Unfelt

Noggle, James

Published by Cornell University Press

Noggle, James.  
Unfelt: The Language of Affect in the British Enlightenment.  
Project MUSE.  

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/73096

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2506802
Chapter I

Philosophy

Affective Nonconsciousness

Inconspicuous references to the unfelt lace through philosophies of feeling, perception, and sensation, as well as emotions and “sentiment,” in Britain throughout the long eighteenth century. Noticing this quiet persistence puts the centrality of feeling in the period’s philosophical writing in a new light. A scholarly tradition, inherited and refined by seminal intellectual histories of the late twentieth century, has long seen a specially heightened attention to consciousness, the arena in which the self interacts with its feelings, as definitive of the period’s thought. The “self-intimating” impressions of the mind, where sensation and knowing converge, consist of what is sensible, either furnished from “outside” or presented in the mind’s reflection on its own operations. This motif in John Locke and his heirs has been seen to place a new emphasis on interiority—the inner space to which objects of sense are conveyed and in which feelings are had—with a corresponding focus on the individuality or separateness of the mind subject to such states, and on the personal identity of the self extending through time as these evolve.

This study’s attention to the insensible in some ways resembles the approach of a more recent generation of scholars who look for the defining components of selfhood in the period apart from its specially heightened self-consciousness. Some intellectual historians have shown that British philosophy noticed other factors, including bodily and social ones, in its accounts of the self. Others insist that, whatever the philosophers said, the self was popularly understood as culturally negotiated instead of strictly internal and profoundly personal. And several literary studies have argued that aspects of the self, such as the will or the capacity for moral choice, arise for many writers of the period—novelists as well as philosophers—in our interactions with the world, not in our radically separate conscious states. So legal structures, for instance, portray what a person is in essentially social terms, or theories of
agency make willing a matter of external causation instead of a special mental action.⁶

Chapter I, focusing on philosophical writing from Locke through Adam Smith, considers a somewhat different pattern. The insensible tends to come up in this writing’s very effort to articulate the unique sensitivities of the mental. It is inside the inside, as it were, inherent in feeling and essential in accounts of the self’s interiority. A common theme in affect theory in recent years suggests something similar. It defines affect as “prepersonal intensity” not merely to distinguish it from “personal feeling” but also to show how the latter emerges from and gains its vividness from the former.⁷ What a person feels results from what she has not yet felt as a person. The Deleuzean strand of such theories has roots in materialist thought of the seventeenth century, especially Baruch Spinoza’s, in which mental images are “corporeal affections (affectio),” defined as “traces of an external body on our body.”⁸ I begin by examining such encounters between affecting and affected at the smallest possible scale: the “insensible parts” of matter identified by Locke as causing sensation, and the infinitesimal particles in the brain hypothesized by Locke’s disciple, David Hartley, to bridge spirit and matter. Examples surveyed later in chapter I treat a larger entity, the self, and the unfelt changes undergone by consciousness, a mind, or a person through time. This temporal dimension is evoked by another Spinozan term, affectus, which Deleuze defines as “continuous variation of the force of existing.”⁹ If affectio helps us think about miniscule physical traces that affect the mind, affectus describes the ongoing, often vanishingly minute transitions that minds undergo: unfelt traces, and the unfelt variations they make. In all these cases, philosophers use the insensible to pass between and underwrite the feelings at the center of their attention.

This passing function indicates why such terms do not come in for much scrutiny from intellectual historians. The insensible plays a supporting role. It facilitates the articulation of prominent ideas—the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, notions of personal identity, the association of ideas, sympathy, and sentimental moral judgment—without being separately conceptualized itself. Beyond that, the period’s philosophies of feeling are, after all, mostly about feelings. Calling something insensible effectively removes it from consideration or, more forcefully, from ever being known. As Locke declares at the beginning of book 4 of the Essay concerning Human Understanding (1689), “Since the Mind, in all its Thoughts and Reasonings, hath no other Immediate Object but its own Ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident, that our Knowledge is only conversant about them.”¹⁰ If immediately sensed ideas supply a paradigm of knowledge in the long eighteenth century, the insensible marks a place where knowledge stops. This affiliates the idiom
of the insensible with a kind of skepticism, an epistemological attitude that often attends its usage in examples discussed in this book.

I begin by discussing how the late seventeenth-century British philosophy of sensation, feeling, and selfhood responded to the challenges of mechanism with the idiom of the insensible. I then show how this idiom carries forward from Locke and Robert Boyle to philosophers of the mid-eighteenth century, the age of sensibility, who use it to address a variety of problems—some directly inherited from Locke, others new. The consistent, Lockean element in these usages by Hartley, Étienne Bonnet de Condillac and David Hume, Eliza Haywood and Adam Smith, is that they do not refer to mental contents. We do not hear of “insensible perceptions,” the existence of which, as we shall see, G. W. Leibniz asserts to distinguish his views from Locke’s. There are no “unconscious thoughts” or “unfelt sensations” in the British tradition surveyed here. Writers in this tradition rather describe insensible powers that affect the mind without themselves being mental. They are nonconscious, not unconscious. This is not an articulated idea in the writers I survey here. Rather, it is an implication carried by the idiom into articulations of quite a wide variety of other ideas. All of them indicate the persistent usefulness in philosophies of feeling of a stylistic gesture toward something beyond the reach of both feeling and philosophy.