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Berkeley on Self Knowledge

In the *Third Dialogue Between Hylas and Philonous*, George Berkeley sets forth a rather simple position on self-knowledge. With very little in the way of explanation or fanfare, Philonous asserts, “I do nevertheless know, that I who am a spirit or thinking substance, exist as certainly, as I know my ideas exist. Farther, I know what I mean by the terms *I* and *myself*; and I know this immediately, or intuitively...” (221). Unfortunately, while he apparently knows what the terms “I” and “myself” mean, he does not share with Hylas the definitions.

What he does explain is what the mind is. “The mind, spirit or soul,” Philonous says, “is that indivisible unextended thing, which thinks, acts, and perceives. I say *indivisible*, because unextended; and *unextended*, because extended, figured, moveable things are ideas; and that which perceives ideas, which thinks and wills, is plainly itself no idea, nor like an idea” (221). Again, as though to madden poor Hylas, Philonous does not explain why a thing cannot both perceive and be perceived at the same time. Of course, he does defend this elsewhere; it is the basis of his ontology. Even still, it could bear repeating at least in this section.

Further along, Philonous returns to the question of how he came to know this about the self. He says, “My own mind and my own ideas I have an immediate knowledge of” (221). In other words, upon reflection on the topic of himself, he comes to perceive things. Nothing gets in the way of that. Then, apparently, in the midst of perceiving his ideas, he comes to know that there must be something perceiving the perceptions. Thus, without mediation, he comes to understand the existence of his thinking and perceiving self.

For Berkeley, it seems that the existence of the self is not something that even needs arguing. He is aware of his ideas, of that he is completely certain. By the same token, he is

completely certain of a self that perceives his ideas. Beyond these simple intuitions, nothing more is needed. Self-knowledge is completely intuitive and obvious for Berkeley.

Hylas puts forth two objections to the account of self-knowledge asserted by Philonous. Separately, the two objections are swiftly brushed aside by Philonous. Neither of them are particularly strong objections; in fact, it almost seems as if Berkeley is setting up straw men for Philonous to destroy.

Hylas' first objection is aimed at a seeming inconsistency in what is admitted into the ontology held by Philonous. Hylas points out that Philonous admits spiritual but not material substance into his ontology. He also points out that Philonous admitted to having no idea of spiritual substance. Further, says Hylas, having no idea of material substance is what led Philonous to rejecting it from his ontology. It seems to Hylas that, to be consistent, Philonous must either accept material substance or reject spiritual.

Philonous, of course, has a response ready. He explains to Hylas that while he has no idea of spiritual substance, and in fact cannot, he does have a notion of it. Moreover, while he has a notion of what material substance might be, the notion itself is inconsistent. This, he says, is the reason he rejects the one but not the other.

Berkeley does not allow Hylas to press the point, so it is impossible to say whether or not this objection could have been stronger. As it is, Philonous seems to get away with juggling the notion of material substance to fit his ends. Without argument, he presupposes his own ontology to dismiss the notion of material substance as inconsistent and repugnant. Hylas' objection never has a chance against the rebuttal.

So, Hylas tries a different tack rather than pressing on with his first. For his second objection, Hylas brings forth what appears to be the Humean notion of the self. Hylas says to

Philonous, “according to your own way of thinking...it should follow that you are only a system of floating ideas, without any substance to support them” (223). It seems to Hylas that there is no more meaning in Philonous’ notion of spiritual substance than there is in Hylas’ own of material substance. Therefore, since Philonous blasted apart the latter notion, the former must be discarded as well.

At first glance, this does seem to be a serious problem. Using Philonous’ own arguments against him, Hylas seems to have backed Philonous into a corner. If this reasoning can be defeated, it would be a great success for Berkeley’s conception of self-knowledge. Philonous seems rather exasperated by the objection. His response basically consists of repeating, without argument, his position as if it were self-evident. Philonous boldly asserts that he is not his ideas; he knows that he is distinct from all sensible things and ideas.

However, he never explains to Hylas just how he knows this. It is supposed to be intuitively obvious. The very fact that Hylas is arguing the point, though, seems to lead to the conclusion that it is not, in fact, intuitively obvious. It is not obvious to Hylas, to Hume, nor to me. Therefore, it seems that arguing from intuition is not a particularly strong argument at all. Because of this, Hylas’ objection seems to hold much more weight. Be that as it may, Hylas again does not press the point. Rather, he concedes to Philonous’ rebuttals.

Thus, neither of Hylas’ objections alone carries the day. Both suffer from the same fundamental problem: they do not strike at the heart of the problem. That is to say, Hylas never directly questions Philonous’ ontology. At the point where Philonous asserts “that ideas should exist in what doth not perceive, or be produced by what doth not act is repugnant” (223), Hylas should have pounced.

To make a truly strong objection, it seems that a more important question should have been raised. Hylas should have inquired just what makes the notion repugnant. That is to say, do Philonous' own prejudices keep him from accepting that inert objects could cause sensations? It seems that, perhaps, such an admission would make spirits, including Berkeley and God, much less special. It might just be that this is what is truly repugnant to Berkeley rather than the notion he describes as repugnant. However, Berkeley never allows Hylas to raise this question.

What seems to be a great problem in this portion of the dialogue is that many things might seem intuitively obvious to Philonous and many to Hylas. Since neither agrees on what is and is not obvious from the outset, arguments must be raised instead of bold assertions. Loaded terms like obvious and repugnant are not in themselves arguments, rather they should either be kept apart from rational dialogue or used only as a starting point.

Unfortunately, this point is never addressed by Hylas. Because of this, Hylas' objections do not come across as completely persuasive. In fact, it does not seem that they could be. Rather than addressing the real problem, they hint at problems. They seem to skirt the problem. Taken together, they begin to be persuasive; alone they fall apart. While the position that Philonous is asserting definitely seems to cry out for objection, the particular ones used by Hylas do not work at all well.