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The Conceivability of *Locke's Image of the World*: Some Thoughts on Jacovides

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Abstract:

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the APA Eastern Division's 115th annual meeting in New York on Monday January 07, 2019. It was presented at session 20 Author Meets Critics: Michael Jacovides, *Locke's Image of the World*. The session chair was Antonia LoLordo (University of Virginia), the critics were Robert Pasnau (University of Colorado Boulder) and Kathryn Tabb (Bard College), and the author was Michael Jacovides (Purdue University).

Keywords: John Locke, conceivability, causation, substance, real essence, sense perception

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1. Introduction

Agreeing to play the role of commentator in a book symposium introduces into one's life—at least this commentator's life—a particular sort of anxiety: that one might just have nothing to say about the book in question. I can't think of a past instance, however, where those worries were dispelled as quickly as they were upon engaging with Michael Jacovides's new book. Although it is not a long book, it's jam-packed with ideas from the first page to the last, and I could happily take up a whole volume talking about it. In the space that I do have, I am going to confine myself to thinking about the way *conceivability* plays a central role in much of Jacovides's thinking about Locke's "image of the world." I'll develop this theme first in the domain of causation, then substance, and finally perception.

First, though, a few general remarks. One of Jacovides's most interesting ideas, to which he returns throughout the book, is that conceivability is acculturated, in the sense that what counts as conceivable depends very much on one's cultural context. Thus, he writes, "the boundaries of conceivability can be relative to social circumstances, and this is as true for historians of philosophy as it is for the figures they study."¹ This means that, in reading Locke, we should be aware that what he takes to be conceivable or inconceivable is liable to depend on the social context, and so on the "authorities [and] institutions"² with which Locke engages. It also means that what we take to be conceivable or inconceivable is similarly dependent on *our* cultural context. Thus, even when it comes to seemingly pure metaphysical questions of conceivability, we need to be sensitive to issues of social epistemology.

If this is right, and I don't doubt that it is, then it immediately raises questions about *why* it is philosophically significant to judge a thing conceivable or inconceivable. There is, of course, a long tradition of connecting conceivability to possibility. Perhaps it would be hard to find many philosophers who are willing to insist on a strict biconditional. As far back as Aquinas, for instance, one finds the remark that "it is clear that God can do more in his operations than our intellect can do in its apprehension."³ Still, and particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, charges of inconceivability or unintelligibility carry considerable weight. Yet if Jacovides is right that such judgments are highly dependent on social context, then we should be suspicious of their value. And indeed, Jacovides *is* suspicious.⁴ But I will suggest that Locke's appeals to conceivability are more objectively grounded than Jacovides allows and yet at the same time less central to Locke's ultimate philosophical views.

¹ Michel Jacovides, *Locke's Image of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 159.

² Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 42.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis et al. 5 vols., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 4.65.3, 5:263.

⁴ Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 40, 202–4.

2. Conceivability of Causation

Locke thinks that bodies can causally interact in just one way: “They knock, impel, and resist one another . . . and that is all they can do.”⁵ I’ll refer to this as mechanical causation. In drawing such a limit, Locke seemingly sets aside formal, material, and final causation, preserving only efficient from among the old Aristotelian quartet. Moreover, even efficient causation gets dramatically pared down, because Locke is also not prepared to accept the principal Aristotelian vehicle for efficient causation, which is an agent’s impressing its accidental form on a patient. The only “efficacy” that “we can conceive . . . in corporeal agents . . . [is] Modifications of Motion.”⁶

Jacovides usefully distinguishes two kinds of conceivability arguments in this context.⁷ Strong inconceivability attaches to the denial of something known through intuition or demonstration. Mere psychological inconceivability arises from the absence of an idea. It’s this second kind that Locke deploys against the Aristotelians and anyone else who wants to extend causation beyond the bounds of mechanism: “whatever sort of Action, besides these, produces any effects, I confess my self to have no Notion, *nor Idea* of.”⁸

Jacovides thinks that this kind of argument for mechanism from conceivability has little or perhaps even no independent force. He says, “without supplementation, we shouldn’t put any epistemic weight on mere psychological inconceivability.”⁹ And he thinks, moreover, that Locke agrees,¹⁰ highlighting passages where Locke stresses our being at the mercy of the limited range of ideas we human beings happen to be capable of receiving (especially IV.iii.23). Accordingly, in a well-known passage that Jacovides prominently quotes, Locke describes himself as having “instanced in the corpuscularian Hypothesis, as that which is thought to go farthest in an intelligible Explication of the Qualities of Bodies; and I fear the Weakness of the humane Understanding is scarcely able to substitute another, which will afford us a fuller and clearer discovery.”¹¹ Yet although I think we can take Locke at his word when he professes modesty with regard to whether mechanism is ultimately the one true theory of the material universe, we should also take him at his word in his very aggressive attack on the competing hypotheses of his contemporaries, in particular the Aristotelians. And his usual form of attack against these views is precisely this argument from psychological inconceivability, as when substantial

⁵ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), IV.x.10, 624.

⁶ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxii.11, 294.

⁷ Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 26.

⁸ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxii.11, 294.

⁹ Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 27.

¹⁰ Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 28.

¹¹ Locke, *Essay*, IV.iii.16, 547.

forms are dismissed as “not within the reach of our Knowledge . . . nor within the signification of our Words.”¹²

I might at this point be expected to mount some kind of *apologia* for these Aristotelian doctrines, but instead I want to argue that Locke’s attack has more power than Jacovides allows. To begin to think about this, we might try saying a bit more about what conceivability amounts to. As has become quite clear in recent debates in philosophy of mind over the conceivability of zombies and the like,¹³ it is important to get clear about the sort of mental grasp of a thing that is required for it to count as conceivable. As Locke himself acknowledges, his opponents can readily attach words like “form” and “actualize” to the entities and processes they postulate. The problem, of course, for Locke, is that his opponents lack ideas to associate with these words (that’s what Jacovides describes as the core of psychological inconceivability). Locke offers this concrete example: “when a Country-man says, the Cold freezes Water, though the word Freezing seems to import some *Action*, yet truly it signifies nothing, but the effect, *viz.* that Water, that was before fluid, is become hard and consistent, without containing any *Idea* of the Action whereby it is done.”¹⁴ On its face, this may not seem a great example for Locke. After all, the word “cold” can certainly be tied very directly to a sensory idea. And “freezes water” can simply be understood as a way of saying *makes water go from its fluid state to its solid state*. And there is no problem with having ideas for solidity or fluidity. So why should this be any more problematic as a causal claim—when it comes to conceivability—than the paradigm case of impulse: one body’s moving another? Indeed, on reflection, the ideas associated with impulse might seem *more* dubious than those associated with freezing. After all, motion is a very strange sort of quality—whereas all the other qualities are states at an instant, motion is a change in location over time. Why the mechanical philosophy enshrined motion as a primary quality rather than *location* is a complex question, but at any rate one might have reservations about the cogency of motion as a quality. For that matter, even the idea of location is a somewhat dubious one. The ideas associated with cold making fluid things into hard things seem if anything clearer than the ideas involved in impulse.

We are, however, looking in the wrong place. Locke does not object to the ideas associated with “cold,” “fluid,” and “hard,” but to the idea associated with “freezing.” And the problem is not that we don’t know what that word means—he allows that we can give it quite a precise construal in terms of making hard what was fluid. The problem is that we have no further idea “of the action whereby it is done.” In effect, this is to make a point about the depth of our ability to conceive of causation in such a case. Neither the “country-man” nor, indeed, the Aristotelian has an account to give of *how* cold freezes water. In contrast, the mechanical philosophy can, at least in principle, tell a story in terms of impulse. To be sure, don’t expect Locke, or even me, to set that story out in any detail. But

¹² Locke, *Essay*, III.vi.33, 461.

¹³ Classic discussions include those found in both Stephen Yablo, “Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1993): 1–42, and David Chalmers, “Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?” in *Conceivability and Possibility*, eds. Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 145–200.

¹⁴ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxii.11, 294.

one way or another, this is a process we can understand, because it has to do with bodies knocking, impelling, and resisting one another.

There may be some temptation, at this point, to say that Locke's concern here is not so much with conceivability, but rather with intelligibility or, even better, with explicability (I suspect Jacovides may see the situation this way). But I think we should be hesitant to pull these things apart. We can superficially conceive of a thing by attaching a label to it, and in this sense, there is no difficulty in conceiving of the cold's freezing water. More generally, in this superficial sense, Aristotelians are certainly *conceiving* of their various physical and metaphysical accounts. Locke's point is that such superficial conceiving gives out as soon as demands are made to explain the process at a deeper level. All too quickly, Aristotelian accounts become inconceivable, which is not to say that they are impossible or contradictory but just that we do not have an intelligible story to tell about how the process works. It just does. In contrast, we understand impulse, or at least understand it better. Admittedly, there may be some metaphysical obscurity in the status of motion and location, and Locke admits that when it comes to the production of motion via impulse, "the manner how, hardly comes within our comprehension."¹⁵ Still, relations of impulse between such bodies "go farthest in an intelligible Explication" relative to the other contenders.¹⁶ And I think Locke is quite within his rights to insist that we should prefer explanations that lack such obscurity—that we have strong reasons to prefer explanations we can *understand*.

When conceivability is understood in this sense, as what I'll call *deep conceivability*, it becomes harder to suppose that it is subject to acculturation to the extent Jacovides suggests. That's not to say that social factors play no role, but still I think there are fairly objective answers to questions about just how far down explanations go in one domain or another. And to the extent there can be objective measures of explanatory adequacy, it becomes reasonable to prefer explanations that are adequate in these ways.

Another example of this sort of reasoning, and one that Jacovides talks about at some length, concerns action at a distance. In the first addition to the *Essay*, Locke had declared it "impossible to conceive that body should operate on what it does not touch."¹⁷ By the time of the Fourth Edition, Locke had changed his mind about this and modified the passage. As Jacovides stresses, however, Locke did not change his mind about the inconceivability of action at a distance; he rather was "convinced by the judicious Mr. Newton's incomparable book"¹⁸ that we should be open to the possibility even though it is inconceivable. This leads Jacovides to suggest that Locke, here, is motivated by a third kind of inconceivability argument: not one that, like the first two kinds, shows the inconceivable to be definitely false, but one that shows the inconceivable to be probably false, pending other considerations. This leads Jacovides to some interesting reflections on how Locke's commitment to mechanical explanations can be understood as something

¹⁵ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.28, 311.

¹⁶ Locke, *Essay*, IV.iii.16, 547.

¹⁷ Locke, *Essay*, II.viii.11, 135(31)–36(2) 2–3.

¹⁸ John Locke, *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1823), 4:467.

like a Kuhnian commitment to a paradigm, embedded within a sociological context that explains his scientific commitments.¹⁹

I find these remarks philosophically interesting but exegetically implausible. To be sure, Locke's willingness to entertain the possibility of the inconceivable shows us that such arguments are defeasible. But it seems to me that, rather than treat action at a distance as a special case, we should conclude that, for Locke, arguments from inconceivability are *always* defeasible. Nor do I find it very tempting to say that inconceivability lowers the *probability* of a judgment. That would require Locke to sign on to the notion that our world is probably conceivable, which looks like the sort of metaphysically speculative claim he resists. What seems to me better, as before, is to conceive of conceivability in terms of explicability. This fits particularly well with the present case, since there is nothing about the ideas involved in action at a distance that makes it any less conceivable than is action through impulse. It is indeed *easy* to conceive of action at a distance: you conceive of body A here and body B there, and you conceive of B's going into motion because of A's motion. No problem. What's lacking, as in the freezing case, is an explanation of *how* it happens. A bare appeal to action at a distance seems inadequate. Hence it fails to pass the test for (deep) conceivability.

The inexplicability of action at a distance does not make it less probable, as I read Locke, but rather makes it an ineligible hypothesis on methodological grounds. The point of philosophy (or science) is to explain, and so theories that offer no explanatory path forward—like so many Scholastic accounts—should be regarded simply as nonstarters. Appealing to “social considerations and personal biography”²⁰ undersells the cogency of Locke's commitment to conceivability. Even in the face of Newton's influence, Locke's judgment regarding the inconceivability of action at a distance remained unshakable (indeed, this is a judgment that has been shared by pretty much everyone throughout the history of philosophy and physics, up to this day). What changed, for Locke, was not his judgment about inconceivability but his judgment about the explanatory prospects for action at a distance. Newton's work influenced Locke's thinking not because it shifted the weight of probabilities but rather because it offered a methodological way forward. Even if the theory of gravity seemed to require an unintelligible action at a distance, Newton's theory was capable of being developed in ways that similarly unintelligible Scholastic accounts never were. Locke's willingness to waive the requirement of conceivability in this special case, then, helps explain just why, in general, he regarded inconceivable theories as impermissible.

2. Conceivability of Substance

I am pleased to report that Jacovides's understanding of Lockean substances is much like my own. He thinks that Locke's famous quest in *Essay* II.xxiii for the “substratum” and “support” beneath sensible qualities is simply a quest to understand the ordinary substances around us. In Jacovides's terms, “substrata are substances, and these are ordinary objects, living things, chemical stuffs, corpuscles, and spirits.”²¹ Jacovides and I

¹⁹ Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 36–40.

²⁰ Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 42.

²¹ Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 55.

can join together, then, in hoping that, at least in this room, today, there will no talk of some mysterious sub-substance lying beneath the familiar furniture of the world.

Yet even with regard to the familiar substances around us, Locke thinks we face considerable obstacles to conceivability. The obstacles look to be, in the first instance, precisely along the lines of Jacovides's mere psychological inconceivability—that is, they arise from our failure to have ideas corresponding to our words. As Locke says: “here, as in all other cases, where we use Words without having clear and distinct *Ideas*, we talk like Children.”²² We lack a clear and distinct idea of what it is to be “*pure Substance in general*”²³ and accordingly we have only a “confused” idea of any particular substance, apart from the “collection of those simple *Ideas* which are to be found in them.”²⁴ But whereas obscurities of this kind are enough, as we have seen, for Locke to reject with mockery the Aristotelian theory of formal causation, in the case of substance he feels unable to do that, because he is unwilling to embrace the sort of radically revisionary metaphysics that would deny the reality of ordinary objects.

Here, again, I think it's misleading to treat Locke's concerns as a matter of mere psychological inconceivability. To be sure, Locke talks that way, as we have just seen. But it is not as if he thinks there is something within a stone that, if only we could see it, our puzzlement would be resolved. Cut up the stone and all you'll find are more stones, and although Locke isn't prepared to say that it's stone all the way down, it's not as if his puzzle would go away if that proved to be the case. So, what idea exactly is he lacking? Or, more perspicuously, what *would* be an example of an adequate conception of substance? The most familiar answer is Aristotelian prime matter and substantial form. Locke is of course not satisfied with explanations like that. But can we give even a *possible* example of something that would satisfy him?

Here I think that Jacovides and I broadly agree on the answer. It is not so much that we are missing out on some idea that would unlock the nature of substance and make the whole thing conceivable but that we are unable to fill in the details of how substances work. As Jacovides puts it, “the problem with philosophical orthodoxy about the nature of substance is not that it is in error but rather that it doesn't fill in the details.”²⁵ This fits nicely with how I suggested above we should think about causation. What is problematic about substance is just what was problematic about Aristotelian causality: that it fails to pass the test of deep conceivability. That is, we cannot fill in the details of *how* a collection of stone particles does the things that it must do in order to count as a single stone.

What would satisfy Locke is the same sort of thing we've seen already, an explanation in terms of bodies knocking, impelling, and resisting one another. But if this is what Locke is looking for, then it may seem unclear why there is a puzzle here. Let a stone be a collection of smaller stony bits, as far down as you like. The bits knock, impel, resist. Beyond the tedious mechanical details of how exactly this works, why is there a general philosophical problem? An answer to that question turns on a specification of what it is

²² Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.2, 296.

²³ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.2, 295.

²⁴ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.3, 297.

²⁵ Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 59.

that makes something count as a substance. Jacovides devotes a section of the book to precisely this issue, under the heading “What a Clear Idea of Substance Would Teach.”²⁶ Here, however, his view and mine begin to go in somewhat different directions.

Jacovides takes a clear idea of bodily substance to require two things: “the cohesion of bodies and the capacity of bodies to make other bodies move through impulse.”²² He works through the latter sections of II.xxiii where Locke develops just these two points, showing that body fails to be deeply conceivable (in my terms) on both counts. But I think Jacovides is misreading the course of II.xxiii in a subtle but significant way. Locke’s concern, beginning in II.xxiii.15, is with establishing that we have “as clear a perception, and notion of immaterial Substances, as we have of material.”²³ This is what leads him to identify cohesion and impulse as “*The primary Ideas we have peculiar to Body, as contradistinguished to Spirit.*”²⁴ I think it is a mistake, however, to think of these as distinctive features of *substance*, even if this extended discussion appears in the chapter devoted to that topic. Rather, substance is something else, in addition to cohesion and impulse, which is why Locke says that “by putting together the *Ideas* of coherent solid parts, and a power of being moved, joined with Substance, of which likewise we have no positive *Idea*, we have the *Idea* of Matter.”²⁵ So, cohesion and impulse are features of body, but they do not have a direct bearing on Locke’s puzzles over substance. And this is as it should be, since neither cohesion nor impulse are unique to corporeal substances. Tie a stick onto a stone and you have a hammer that exhibits cohesion and the capacity for impulse, but you do not thereby have a substance.

What, then, are the distinctive features of substance? Locke tells us right at the start of II.xxiii: Take the collection of simple ideas that “go constantly together” and are “presumed to belong to one thing . . . ; we accustom our selves, to suppose some *Substratum*, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *Substance*.”²⁶ The distinctive features of substance, then, are to serve as the subject in which qualities inhere, and, critically, to serve as the explanatory core for why a certain sort of substance has certain sorts of qualities. Thus, for instance, our idea of the sun is “an aggregate of those several simple *Ideas*, Bright, Hot, Roundish, having a constant regular motion, at a certain distance from us.” But we additionally suppose there to be “such a *Substratum*, as gives as it were a support to those Qualities.”²⁷ The substratum just is the sun, and to understand the sun would be to understand why, day after day, there is this thing in the sky that constantly has the qualities we observe it to have.

²⁶ Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 62.

²² Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 62.

²³ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.15, 305.

²⁴ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.17, 306.

²⁵ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.15, 305.

²⁶ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.1, 295.

²⁷ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.6, 298–99.

I am hopeful that Jacovides won't disagree with any of this, and in a way my quarrel with him is petty (if I don't allow myself petty quarrels with his book, I'll be back to the anxious state of having nothing to disagree with at all). If we think in the traditional way of substances as falling into various higher and lower genera and species, then I am in effect going down to the *infima species*, or even to the individual level, and expecting a wholly intelligible idea of substance to explain the superficial properties of a thing of that kind. Jacovides is looking higher up the Porphyrian tree, at the features characterizing everything in the genus of body. Either way, a deep conception of substance would play the same role, showing exactly how and why the thing at issue (the piece of gold, which is a body) has the sensible qualities that it has. My only point is that in holding onto the legitimacy of the doctrine of substance, even while complaining of its obscurity, Locke endorses a certain metaphysical structure, on which the world comes in familiar medium-sized chunks, identifiable and reidentifiable in virtue of stable sensible qualities, where the stability of those qualities is to be understood in terms of deep features of the medium-sized thing. These things are the substances. The puzzle is to identify the deep explanatory features.

Although Locke thinks our ideas here are mired in obscurity, he does offer something by way of a framework. He thinks the critical thing we would need to grasp is the real essence of the substance. It is this that the sensible qualities are “supposed to flow from.”²⁸ Jacovides and I are broadly in agreement here, but he charges that my picture is not quite right. I had said in *Metaphysical Themes* that for Locke “the substance itself is a kind of composite: an organizational principle, together with a stuff that gets organized.”²⁹ A good passage along those lines is II.xxiii.11: “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 certain Size and Figure.”³⁰ I take the “real constitution” here to be equivalent to the “admirable texture of parts,” and I take both to be ways of talking about a real essence. So, I think we have here a version of the venerable notion of material substances as a composite of form and matter, albeit of a non-Aristotelian kind. On this story “texture” plays the form role and the “parts” that get textured—he often calls these “particles”³¹—play the role of matter.

Jacovides rejects this picture. He reports my impression of a passage as suggesting that “Locke thinks of substances as composites of real essence and matter.” To this Jacovides responds: “It doesn't suggest that to me. The real essence is a collection of determinate microphysical primary qualities. Locke believes that primary qualities inhere in their substances, and he doesn't say that they are parts of those substances.”³² Broadly,

²⁸ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.3, 296.

²⁹ Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1671* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), 172.

³⁰ Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.11, 301.

³¹ For example, see Locke, *Essay*, II.xxvi.2, 325.

³² Jacovides, *Locke's Image*, 105n.

perhaps, our views are not that different. But I think the details here do matter. I am not sure whether we should characterize the real essence in terms of “primary qualities” and I don’t much care whether the real essence should be strictly described as a “part” of the substance, but if we are going to follow Jacovides’s way of talking, then I would want to insist on the following.

First, the real essence is not simply the “collection” of all the primary qualities of a particular body. Rather, it consists of those primary qualities that give the particles a “texture” such as to function as the substance it is. This is why it is important to get clear on just what the function of a substance is (Jacovides may agree with me here).

Second, the reason I hesitate to follow Jacovides in speaking of the real essence in terms of primary qualities is that this naturally leads to Jacovides’s further thought that the real essence inheres in the substance. That, I am fairly confident, wrecks Locke’s view, because it puts us inescapably onto the path to thinking of the substance as a qualityless sub-substance. We should hold fast to the thought that the substance is, for example, the stone and the real essence is an integral feature (avoiding the word “part”) of the stone. If the substance is something lying underneath the real essence, then we are back to the old bad picture of a bare Lockean substratum.

Third, if Jacovides really does want to insist that the real essence inheres in something, then the best way forward is to go even farther than me in insisting that Locke has something like prime matter in his theory. For the only way to tell the story as Jacovides wants to tell it is to think of the particles as collectively a subject in which the essence-level primary qualities inhere. And that’s really very close to the Aristotelian view, except that now the substantial form is conceived of as a “collection of primary qualities.”

I think that reads too much into Locke’s theory. The most I would say is that Locke thinks substances are comprised of particles and an organizing structure for those particles. The organizing structure is the real essence. The particles, which endure through change, play the same functional role as prime matter. If this seems objectionably metaphysical and Scholastic sounding, well, that’s precisely why Locke complains so sharply about the obscurity and inadequacy of our ideas of substance. But he cannot come up with anything better than this.

3. Conceivability of Perception

How conceivable is sensory perception? There are two broad sorts of traditions here. One assimilates perception to thought and treats sensory ideas as part of the broad family of mental phenomena essentially distinct from corporeal phenomena. Readers of Locke whose frame of historical reference begins with Descartes are liable to assume without question that this is how Locke thinks of perception. But the more mainstream historical tradition, going back to Aristotle, treats sensory perception as a biological phenomenon occurring in the brain rather than in the mind and no more unintelligible in principle than is, say, the reception of light in air.

I am somewhat puzzled about Jacovides’s view in this regard. Or, perhaps I should say, I am puzzled about Locke, but since my assignment is to complain about Jacovides, I’ll try to take him as my target. On one hand, Jacovides seems to assume without question that perception, for Locke, belongs on the incorporeal mind side of the divide. And, to be sure, Locke often does seem to assimilate the case of perception to the case of thought and to speak of both as equally inexplicable in corporeal terms. For instance: “Body as far as we can conceive being able only to strike and affect body; and Motion, according to the

utmost reach of our *Ideas*, being able to produce nothing but Motion, so that when we allow it to produce pleasure or pain, or the *Idea* of a Colour, or Sound, we are fain [inclined or obliged] to quit our Reason, go beyond our *Ideas*, and attribute it wholly to the good Pleasure of our Maker.”³³ Locke seems to think that there is an intelligible corpuscular story to be told that runs from object through the medium, into the organ, and all the way into the brain, but then “reason” runs out and we cannot conceive of how from there ideas are produced within the mind. This is explicitly Jacovides’s way of thinking about Locke’s theory of perception: we do as much as we possibly can in corporeal terms and then appeal to divine intervention only to bridge “a single point in the causal chain from external bodies to ideas of sensation.”³⁴

What I find puzzling is that elsewhere, Jacovides, following Locke himself, seems to forget this Cartesian picture and treat at least some kinds of perception as if they were wholly and intelligibly corporeal. Jacovides routinely speaks of Locke’s “corpuscularian theory of perception,”³⁵ with an eye to passages like this one: “all Sensation being produced in us, only by different degrees and modes of Motion in our animal Spirits, variously agitated by external Objects.”³⁶ I suppose such comments can be read as tacitly setting aside the inconceivable bit that comes in at the tail end of the story. But I really do not know what we are supposed to do with the extended argument at II.viii.11-15, which begins with this remark: “bodies produce ideas in us . . . by impulse.” Next there’s a passing reference toward the interface where Cartesians see a gap: motion comes to “the brains or the seat of sensation, there to produce in our minds the particular ideas we have of them.” This leads to familiar remarks about how the ideas of secondary qualities fail to resemble their objects, since we cannot “conceive, that God should annex such *Ideas* to such Motions, with which they have no similitude.”³⁷ That’s the bit that gets all the attention. But what I am puzzling over here is the contrasting conclusion Locke draws in II.viii.15: “from whence I think it is easy to draw this observation, that the ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves.” How did we get resemblance from this story? Locke now seems to picture perception along the old Aristotelian lines of the stamp and the wax. As long as we confine ourselves to primary-quality perception, the motions of particles in the world simply stamp themselves on our perceptual faculties in such a way that resemblance is preserved. Locke continues to speak this way later in II.viii when he apologizes for finding it necessary to have been “engaged in Physical Enquiries . . . to make the Nature of Sensation a little understood.”³⁸ None of this makes any sense if Locke thinks there is a gap in principle between the brain’s motions and the mind’s ideas. If God has to intervene at that point—“intervention” being the word Jacovides repeatedly uses to describe God’s

³³ Locke, *Essay*, IV.iii.6, 541.

³⁴ Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 126.

³⁵ For example, see Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 36.

³⁶ Locke, *Essay*, II.viii.4, 131.

³⁷ Locke, *Essay*, II.viii.13, 136.

³⁸ Locke, *Essay*, II.viii.22, 140.

role in perception³⁹—then at that point, we lose the ability to conceive of how to connect mind and world. Locke’s “easy . . . observation” about the resemblance between primary qualities and their ideas makes sense only if he thinks that whole process, from start to finish, is conceivable. Indeed, it must be deeply conceivable, so that we can be confident it works on the model of the stamp on the wax. It is as if Locke is a Cartesian with regard to secondary-quality perception and an Aristotelian with regard to primary-quality perception. Jacovides happily draws on the passages I have just cited to illustrate how physical theory shapes Locke’s philosophy of mind.⁴⁰ But it can do so only if perception is, at least in some cases, much more intelligible than Jacovides elsewhere allows it to be.

My guess is that Jacovides’s considered view is that Locke’s perceptual theory is Cartesian, by which I mean that some special, divine intervention is required in all cases of perception to get us from the corporeal brain to the immaterial mind. My guess about Locke, however, is that his considered view of perception is Aristotelian, by which I mean that he thinks perception is a corporeal process, albeit not in all respects deeply conceivable. My clearest evidence for this is the well-known remark to Stillingfleet in which God superadds various properties to matter, thereby bringing into existence moving bodies, vegetative bodies like a peach tree, and finally sensory animals. He remarks: “Hitherto it is not doubted but the power of God may go, and that the properties of a rose, a peach, or an elephant, superadded to matter, change not the properties of matter; but matter is in these things matter still.”⁴¹ Scholars usually focus on this passage for what Locke goes on to say about thinking matter, but its implications for sensation are equally striking. The passage leaves little doubt that Locke puts sensation on the side of “vegetation, life” and “spontaneous motion,” as characteristics of living things that are uncontroversially functions of material entities. This implies that Locke is no Cartesian, and that he takes his readership not to be Cartesians either, and that he thinks of perception, and in general the operations of nonrational animals, as something that can be undoubtedly (“it is not doubted”) accommodated at the corporeal level. To say that it can be accommodated is not to say that it is deeply conceivable. But I take its inconceivability to be on a par with the inconceivability of the communication of motion by impulse or the workings of gravity. It is a gap in our understanding, to be sure, but not one that requires any form of dualism, or any special divine intervention.

Here too, then, Locke’s talk of “inconceivability” and the like is a rhetorical tool that he wields for variable purposes on various occasions. To be sure, what is inconceivable is by no means impossible, but Locke is on firm ground in supposing that we should pursue theories that are deeply conceivable when we can have them and eschew theories that are not deeply conceivable when we can do without them. Hence, he embraces mechanism and rejects formal causality. But in some cases, as with substance, perception, and action at a distance, we cannot do without the inconceivable.

If there is anything to complain of here, now finally turning my complaints to Locke himself, it would be his annoying tendency to think that what he finds inconceivable will never be conceivable by anyone. “The simple *Ideas* we receive from Sensation and

³⁹ For example, see Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 126.

⁴⁰ Jacovides, *Locke’s Image*, 150.

⁴¹ Locke, *Works*, 4:460.

Reflection, are the Boundaries of our Thoughts; beyond which, the Mind, whatever efforts it would make, is not able to advance one jot; nor can it make any discoveries, when it would pry into the Nature and hidden Causes of those *Ideas*.”⁴² Rather than bide his time in cases such as this, awaiting further developments in science and philosophy, Locke surrenders to the wisdom of God. As he says about the mysteries of the brain–mind interface in perception, “this I can resolve only into the good pleasure of God, whose ways are past finding out.”⁴³ I take the point to be epistemic rather than metaphysical. That is, it is not that we should suppose God directly intervenes in cases such as this but rather that we should resign ourselves to practicing religion, rather than science or philosophy, if we hope to make any progress. This is one of Locke’s characteristic intellectual reflexes, and it has not aged well.

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⁴² Locke, *Essay*, II.xxiii.29, 312.

⁴³ Locke, *Works*, 9:217.

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