

IDEAS

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The aim of the *Essay* is to ‘enquire into the Original, Certainty, and Extent of humane Knowledge’ (*E*, I.i.2, p. 43). Central to this epistemological endeavour is the theory of ideas. Ideas are the ‘materials’, or ‘instruments’, of knowledge. Ideas compose propositions, and knowledge of propositions consists in nothing more than perceiving the agreement or disagreement of their constituent ideas (*E*, IV.i.1, p. 525). As such, ideas are the bedrock of Locke’s epistemology. Perhaps because of this, they are also one of the most controversial aspects of Locke’s philosophy: Locke’s theory of ideas was the target of many of the earliest critics of the *Essay*, including Norris and Stillingfleet; their criticisms coalesced at the end of the Early Modern period with Reid; and Locke’s use of the term continues to be controversial.

Locke was a proponent of what Stillingfleet famously described as the ‘new way of ideas’ (e.g. Stillingfleet, 1698, p. 120). Drawing on the Platonic and neo-Platonic traditions, the term ‘idea’ had been re-popularised in the seventeenth century by Descartes. On the Continent, Descartes’s use of the term gave rise to a celebrated dispute amongst Cartesians, centring around Malebranche and Arnauld. The terminology had advocates on the other side of the English Channel too, including Hobbes, Boyle, and the Cambridge Platonists, More and Cudworth. To a greater or lesser extent, Locke was influenced by all these figures.

Apologising for his frequent use of the term, Locke defines ‘idea’ in the Introduction of the *Essay* as ‘whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks’, explaining that the term ‘expresses whatever is meant by *Phantasm*, *Notion*, *Species*, or whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ’d about in thinking’ (*E*, I.i.8, p. 47 and

E, II.viii.8, p. 134). This definition is—presumably intentionally—consistent with most of the main theories of ideas abroad in the seventeenth century.

‘Phantasm’, ‘notion’ and ‘species’ were all originally Aristotelian terms, typically associated (respectively) with imagination, the intellect and sensation. But these terms were also used, often with related senses, by those hostile to the Aristotelian tradition: Descartes, for instance, often uses ‘notion’ to refer to ideas in the intellect, and Hobbes often uses ‘phantasm’ to refer to ideas in the imagination.

The claim that ideas are the ‘Object of the Understanding’ is equally undiscerning: the correct interpretation of this phrase was central to the dispute between Malebranche and Arnauld. Calling ideas ‘objects’ naturally suggests the view that ideas are themselves substances, or at least ‘substance-like’ entities. This was how Malebranche understood the phrase, arguing specifically that ideas are substance-like entities that exist ‘in’ the mind of God (Malebranche, 1997, sect. 3.2.1, 3.2.6, Elucidation 10). But Arnauld argued that this description is also consistent with the view that ideas are not themselves real beings, but intrinsically representational modifications of mind considered with respect to their intentional content, or the ‘intentional objects’ of these modifications of mind (Arnauld, 1990, Chapters 5-6). This is a development of Descartes’s famous claim in the *Meditations* that the term ‘idea’ is ambiguous, referring ‘materially’ to thoughts considered as modifications of mind, and ‘objectively’ to what those thoughts are thoughts *of*, e.g. the sun or a golden mountain (Descartes, 1985, vol. II, pp. 7, 27-9).

Locke’s critics have traditionally assumed that, like Malebranche, Locke thought of ideas as real beings (although unlike Malebranche, not ‘in’ God). This view is not obviously absurd; it continued to have proponents for centuries to come, particularly during the hey-day of sense-datum theories in the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Locke’s critics argue that the interposition of ‘shadowy’ entities between perceiving subjects and material objects has disastrous epistemic consequences, leading

either to external world scepticism, or at best—and dispensing with the mind-independent external world behind the ‘veil of ideas’—Berkelian idealism (e.g. Reid, 1969).

Locke himself often lends support to this interpretation, frequently writing as though ideas are epistemic intermediaries between mind and world. Two notorious passages in particular contain the claims that material objects, unlike ideas, are not known ‘immediately’ (*E*, IV.iv.3, p. 563), are not ‘present to the Understanding’ (*E*, IV.xxi.4, p. 721), indeed are perhaps not perceived at all (‘the Mind...perceives nothing but its own *Ideas*’, *E*, IV.iv.3, p. 563). These claims are strongly reminiscent of Malebranche’s ‘wandering soul’ argument for the existence of ideas: that since the soul does not leave the body and ‘stroll about the heavens’ when it perceives objects external to itself, there must be something else distinct from these objects to which the soul is ‘intimately joined’ and that it thereby perceives directly (Malebranche, 1997, sect. 3.2.1).

But other passages cut against this interpretation, suggesting instead the more orthodox Cartesian view of Arnauld that ideas are nothing more than mental modifications considered with respect to their intentional objects (e.g. Yolton, 1984). Locke identifies ideas with acts of perception on a number of occasions (e.g. *E*, I.iv.20, pp. 96-98 and II.x.2, pp. 149-150). Recalling Descartes’s distinction between the material and objective reality of ideas, he talks at one point of ideas as being ‘*objectively in the Mind*’ (*E*, p. 13). This interpretation also receives at least mitigated support from comments written by Locke on John Norris, the first published critic of the *Essay* and an English follower of Malebranche, and Malebranche himself. Indeed, in the discussion of Malebranche, Locke pre-empts what would become a standard objection to indirect (often called ‘Lockean’) theories of perception, arguing that Malebranche’s ‘Vision in God’ erects an impenetrable veil of ideas between perceiving subjects and material

objects to disastrous epistemic effect: for ‘how can I know that the picture of any thing is like that thing, when I never see that which it represents’ (*W*, vol. 9, p. 250).

Nevertheless, simply ‘de-ontologizing’ ideas in this way is not an epistemological panacea. Even if ideas are merely intentional objects and not real beings, this does not by itself explain how ideas fulfil the function of guaranteeing our epistemic access to the world, given that in cases of illusion we can perceive objects to be other than they really are, and in cases of hallucination have perceptions as of objects that do not exist at all. Moreover, the overwhelmingly reticent tone of the posthumously published comments on Norris and Malebranche makes it difficult to confidently attribute to Locke any positive view about the nature of ideas. Consistent with his neutral definition of ‘idea’ in the *Essay*, it might be that Locke does not propose any positive theory of the metaphysics of ideas at all. As Locke himself says in response to Norris’s complaint that he fails to give an account of the ‘nature of ideas’—whether they are real beings or not, substances or modifications, material or immaterial—‘possibly I found that discovery beyond my reach & being one of those that do not pretend to know all things am not ashamed to confesse my ignorance in this & a great many other’ (Acworth, 1971, p. 10). That is, perhaps the metaphysical status of ideas is one of the things that the enquiry into the ‘Original, Certainty, and Extent of humane Knowledge’ ultimately shows lies beyond the ‘compass of human understanding’.

Whatever their ontological status, Locke argues at length in Book 1 that no ideas are innate. Instead, all ideas derive ultimately from experience: either sensation, whereby objects produce ideas in us, or reflection, whereby we reflect on the operations of own mind; ‘These two are the Fountains of Knowledge, from whence all the *Ideas* we have, or can naturally have, do spring’ (*E*, II.i.2, p. 104). But although the ultimate origin of all our ideas, ideas differ depending on how exactly how they derive from experience.

Simple ideas derive directly from experience, and in receiving them the mind is ‘wholly passive’ (*E*, II.xii.1, p. 163); although once received, these ideas can be actively discerned (*E*, II.xi.1, p. 155) and retained (*E*, II.x.1, p. 149). Simple ideas differ depending on their mode of entry into the mind: some simple ideas, like solidity and the secondary quality ideas colour, sound, taste, smell, come only from one sense; some come from more than one sense, like the ideas of size, shape, motion; some come only from reflection, like the ideas of perception (or thinking) and volition (or willing); and some simple ideas, like pleasure, pain, power, existence, unity, come from both sensation and reflection.

Complex ideas, in contrast, are produced out of simple ideas by various actions of the mind, including compounding, decomposing, repeating, comparing (e.g. *E*, II.xii.1, pp. 163-164). It is not entirely clear whether these actions of the mind are always voluntary. At times (*E*, II.xx.9, pp. 153-154) Locke seems to suggest that complex ideas derive directly from sensation; if so, the mind presumably binds together the simple ideas that ‘enter by the Senses simple and unmixed’ (*E*, II.ii.1, p. 119) (cf. Gibson, 1917, pp. 61-2, Chappell, 1994, p. 37). Elsewhere, however, Locke seems to distinguish complex ideas properly so-called from mere ‘Combinations of simple *Ideas*’, of the sort a dog might ‘take in’ from his master (*E*, II.xi.7, p. 158). This would be consistent with the epistemological significance that Locke accords to the passivity of the mind in perception (cf. Bolton, 2007, pp. 86-7).

There are three types of complex idea (e.g. *E*, II.xii.3-8, pp. 164-166). First, there are ideas of particular substances, like a man or a sheep, which consist of particular qualities and the relative, obscure and confused, supposition of that in which these qualities inhere. Second, there are ideas of modes of substances, of which there are in turn two types: simple modes, including space, number, power, and mixed modes, including obligation, drunkenness, lying. (Locke draws the distinction between simple

and mixed modes in two not obviously equivalent ways, depending on whether the idea is a collection of distinct homogenous simple ideas (*E*, II.xii.5, p. 165) or modifications of the same simple idea (*E*, II.xiii.1, pp. 166-167.) Finally, and slightly more controversially, there are ideas of relations, like father, bigger and cause; these are slightly more controversial because changes to the fourth edition of the *Essay* are sometimes taken to suggest that Locke came to regard complex ideas and ideas of relations as mutually exclusive categories (*E*, II.xii.1, pp. 163-164; see e.g. Gibson, 1917, p. 65, but contrast Stewart, 1980).

Locke's distinction between simple and complex ideas raises a number of questions. Locke initially characterises simple ideas in structural terms, as being in themselves 'uncompounded, nothing but *one uniform Appearance*, or Conception in the mind' (*E*, II.i.1, p. 132). On this view, simple ideas are like the atoms of the corpuscularian theory of matter (e.g. *E*, II.ii.2, pp. 119-120 and II.vii.10, pp. 131-132). This phenomenologically based structural distinction is in turn intended to ground the later semantic characterisation of simple ideas, as ideas that have names that are incapable of definition (*E*, III.iv.4, 7, pp. 421, 422). Yet the structural distinction between simple and complex ideas is not consistently adhered to: Locke admits elsewhere that the simple idea of extension is composed of parts, albeit other ideas of extension (*E*, II.xv.9, pp. 201-203); the simple idea of power 'includes' in it a relation to 'Action or Change'; and consequently paradigmatically uniform secondary quality ideas like colour involve relations, being as they are 'the *Powers* of different Bodies, in relation to our Perception, *etc.*' (*E*, II.xxi.3, p. 234). Even a purely genetic distinction between simple and complex ideas based on their relation to experience is problematic. We have already seen that it is unclear whether complex ideas can come directly from experience; the genetic story is still further complicated by Locke's claim that the mind by 'habitual custom' alters ideas received via the senses into ideas of three-dimensional figures (Bolton, 2007, pp. 81-3).

Cross-cutting the distinction between simple and complex ideas are the coincident distinctions between particular and general, and concrete and abstract, ideas. Abstract ideas are the materials of general knowledge. They are formed by a different kind of mental activity, abstraction, which involves ‘separating’ ideas from ‘the circumstances of Time, and Place, and any other *Ideas*, that may determine them to this or that particular Existence’ (*E*, III.iii.6, p. 411).

Abstract ideas are the referents of general terms, like ‘white’, ‘murder’, and ‘man’. Locke accepts the nominalistic principle that everything that exists is particular. Abstract ideas therefore play the role of universals, although they are not themselves universal: the universality of a general idea consists just in the fact that ‘the particular *Ideas*, about which it is, are such as more than one particular Thing can correspond with, and be represented by’ (*E*, IV.xvii.8, p. 681). What is controversial is exactly how they fulfil this representative function.

Following Berkeley (Berkeley, 1975, Introduction), it is traditionally assumed that Locke thinks of abstraction as a process for producing numerically distinct ideas, in which any features tying an idea to a particular spatio-temporal context are literally removed from it. On this view, abstraction is the converse of composition. This appears to be the view of abstraction proposed in the later Drafts of the *Essay* (Walmsley, 2000), and follows from a natural way of interpreting Locke’s repeated claims in the *Essay* itself—especially in the second discussion of abstraction in Book III—that forming abstract ideas involves ‘leaving out’ those features that are peculiar to particular individuals (e.g. *E*, III.iii.7, 8, 9, pp. 411-412).

As Berkeley points out, such a view faces a number of problems. At the very least, it seems to require that abstract ideas have radically indeterminate contents: for instance, that the abstract idea of a man is an idea of a thing capable of voluntary motion, with sense and reason, joined to a body of a certain size, but such that this body is not

any particular shape, size or colour. Worse, Locke even seems to suggest that the contents of abstract ideas are not just indeterminate, but internally inconsistent: for instance, that the abstract idea of a triangle ‘must be neither Oblique, nor Rectangle, neither Equilateral, Equicural, nor Scalenon; but all and none of these at once’ (*E*, IV.vii.9, p. 596).

With these problems in mind, a number of commentators have argued that Locke’s considered theory of abstraction is actually the more innocuous view—effectively the view of abstraction that Berkeley himself proposes—that abstraction merely consists in ‘partially considering’ particular ideas, by selectively attending to some of their features whilst ignoring others (e.g. Ayers, 1991). This view is more strongly suggested by the earlier discussion of abstraction in Book II, where simple ideas of qualities are the main focus. As Locke remarks there, the mind is able to use ideas to represent ideas of a particular class by ‘considering them as they are in the Mind such Appearances, separate from all other Existences, and the circumstances of real Existence, as Time, Place, or any other concomitant *Ideas*’ (*E*, II.xi.9, p. 159). The mind frames the abstract idea of whiteness, for instance, when it ‘considers that Appearance alone’ which is common to chalk, snow and milk, without attending to any concomitant ideas, or taking into consideration anything that ties the simple idea of whiteness to its particular spatio-temporal context.

Locke’s view of abstraction bears on a different question about the nature of ideas: whether ideas are images or concepts? There are different ways of understanding the contrast between images and concepts, but the view that all ideas are images (*imagism*) is typically associated with two related theses: first, that objects are presented in thought in the same general way as they are presented in sensation; and second, by way of explanation of this, that there is no rational intellectual faculty, distinct from the (sensory) imagination, of the kind that Descartes argues for by contrasting the mental activity of

confusedly imagining a 1000-sided chillagon with that of clearly conceiving of one (Descartes, 1985, vol. II, pp. 50-1). The imagism debate bears on the debate about abstraction in the following way: because there can be no images with the kind of indeterminate content that the first model of abstraction (suggested by the Book III discussion) requires, an imagistic theory of ideas presupposes the view that abstract ideas are particular ideas partially considered.

As Ayers, who attributes an imagistic theory to Locke, notes, ‘Hostility to Descartes’s conception of intellect pervades the *Essay*’ (Ayers, 1991, p. 48). Locke explicitly attempts to diffuse Descartes’s argument for the existence of a distinct intellectual faculty, arguing that whilst we lack a clear conception of the *figure* of chillagon, we are nevertheless able to think about it by virtue of having a clear conception of the *number* of its sides (*E*, II.xxix.13-4, pp. 368-369). Moreover, an imagistic theory of ideas is at least suggested by Locke’s discussion of memory, with its abundant use of imagistic metaphor: memory is described, for example, as the faculty by virtue of which the mind is able to take previously experienced ideas and ‘paint them anew on it self’ (*E*, II.x.2, p. 150), even if ‘*The Pictures drawn in our Minds, are laid in fading Colours*’ (*E*, II.x.5, p. 152).

Nevertheless, the evidence that Locke is a thorough-going imagist is equivocal. The first extant draft of the *Essay* opens with an explicit statement of imagism: ‘simple Ideas or Images of things...are noe thing but the reviveing again in our mindes those imaginations which those objects when they affected our senses caused in us’ (Draft A, sect. 1, p. 1). Yet Locke is less than forthright in the *Essay* itself: Locke’s initial definition of idea is neutral between imagistic and non-imagistic theories (*E*, I.i.8, p. 47), and the term ‘image’ is used only sparingly elsewhere in the work. This might suggest that Locke subsequently became dissatisfied with the view, and perhaps with good reason. Although Locke is less epistemologically sanguine than Descartes, his scepticism is mitigated by

knowledge claims that appear to require the existence of non-sensory intellectual concepts. Particularly problematic amongst the class of propositions that are putatively known are those which have as constituents ideas of our minds, God, powers, existence and morality. None of these ideas appear to be adequately represented imaginatively (Soles, 1999).

Whether they are all images or not, Locke draws a number of further distinctions amongst the class of ideas depending on whether the ideas are clear or obscure, distinct or confused, real or fantastical, adequate or inadequate, and true or false.

The first pair of contrasts appropriate the famous Cartesian distinction. *Clear* ideas are those ideas of which the mind has ‘a full and evident perception’, whereas *distinct* ideas are those that the mind is able to distinguish from all other ideas (*E*, II.xxix.4, p. 364). Clarity and distinctness of ideas is necessary for propositions containing them to be known (e.g. *E*, II.xi.1, pp. 155-156).

The remaining pairs of contrasts relate to the representational features of ideas, or ideas ‘in reference to things from whence they are taken, or which they may be supposed to represent’ (*E*, II.xxx.1, p. 372). *Real* ideas ‘agree to the reality of things’ (*E*, II.xxx.1, p. 372). *Adequate* ideas agree to the reality of things completely: they ‘perfectly represent those Archetypes, which the Mind supposes them taken from; which it intends them to stand for, and to which it refers them’ (*E*, II.xxxi.1, p. 375). Finally, *true* ideas ‘conform’ to those things that the mind tacitly supposes them to refer to (*E*, II.xxxii.4, p. 385).

These further distinctions co-ordinate with the distinction between simple and complex ideas. Because the mind is wholly passive in the reception of simple ideas, simple ideas are all necessarily real, adequate and true. Simple ideas can represent in one of two ways: primary quality ideas represent by ‘resemblance’, being the ‘Images, or Representations of what does exist’ (*E*, II.xxx.2), whereas secondary quality ideas

represent by causal co-variation, being ‘the Effects of Powers in Things without us, ordained by our Maker, to produce in us such Sensations’ (*E*, II.xxx.2, p. 373). Either way, the ‘steady correspondence’ between these ideas and their causes guarantees that they represent them (*E*, II.xxx.2, p. 373), represent them completely (*E*, II.xxxi.2, pp. 375-376), and as such, conform to them (*E*, II.xxxii.14, pp. 388-389).

This is epistemically important in two ways. First, because they are real, adequate and true, simple ideas are able to function as ‘Marks of Distinction in Things’ (*E*, II.xxxii.14, pp. 388-389), thereby allowing for perceptually guided action: simple ideas not only mark differences amongst particular substances by reliably corresponding to differences in these substances’ powers to produce those ideas, but also mark the same substances over time so long as an object’s powers to produce those ideas (in particular perceivers) remain constant. (The restriction to particular perceivers allows for the possibility of inter-subjective spectral inversion (*E*, II.xxxi.15, p. 389), an example perhaps inspired by Malebranche (Malebranche, 1997, sect. 1.13, p. 66).) Second, the steady correspondence between simple ideas and their causes is sufficient to secure the ‘reality’ of our knowledge of general propositions involving abstract simple ideas, thereby distinguishing our reasoning from the ‘Visions of an Enthusiast’ (*E*, IV.iv.1, p. 563).

It is unclear whether causal correspondence is both necessary *and* sufficient for simple ideas to fulfil their representative function. Locke sometimes seems to suggest that co-varying ideas only become representative of their causes when they are *taken* by the mind to be so: when they are ‘tacitly refer’d’ to their ‘Archetypes’ by the mind (*E*, II.xxx.1, p. 372 and II.xxxi.1, p. 375). But even if this is the case, Locke’s thought seems to be that this ‘taking’ is an entirely ‘natural’ function of the mind: that simple ideas are therefore ‘natural signs’ of their causes, which somehow direct the mind to the mind-independent causes of those ideas (Ayers, 1991, pp. 60-6, Chappell, 1994, pp. 53-5). As such, this accords sensation an epistemologically foundational role.

Like simple ideas, complex ideas of modes and relations are also all real, adequate and true. But this is not because these ideas are passively caused by things distinct from ourselves—quite the opposite. Because these ideas are voluntarily determined by the mind, ‘without reference to any real Archetypes, or standing Patterns, existing any where’ (*E*, II.xxxi.3, p. 376), there is nothing for these ideas to fail to agree or conform to, hence their reality, adequacy and truth is, in a sense, trivial. This guarantees the possibility of knowledge in those areas where knowledge consists in perceiving agreements or disagreements between ideas of modes, notably mathematics and, crucially for Locke, morality.

Complex ideas of substances, in contrast, are all inadequate, and only sometimes real and true. They are real and true if our ideas are composed of simple ideas that are ‘really united, and co-exist in Things without us’ (*E*, II.xxx.5, p. 374), like the complex idea of a horse, but unlike the complex idea of a centaur. Yet whilst these complex ideas represent substances, they do not do so completely, and hence are inadequate: our complex ideas of substance neither represent the unknown real essences or inner constitutions of substances (*E*, II.xxxi.6-7, pp. 378-380), nor collect together all the observable properties of objects (*E*, II.xxxi.8-10, pp. 380-382), nor include the idea of substance in general (*E*, II.xxxi.13, p. 383). The inadequacy of our complex ideas of substances, which is due to the ‘dull and weak’ sensory faculties (*E*, II.xxiii.12, p. 302) by which the mind is furnished with these ideas, is the source of one of the main limitations to the extent of human knowledge.

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