived by us, are not in the fire or sugar. What say you to this?
- Phil. I say it is nothing to the purpose. Our discourse proceeded altogether concerning sensible things, which you defined to be, the things we immediately perceive by our senses. Whatever other qualities, therefore, you speak of as distinct from these, I know nothing of them, neither do they at all belong to the point in dispute. You may, indeed, pretend to have discovered certain qualities which you do not perceive, and assert those insensible qualities exist in fire and sugar. But what use can be made of this to your present purpose, I am at a loss to conceive. Tell me then once more, do you acknowledge that heat and cold, sweetness and bitterness (meaning those qualities which are perceived by the senses), do not exist without the mind? (*Dialogues*, 16)

Philonous insists that the only way of escaping that conclusion that our sensations are all species of pain and pleasure is to claim that something exists other than what we perceive immediately, a claim that Philonous thinks is wholly without warrant.

In the passages I have pointed to thus far, Berkeley adverts only to the so-called secondary qualities, and so can be seen as playing up Locke's willingness to draw an analogy between those qualities and pain and pleasure.²¹ However, Berkeley does go on to suggest that even our ideas of extension, figure and motion are also pleasures and pains, albeit less vivid ones:

Phil. It is not my business to account for every opinion of the philosophers. But, among other reasons which may be assigned for this, it seems probable that pleasure and pain being rather annexed to the former than the latter may be one. Heat and cold, tastes and smells, have something more vividly pleasing or disagreeable than the ideas of extension, figure, and motion affect us with. And, it being too visibly absurd to hold that pain or pleasure can be in an unperceiving substance, men are more easily weaned from believing the external existence of the Secondary than the Primary Qualities. You will be satisfied there is something in this, if you recollect the difference you made between an intense and more moderate degree of heat; allowing the one a real existence, while you denied it to the other. But, after all, there is no rational ground for that distinction; for, surely an indifferent sensation is as truly a sensation as one more pleasing or painful; and consequently should not any more than they be supposed to exist in an unthinking subject. (*Dialogues*, 27)

Berkeley thus resolves the equivocations in Locke in two ways. First, he admits that our sensations of pain and pleasure inform us about benefits and harms; they are information bearing states. Second, he denies that pleasure and pain are distinct simple ideas. Rather, all our simple ideas of sensation are pleasant or painful in themselves. In taking on these two positions, Berkeley clearly situates us as perceivers immersed in the world.

5.2 Condillac

Condillac was just as astute a reader of Locke as was Berkeley; his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* is a reworking of Locke's *Essay*. For my purposes here, however, I am interested in his *Treatise on Sensations*. Interestingly, there Condillac starts from the assumption that all our sensations essentially involve pleasure and pain. His self-described aim is to explain how all our cognitive functions can be explained from this starting point:

Nature has given us our sense organs to alert us to what we have to seek out by pleasure, and to what we have to flee by pain. But our nature stops there. Experience has the job of giving us habits and completing the job that nature started. This object is new, and shows

²¹ See n.13 above.

all the simplicity of the ways of the author of nature. Cannot one but wonder that to give birth to ideas, desires, habits, and all kinds of talents, it is only necessary to make human being sensible to pain and pleasure? (*Dessein*; Condillac 1754/1984, 12)

In many ways, then, Condillac's project is identical to Locke's: to explain human understanding without appeal to innate ideas and with only the resources of experience. However, there is one crucial difference. Whereas Locke is equivocal regarding whether pleasures and pains are distinct simple ideas, Condillac is clear they are not. For Condillac, they are integral aspects of our sensations. Moreover, that this is so is critical to the empiricist psychology Condillac wants to go on to develop.

Condillac proposes to defend his hypothesis that all our cognitive functions derive from our sensations through a thought experiment. Indeed, the whole of the work consists in just this exercise. Condillac asks us to consider a statue that is given one sense modality at a time and to determine when she comes to have a consciousness like our own. What Condillac seems to mean by consciousness here is simply the ability to perceive and identify objects as distinct from ourselves in the way we do. This work thus aims to provide a direct solution to the challenge Locke faces in explaining object perception in empiricist terms.

While I cannot give a full accounting of Condillac's argument here, it is useful to recognize just how the fact that our sensations are pleasant and painful figures into the account. As the statue is given one sense modality at a time, she finds her awareness completely consisting in the sensory quality of that mode she is experiencing. She first identifies herself with the smell she is experiencing, of a rose; there is nothing in her awareness but that smell. Then she identifies herself similarly with the color she experiences, the red of the rose; again she is not aware of anything but that color. Insofar as the sensory qualities each constitute her awareness, she has no consciousness of anything else. While in these cases, Condillac is clear that the experience of rose smell and of rose colour are pleasant, it is not clear what function this pleasure is to play in our cognitive life, other than to induce us to want to continue in having that pleasant experience.

It is not until that the statue acquires a sense of touch that she is able to form an idea of an object distinct from a perceiving subject. At its most fundamental level, touch, for Condillac, seems to be equivalent to proprioception, and it is this fundamental feeling, as Condillac calls it, through which we get a sense of ourselves.²² Equally, we are only able to learn that there is something existing outside of us through the sense of touch. Pleasure and pain are essential to the statue's coming to understand that there are other things existing distinct from it. For with the sense of touch, understood first as a fundamental feeling of one's body, and so of oneself, pain and pleasure are what lead us to move our limbs:

In accord with its organization, therefore, pleasure and pain, or the passage from one to the other, cause it to have movements; it cannot then but happen that among these movements

²² TS II.1.3; Condillac 1754/1984, 158.

some will cut off or suspend a sensation which is hurtful, and others will procure it a sensation which is pleasurable. (TS II.5.2; Condillac 1754/1984, 101–2)²³

Through these motions, motions prompted by feelings of pain and pleasure, the statue comes to discover that it has a body distinct from other bodies. In moving its limbs along itself and around in the world, it comes to distinguish when it feels itself, and when it does not:

Placing its hands on itself it will discover that it has a body, but only when it has distinguished the different parts of it and recognized in each the same sentient being. It will discover there are other bodies when it touches things in which it does not find itself. (TS II.5.2; Condillac 1754/1984, 102)

Through touch, then, we begin to form ideas of objects. We are able to locate ourselves in a world populated by other things existing apart from us.

With an idea of an object existing distinctly in place, Condillac's next task is to explain how we are able to collect together our other simple ideas, ideas of color, smell, taste and so on, and attribute them to the objects our sense of touch has identified. Doing this, for Condillac, once again involves motion.

Placing its hands by chance upon the objects it meets, it grasps a flower and holds it in its hand. Its arm moving aimlessly, is brought now towards its face, now away from it; it is conscious with more or less vividness of a particular mode of being. Surprised, it now repeats the experiment designedly. It lifts the flower and lets it fall several times, and it comes to think that it exists or ceases to exist in a certain manner according as the flower is near or distant. Finally, it begins to suspect that it owes to the flower the feeling which is a modification of its own being. (TS III.1.4; Condillac 1754/1984, 158)

We combine smell with touch, for instance, by first having two discrete sensations, and then noticing that there is correlation between the changes in the one (smell) while we move the other. Touch provides us with a fixed point through which we can measure changes in the other sensations we have, and in particular changes in pleasures and pains. In correlating those changes with our own motions, we come to attribute various sensory qualities to the objects defined through touch.

Condillac, thus, would seem to resolve the equivocations from Locke in a way similar to Berkeley. For both, pleasure and pain are an intrinsic aspect of all our sensations, and in particular those of touch. For both, pleasure and pain contain information about benefits and harms. Condillac ingeniously argues that with this conception of immersed experience, an empiricist has all the resources that are needed to resolve a problem facing Locke – the problem of explaining our ability to perceive objects.²⁴

²³See also TS II.8.1: "Without pleasure our statue would never have the wish to move: without pain it would move with confidence and infallibly perish. It must then always be exposed to pleasant and unpleasant sensations" (Condillac 1754/1984, 119).

²⁴Condillac's account of how we come to perceive objects should be of particular relevance to cognitive scientists interested in the Binding Problem.

6 Locke's Mixed Mind: Possible Explanations

It is particularly interesting that two empiricists as committed as Berkeley and Condillac adopt the model of immersed experience, taking our sensations to be essentially affective, even though the model does seem to find its roots in the early modern period with canonical rationalists like Descartes and Spinoza. Thus, while it might perhaps be tempting to explain Locke's equivocations by claiming that immersed experience is somehow at odds with empiricist principles, this cannot be correct. So then why did Locke himself not resolve the equivocations in his account? Of course, one might well claim that he prioritized other issues, but for the sake of argument let me conclude by offering two other less pragmatic and more philosophical answers.

First, consider the status of animals in the early modern period. It was certainly highly contentious whether animals were capable of either pleasure or pain,²⁵ and if animals were taken to be incapable of these basic affective responses, this would certainly preclude their having immersed experience as such. But surely no one would want to deny that animals share a world with us, a world populated by objects with properties. If animals are incapable of feeling pleasure and pain, then their sensory perception must not involve this affective dimension. Are we then to understand humans and animals as experiencing the world in fundamentally different ways? A principle of simplicity would suggest that human and animal experience are not different in kind, but rather at different points on a spectrum. So long as animals are denied feelings of pain and pleasure, it would make sense then to adopt an instrumental conception of experience. We do share sense organs with animals, and so it does make sense that we would be able to take in similar bits of information. But equally, if we admit animals might feel pleasure and pain, then the possibility of a model of immersed experience opens. Locke's mixed mind about human experience thus parallels mixed views about animal experience.

Second, it is worth noting that the conception of human embodiment was intimately intertwined with theological issues, and in particular that of the immortality of the soul. The controversies around Locke's accounts of substance and personal identity – in particular his exchange with Stillingfleet – demonstrate just how vexed a topic the immortality of the soul was, and Locke does take care in to affirm his belief in the Resurrection and the immortality of the soul, distinct from its immateriality in the *Essay*.²⁶ In many ways, a model of immersed experience is more threatening in this regard to Locke than it might be to someone like Descartes who was clearly committed to the view that the mind, or soul, was able to subsist without the body. For Descartes, whatever thoughts the soul might be able to have

²⁵Descartes, for instance, initially denies animals are capable of pain and pleasure, just insofar as they are incapable of thought (see 3:85; 3:148 and 4:573; 3:302ff). Later, in correspondence with More, he backpedals a bit, simply suggesting that we cannot know whether animals experience pleasures and pains (5:276f; 3:365f).

²⁶See for instance ECHU II.27.15.

in virtue of being united with a body, and so immersed in the world, the soul is still capable of independent existence and thereby persists after death; and so Descartes preserves the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Locke's skepticism about pure substance in general, his lack of commitment to dualism, and his denial of innate ideas put pressure on the model of immersed experience in the face of concerns about the soul's immortality. If all our ideas come from experience, and that experience is essentially situated in the world, what can possibly be retained once our body dies? Without our bodies, we would presumably lose the capacity to retrieve those ideas whose content depended on our having a body at all. And without its thoughts, what could the soul possibly be? Despite the advantages of a model of immersed experience, these kinds of considerations might well have moved Locke towards a more instrumental conception of our experience. If the content of our ideas does not depend on the body in which we find ourselves, then the mind can at least in principle retain those thoughts after the body dies, and so preserve some semblance of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Easing of various political pressures around this issue might well have allowed later empiricists the liberty to fully adopt the model of immersed experience. Certainly, these sorts of considerations need not constrain contemporary cognitive scientists in their efforts to address the question of object perception.

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