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Philonous on Self-Knowledge and God

How can you conceive it possible, that things should exist in His mind if you have no idea of the mind of God (231)? This is precisely the question put forth to Philonous in *Three Dialogues*, which guides Hylas and Phillonous to explore the possibilities of self-knowledge along with the existence of God, souls, and matter. Within these dialogues Hylas rightfully questions Philonous' flawed rejection of physical matter, while at the same time allowing for the existence of spiritual entities. Given his characterizations of ideas and spirits, combined with the admission that he has no idea of God or any other spirit (which Hylas takes to include his own soul as well), we have no choice but to question the grounds on which Philonous argues.

Philonous begins the debate with the simple admission that he can have no idea of God or any other spirit, "for these being active, cannot be represented by things perfectly inert, as our ideas are"(231). He further claims that "the mind, spirit, or soul, is that indivisible unextended thing, which thinks, acts, and perceives", which is to be directly contrasted to ideas which are inactive and perceived (231). This leads us to an important distinction:

1. *God and spirits* are active, thinking, perceiving substances.
2. *Ideas* are inert, inactive, perceived, and passive.

Given this distinction, we must now consider Philonous' first statement regarding self-knowledge: "I do nevertheless know, that I who am a spirit or thinking substance, exist as certainly, as I know my ideas exist". A statement quite synonymous to Descartes' famous 'Cogito ergo sum' argument, Philonous lays this as the foundation to confirm the

existence of God, since it is his soul that furnishes the idea, or image, of Him. "For all the notion I have of God, is obtained by reflecting on my own soul heightening its powers, and removing its imperfections"(231-232). This leads us to the following argument:

1. I [a spirit] exist, and my ideas exist.
2. I have an idea of God.
3. Therefore, God [also a spirit] exists.

This argument is understandably flawed, for there seems to be a missing premise between having an idea of God and allowing the existence of God. But to this Philonous would respond by a call to reflection and reasoning. "My own mind and my own ideas I have an immediate knowledge of; and by the help of these, do mediately apprehend the possibility of the existence of other spirits and ideas" (232). But Philonous not only *allows* the possibility of other spirits, he in fact *necessarily* infers the existence of a God, and of all created things in the mind of God (232).

Philonous not only leaves me questioning why he must necessarily infer a God's existence from an act of reason, but he also leaves Hylas questioning how he can have an idea of his own soul, let alone that of God:

You say your own soul supplies you with some sort of an idea or image of God. But at the same time you acknowledge you have, properly speaking, no idea of your own soul. You even affirm that spirits are a sort of beings altogether different from ideas. Consequently that no idea can be like a spirit. We have therefore no idea of any spirit (232).

This is precisely where Philonous runs into difficulties in confirming the existence of God, as well as knowledge of his own being. We must recall his earlier claim that he can have no idea of God or any other spirit, "for these being active, cannot be represented by

things perfectly inert, as our ideas are." This leads us to the important conclusion that ideas can not represent God or spirits, or perhaps that we can not have ideas of spirits. Not only does this provide a serious problem for Philonous' argument for the existence of God (I have an idea of God, therefore He exists), it also has serious consequences in affirming self-knowledge as Hylas demonstrates. Given his own characterizations of spirits and ideas, Philonous creates an inconsistency where he can not adequately provide for self-knowledge. It appears as though he realizes this contradiction, and attempts to rectify the situation by suggesting that "I have a notion of spirit, though I have not, strictly speaking, and idea of it. I do not perceive it as an idea or by any means of an idea, but know it by reflexion" (233). It would seem as though he attempts to draw a distinction between having an idea, and having a notion, but he specifically states that "it is no repugnancy to say, that a perceiving thing should be the subject of ideas, or an active thing the cause of them" (233). Is this not a direct contradiction to the statement that active entities cannot be represented by inactive ones? It appears as though Philonous has confused himself, or rather attempts to confuse Hylas by running his argument in circles.

Though Hylas correctly finds fault with Philonous' arguments in favor of God and self-knowledge, Philonous might have better success if he withdrew his statements distinguishing spirits from ideas. It seems plausible to me that we do have (at least the possibility for) self-knowledge through a degree of reflection. This would not seem to correct the argument in favor of God however, since there still remains a plausible missing premise in the argument.