

Locke and the Nature of Ideas

Keith Allen, University of York
ka519@york.ac.uk

Forthcoming in Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie. Please refer to the final version.

Abstract: According to Locke, what are ideas? I argue that Locke does not give an account of the nature of ideas. In the *Essay*, the question is simply set to one side, as recommended by the “Historical, plain Method” that Locke employs. This is exemplified by his characterization of ‘ideas’ in E I.i.8, and the discussion of the inverted spectrum hypothesis in E II.xxxii. In this respect, Locke’s attitude towards the nature of ideas in the *Essay* is reminiscent of Boyle’s diffident attitude the nature of matter. In posthumously published work, however, Locke suggests that the enquiry into the nature of ideas is one of the things that the enquiry into the extent of human knowledge undertaken in the *Essay* actually shows to lie beyond the “compass of human understanding”. In this respect, Locke’s attitude towards the nature of ideas is reminiscent of Sydenham’s attitude towards the nature of diseases.

1. The Nature of Ideas

According to Locke, what are ideas? The question has been controversial ever since the publication of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In the first published response to the *Essay* (in 1690), the English follower of Malebranche, John Norris, declared it to be a “Fundamental defect” of the *Essay* that Locke nowhere gives an explicit account of what ideas are, for:

by all the Laws of Method in the World, he ought first to have Defined what he meant by Ideas, and to have acquainted us with their Nature, before he proceeded to account for their Origination...yet is not only neglected in its proper place, but wholly omitted and passed over in deep silence.¹

Norris’s criticism became a standard criticism of the *Essay*; indeed, in the editorial introduction to the then-current Oxford edition, Pringle-Pattison went so far as to claim, with specific reference to Locke’s use of the term ‘idea’, that the course of European philosophy after the publication of the *Essay*, “consists largely in a series of attempts to clear up the ambiguities of

¹ Norris 1690, 3f.

Locke's terminology and to surmount the difficulties created for him by his presuppositions".²

Norris criticises Locke for failing to give an explicit definition of the nature of ideas, or in other words an account of what, essentially, ideas are: what makes ideas the things that they are, and not anything else. As was common in the seventeenth century, Norris distinguishes the question of the nature of ideas, from the question of their origin: this is the distinction that Descartes draws, for example, when having first identified ideas as those thoughts that "are as it were the images of things", he distinguishes amongst ideas depending on their origin, noting that "some appear to be innate, some to be adventitious, and others to have been invented by me" (CSM II 25-6/AT VII, 37-8).³ An account of the nature of ideas will include, but perhaps not be restricted to, an answer to the question of whether or not ideas are 'real beings': entities that are distinct from acts of perceiving (modifications of mind), and the mind-independent material objects that these perceptions are perceptions of. Instead of answering this question, all Norris can find Locke offering is an account of the "Origination" of ideas, arguing in Book I that there are no innate ideas, but instead that "all the materials of Reason and Knowledge" spring from experience (E II.i.1).

It is standardly assumed that Locke at least implicitly presupposes a determine conception of the nature of ideas, even if he is less explicit about this than he might have been. The view most often ascribed to the *Essay* is that ideas are 'real beings'. Occasionally, Locke is cited with approval in this respect.⁴ Indeed, this is effectively Norris's attitude, except that Norris suspects that Locke thinks of ideas as specifically material real beings, and not immaterial entities existing in the mind of God, as on the neo-Augustinian view of Malebranche that Norris himself endorses. More often than not, however, the view that ideas are real beings commonly ascribed to Locke is thought to have disastrous epistemic consequences, placing subjects behind a veil of ideas from where knowledge of a mind-independent becomes impossible. A classic statement of this is Reid's sustained attack on the "philosophical" theory of ideas, considered as "a shadowy kind of beings, intermediate between the thought, and the object of thought".⁵

² Pringle-Pattison 1924, xlvi.

³ Arnauld draws a similar distinction in his first criticism of Malebranche's *Vision in God*, T&F, Chapter 7, 78.

⁴ Locke is sometimes cited with approval by twentieth century sense-datum theorists, and more recently Jacovides 1999.

⁵ Reid 1785, II.ix, 136

Agreeing with Reid that treating ideas as real beings leads inevitably to the idealism of Berkeley or the scepticism of Hume, some commentators have argued against ascribing this kind of representative theory of ideas to Locke in the first place. These commentators argue that Locke is better understood as proposing a theory of ideas akin to that of Arnauld and Descartes, according to which ideas are not real beings distinct from acts of perception (and thought), but either the perceptual acts themselves, or else the perceptual acts considered with respect to their intentional content.⁶

In whatever other ways these standard interpretations differ, a common assumption is that Locke at least implicitly endorses a theory of the nature of ideas. It is this shared assumption that I question in this paper. In contrast, I will argue that Locke never intended to endorse a particular theory of the nature of ideas, but was instead concerned with ideas considered only as the “Instruments, or Materials, of our Knowledge” (E II.xxxiii.19). This kind of interpretation is not unprecedented. For instance, as Gibson remarks in his classic study of Locke’s theory of knowledge:

Among the questions that the “plain historical method” sought to lay on one side was that of the metaphysical nature of ideas themselves, concerning which, as we have seen, the followers of Descartes had found themselves in such difficulties. The initial assumption, underlying the whole procedure of the *Essay*, is that the existence of ideas may be taken for granted, and their function in knowledge examined, without entering upon the questions which may be raised concerning their nature as elements of reality, or their relation to mind as a substance.⁷

In support of this interpretation, I argue in §2 that the question of the nature of ideas is one that Locke simply brackets in the *Essay*, as lying beside his business. I call this a ‘Boylean’ approach to the question of the nature of ideas, because of its similarity to Boyle’s diffident attitude towards disputes amongst corpuscularians about the nature of matter, and by way of illustration, argue in §3 that this Boylean approach towards the nature of ideas is exemplified by Locke’s discussion of the inverted spectrum hypothesis (E II.xxxii). In §4, I argue that in his unpublished writings, Locke suggests a more interesting reason for his reluctance to engage with the question of the nature of ideas: the enquiry into the extent of human understanding undertaken in the *Essay* actually shows that the question of what ideas are is unanswerable given our cognitive limitations. I call this a

⁶ See, for example, Yolton 1984, Chappell 1994.

⁷ Gibson 1917, 26. More recently, an interpretation sympathetic to the current approach is suggested by Hight 2001. The current paper develops a brief discussion in Allen 2010.

'Sydenhamian' approach to the question of the nature of ideas, because it is reminiscent of Sydenham's attitude towards the nature of diseases.

2. The 'Boylean' Approach to the Nature of Ideas

In the "Epistle to the Reader", Locke describes himself as an "Under-Labourer" to the "Master-Builders" of his age (E 9-10). The first master-builder he mentions is his friend and mentor, Robert Boyle.⁸

Boyle was an enthusiastic proponent of the mechanistic natural philosophy of the seventeenth century, which sought to explain all natural phenomena solely by appeal to matter and motion, without appealing to Aristotelian substantial forms or real qualities. Nevertheless, Boyle remained resolutely neutral on key disputes amongst proponents of particular versions of mechanism, coining the term "corpuscularianism" to refer to the new mechanical philosophy in general, irrespective of differences amongst different versions of this doctrine. Rather than "act the umpire", adjudicating in-house disputes amongst corpuscularians, Boyle's aim was merely to demonstrate that it is "not necessary to betake ourselves to...scholastick or chemical doctrine[s]" to explain natural phenomena.⁹ Perhaps most famously, but by no means exclusively, Boyle studiously avoided addressing the central disagreement between Cartesians and atomists over the nature of matter (whether its essence is extension), and the consequent dispute about the existence of the vacuum.¹⁰

As well as being a mechanist, Boyle was also an enthusiastic proponent of the natural historical method, associated primarily with Bacon, but later adopted by various members of the Royal Society, including also Sydenham and Newton, two other master-builders mentioned by Locke. Although there are different understandings of exactly what the natural historical method involves, broadly speaking the natural historical method involves prioritizing careful observation, description, and taxonomy, over framing hypotheses about ultimate causes and essential natures.¹¹

Whereas Boyle glosses over disagreements amongst corpuscularians about the nature of matter, Locke's attitude towards the nature of ideas in the *Essay* can be described as 'Boylean' in the sense that he attempts to gloss over disagreements between proponents of different theories of the nature of ideas.

⁸ On Locke's relationship to Boyle, see e.g. Cranston 1957, 75-7

⁹ Boyle 1675, 236.

¹⁰ For discussion, see e.g. Sargent 1995 and Anstey 2000.

¹¹ See, for instance, Anstey 2002.

Rather than frame hypotheses about the essential nature of the mind and its ideas, Locke's aim in the *Essay* is to produce a natural history of the mind and its ideas. As he says in the "Introduction" to the *Essay*, the purpose of the work is to use the "Historical, plain Method" to enquire into the "Original, Certainty, and Extent of humane understanding; together, with the Grounds and Degrees of Belief, Opinion, and Assent" (E I.i.2). As such, he sets aside, as lying beside his purpose, questions relating to the:

Physical Consideration of the Mind...wherein its Essence consists, or by what Motions of our Spirits, or Alterations of our Bodies, we come to have any Sensation by our Organs, or any Ideas in our Understandings; and whether those Ideas do in their Formation, any, or all of them, depend on Matter, or no (E I.i.2).

Locke does not state in the "Introduction" that one of the aims of the *Essay* is to enquire into the nature of ideas. This might not only seem unnecessary for the purpose of enquiring into the origin and extent of human understanding, but more importantly, the use of the plain historical method speaks against engaging in the enquiry into the nature of ideas, at least at the outset. According to the strictures of the plain historical method, providing an account of the essential nature of ideas in the beginning gets things precisely the wrong way around. Before considering what, essentially, ideas are, the plain historical method dictates first producing a taxonomy of ideas on the basis of careful observation. This will involve distinguishing ideas depending on their structural features: whether they are simple or complex. It will also involve distinguishing ideas depending on how they enter the mind: recalling Descartes's tripartite distinction between ideas that appear to be innate, adventitious, or invented by me, whether ideas are innate, which for Locke none are; whether they have their footing in experience, in which case whether they come from sensation, reflection, or both; or whether they are produced by mental operations, such as composition or abstraction. This, of course, is the task undertaken by Locke in Books I and II of the *Essay*.¹² The enquiry into the nature of ideas should be undertaken—if it is undertaken at all—only after these prior enquiries have been completed. So when Norris claims that "all the Laws of Method in the World" require that Locke first give a definition of the essential nature of ideas, he is failing to take into consideration the plain historical method that Locke claims to employ in the *Essay*.

Six sections after stating the purpose of the *Essay*, and immediately prior to embarking on the enquiry into the origin of ideas, Locke explains that:

¹² On Locke's taxonomy of ideas, see, for instance, Bolton 2007.

before I proceed on to what I have thought on this Subject, I must here in the Entrance beg pardon of my Reader, for the frequent use of the Word Idea, which he will find in the following Treatise. It being that Term, which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by Phantasm, Notion, Species, or whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ'd about in thinking; and I could not avoid frequently using it (E I.i.8).

This is echoed in Book II, when he says that “Whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate Object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call *Idea*” (E II.viii.8).

Norris’s complaint that Locke fails to provide an account of the nature of ideas might seem surprising in light of these passages. But in fact, these passages fall a long way short of providing what Norris wants Locke to offer. These are not ‘definitions’ of ‘idea’ in the sense Norris requires: they do not acquaint us with the essential nature of ideas. Rather they are thoroughly ecumenical characterizations of ‘idea’, that are consistent with all the major theories of the nature of ideas current in the seventeenth century. Hence, as Norris complains, we would find nothing more explicit than this in a lexicon.¹³

On the one hand, Locke’s characterization of ‘idea’ is at least superficially consistent with Scholastic theories of perception and cognition. “Phantasm”, “notion” and “species”, are all originally Aristotelian terms. According to Aristotelian theories of perception, forms of objects are transmitted from objects to the eye. Phantasms are the sensible forms, or images, of objects in the common sense or imagination (“fancy” or “phantasia”). Species can also be used to refer to the sensible forms of objects as they exist in the common sense or imagination, as well as forms as they exist in the object in the first place, or in the air between object and subject. When intelligible (or intentional), species are that which is created by the intellectual process of abstraction on the images that exist in the imagination. Finally, notions also exist in the intellect, and are produced by rationation.¹⁴

Occasionally, these Aristotelian terms were taken over by corpuscularians. For instance, Hobbes, according to whom all perceptual experience is sensory, sometimes uses “phantasm” to refer to ideas existing in the material mind,¹⁵ as does Descartes when contrasting “phantasms of our

¹³ Norris 1690, 22.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Stewart 1979.

¹⁵ Hobbes 1655, 4.25.2.

imagination” with “clear and distinct notions of our mind” (to Mersenne July 1641, CSMK, 186/AT III, 395). But as the new philosophers rejected much of the Aristotelian baggage that went with this terms, they generally preferred to signal this departure from Aristotelian philosophy by using different terminology. By and large, the term that they preferred was “idea”: a term that had occupied a central role in the neo-Platonism of Saint Augustine, and was repopularised in the seventeenth century by Descartes. Unfortunately, Descartes’s reintroduction of this term brought with it a number of difficulties that lead to a series of high-profile, often vitriolic, disputes about the nature of ideas.

Descartes famously claimed that the term ‘idea’ is ambiguous (e.g. CSM II, 7, 27-9/AT VII, 8, 40-1). Considered *materially*, this term refers to the act of thinking, or the modification of mind. Considered *objectively*—or *representatively*, as is sometimes added in the French Edition—‘idea’ refers instead to the object of the modification of mind, or that which the modification of mind is of or about: “the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea” (CSM II, 113/AT VII, 161).

Descartes normally suggests that it is the latter of these uses that is the primary signification of ‘idea’. But this suggestion raises a number of problems. First, if ‘idea’ refers to the objects of perceptual acts, then intentionality is an essential feature of ideas: as he puts in the Third Meditation, “there can be no ideas which are not as it were of things” (CSM II, 30/AT VII, 44). This raises a specific problem about sensation, given Descartes’s further claim that some of our sensible ideas might be *materially false*: that they might represent mere privations. As Arnauld points out in the Fourth Objections (CSM II, 145f./AT VII, 206f.), there is at least a question about how to understand how an idea might “represent non-things as things”, as Descartes puts it (CSM II, 30/AT VII, 44): if this just amounts to their not representing anything, then in what sense is intentionality essential to ideas after all?¹⁶

Besides, it is slightly obscure exactly what the ‘objective reality’ (*realitas objectiva*) of ideas is supposed to be in the first place. We know what it is for the sun to exist in the physical world, but what does it mean to say that the sun also exists in the understanding? Is the sun as it is in the understanding *identical* to the sun as it is in the world—but then what about ideas of things that do not exist, like chimeras?¹⁷ And if the relation is not identity, then what is it? Moreover, what does it mean to say that the

¹⁶ For further discussion, see for instance Wilson 1978, Alanen 1994, Hoffman 1996.

¹⁷ This interpretation is suggested, for instance, by Alanen 1994 and Hoffman 1996, 370. For criticism, see Chappell 1986, 185-188 and Kaufman 2000, 390-391.

objective reality of ideas comes in degrees, as Descartes's argument for the existence of God in the Third Meditation requires? And is the objective reality of ideas the same as their "objective being" (e.g. CSM II, 113/AT VII, 161)?¹⁸

These problems with Descartes's use of the term 'idea' set the stage for the dispute in the latter half of the seventeenth century between Malebranche and Arnauld. In the *Search After Truth*, Malebranche argued that it is necessary to explain the intentionality of mental modifications like perceptual experience and thought by appealing to distinct representational entities. Specifically, Malebranche divorced the intentional objects of perception from acts of perceiving, reifying ideas into distinct 'real beings' located 'in' the mind of God. In response, Arnauld defended the more orthodox Cartesian view that the intentionality of perception is not something that demands explanation—not in terms of intrinsically representational beings distinct from our perception of them, and certainly not in terms of intrinsically representational beings that exist 'in' God. According to Arnauld, intentionality just is essential to perception and thought; to ask why perception and thought is always perception or thought of something is as ridiculous as asking why matter is divisible. The perceptual act and the perceptual object are simply one and the same thing considered under different aspects: they are both just modifications of mind (T&E, Chapter 2, 52-4).

In effect, the dispute between Malebranche and Arnauld is a dispute about the correct understanding of the phrases that occur in Locke's apologetic characterizations of the term 'idea': that ideas are the 'objects of the understanding', or the 'immediate objects of perception'. Malebranche understands these phrases literally, treating ideas as real beings distinct from our perception of them, and that in virtue of which we perceive material objects. According to Malebranche's specific version of the representative theory, ideas are real beings in God. But the general view that ideas are real beings distinct from our perception of them is consistent with less exotic theories of what these entities are. For instance, ideas could also be spiritual (immaterial), but not divine entities, as Berkeley would later suggest; or

¹⁸ For instance, according to Hoffman 1996, 359, fn. 4 they are the same thing, but contrast Kaufman 2000, 392-6. For further discussion see, for instance, Wilson 1978, Ayers 1991 I, 52-56, Alanen 1994, Hoffman 1996, and Kaufman 2000.

material beings in the brain, as Robert Hooke suggested in his *Lectures on Light*, delivered to the Royal Society between 1680-2.¹⁹

Arnauld is entirely explicit that he does not object to talking of ideas as the immediate objects of the understanding: 'I do not reject these ways of speaking. I believe them to be acceptable if properly understood' (T&E, 71). But he insists that properly understood, to say that ideas are the immediate objects of thought does not imply the existence of representational beings distinct from our perception of them. To say that ideas are the immediate objects of perception is just to say that ideas considered with respect to their objective reality are the immediate objects of perception and thought. Though spatially distinct from us, objects as they exist in our thought are objectively present; indeed, in this sense it is tautological that ideas are the immediate objects of perception, as how could the mind think about something that it does not think about? (T&E, Chapter 6, 71-2).²⁰

As such, Locke's introduction of the term 'idea' is multiply ambiguous: not only between Aristotelians and proponents of the 'new way of ideas', but amongst different ways of understanding the claim that ideas are the 'objects of the understanding' offered by proponents of the 'new way of ideas'. Why is this? I want to suggest that the most promising explanation of why Locke didn't disambiguate his characterization of 'idea' is because he simply wanted to bracket the vexed question of what ideas are, and focus instead on the enquiries into the origin, certainty and extent of human knowledge that are delineated in the "Introduction" to the *Essay*.

For one thing, Locke made a number of revisions to the Second Edition of the *Essay*, which appear designed to distance himself from the view ascribed to him by Norris, that ideas are real material beings: for instance, he qualifies the description of memory being "as it were the Storehouse of our Ideas...a Repository, to lay up those Ideas, which at another time it might have use of", by explaining that "this laying up of our Ideas in the Repository of the Memory, signifies no more but this, that the Mind has a Power, in many cases, to revive Perceptions, which it once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before" (II.x.3; see also I.iv.20). But despite Norris's criticism that Locke's failure to give a definition of the nature of ideas was a fundamental defect of the work, Locke never made any changes to either E I.i.8, or E II.viii.8, the passages in which

¹⁹ According to Hooke, ideas are "material and bulky, that is,...certain Bodies of determinate bigness, and impregnated with determinate Motions" 1680-2, 142. For discussion, see Reid 1785, ix and Macintosh 1983.

²⁰ Descartes also talks of ideas as being the 'immediate objects' of thought (CSM II, 127/AT VII, 181)

he characterizes the term ‘idea’. Indeed, as I discuss in §4, even in his unpublished comments on Norris, Locke resisted Norris’s invitation to be any more specific about what he takes the nature of ideas to be.²¹

Besides, Locke was well acquainted with the Malebranche-Arnauld controversy; it is therefore likely that prior to Norris’s criticisms of the First Edition, he was already well aware that his apologetic characterization of the term ‘idea’ was consistent with very different theories of the nature of ideas. Locke’s library contained many texts relating to the Malebranche-Arnauld dispute: as well as several editions of the Search After Truth and an edition of On True and False Ideas, Locke owned at least 15 other relevant texts.²² During 1684, the period in which he was working on the final extant draft of the Essay (Draft C), Locke made notes on both the Search After Truth and On True and False Ideas.²³ Locke’s copy of Arnauld’s On True and False Ideas even contains an ink reference to the chapter in which Arnauld criticises Malebranche’s notorious ‘wandering soul’ argument for the existence of ideas, and in which Arnauld draws the crucial distinction between spatial and objective presence—just two chapters after insisting that it is perfectly acceptable from an orthodox Cartesian perspective to describe ideas as the ‘immediate objects of perception’.²⁴

To say that Locke intended to remain neutral on the question of the nature of ideas need not be to say that Locke didn’t think one view of the nature of ideas more probable than another, or perhaps even betray this preference on occasion by his ways of speaking; by comparison, although

²¹ Locke also effectively just repeats his characterization of ‘idea’ in response to Stillingfleet’s attack on his “new way of ideas”. See, for instance, the passages reproduced as a footnote to E.I.8 in the 5th edition of the Essay (1706).

²² These include: Foucher’s Critique de la Critique de la Recherche de la verite (1675), Desgabets’s Critique de la Critique de la Recherche de la verite (1675), Foucher’s, Response pour la Critique a la preface du 2d vol. de la Recherche de la verite (1676), the first of Malebranche’s counter-responses to Arnauld, Defense de l’Auteur de la Recherche de la Verite (1684), the contributions to the Malebranche-Arnauld debate of Bayle in the Nouvelles de la République des Lettres (April, May and August 1684; May, July, August and December 1685; and April 1686), Arnauld’s Dissertation sur le prétendu bonheur des plaisirs des sens (1687), the Port Royal Logic, which Arnauld co-authored with Pierre Nicole, and Arnauld’s objections to the Meditations as part of the collected works of Descartes. For details of works that bear on the Malebranche-Arnauld debate, see Moreau 2003; for details of Locke’s library, see Harrison and Laslett 1965.

²³ Bonno 1955, 164.

²⁴ Page 65 of the 1683 edition of T&F, 80f. in the Gaukroger edition. For details, Harrison and Laslett 1965.

Locke claims not to know whether thought could be superadded to matter, he nevertheless tells us that he thinks that mind-body dualism is at least more probable (E IV.iii.6). Indeed, it might even be that Locke's taxonomy of ideas, and subsequent accounts of language and knowledge, manifest implicit biases towards one or another theory of the nature of ideas. The point is just that the question of the nature of ideas is one that it appears Locke at least intended to bracket in the Essay, as being beside his current business.

3. An Example of the 'Boylean' Approach: The Inverted Spectrum Hypothesis

A fuller defence of this interpretation would require more detailed investigation of exactly what Locke says about ideas in the Essay. As an illustration of this interpretative strategy, however, I want to consider one discussion which might seem to present a problem for this interpretation but which, I will argue, actually represents an attempt by Locke to abstract from the disagreement between Malebranche and Arnauld.²⁵

I want to suggest that Locke's interest in the Malebranche-Arnauld controversy resurfaces in the discussion of the 'inverted spectrum hypothesis' in E II.xxxii—a chapter whose title, "Of True and False Ideas", is evocative of Arnauld's Des Vraies et des Fausses Idees. It is sometimes assumed that Locke deserves the credit—or amongst those unsympathetic to the idea, discredit—for first formulating the inverted spectrum hypothesis: the thought experiment in which the colour sensations of two perceiving subjects are systematically permuted with respect to one another. The hypothesis, however, is effectively a crucial (thought) experiment in the dispute between Malebranche and Arnauld.

According to Malebranche, nothing like secondary qualities (colours, sounds, smells, etc.) exist in the material world, nor are there any ideas of secondary qualities in the mind of God, consequently, "truth is never encountered" in our judgements about the secondary qualities of material objects (Search, I.10, 48); secondary quality perception consists merely in the soul "spreading" itself onto the objects it considers (strictly speaking, ideas in the mind of God) by "clothing them with what it has stripped from itself" (Search, I.12, 58). Given that for Malebranche the intentionality of

²⁵ A different passage that might seem to present a problem for this interpretive strategy is Locke's claim that primary qualities ideas "resemble" qualities of objects. Taken literally, this would seem to require thinking of ideas as real beings. For a non-literal interpretation, see Allen 2008.

experience demands explanation in terms of intrinsically representational beings distinct from our perception of them, this means that our secondary quality experiences are not experiences of anything. It follows that a systematic permutation of our colour experiences is possible, if not actual.

Referring to cases in which people see certain objects as yellow with one eye and green or blue with the other, Malebranche suggests that:

if these people be supposed born one-eyed, or with two eyes disposed to see as blue what we call green, they would think they saw objects as having the same colour that we see them as having because they would always have heard called green what they would see as blue (Search, I.13, 66).²⁶

Indeed, Malebranche even suggests that the fact that the same colours are not equally pleasing to all kinds of people may be evidence that systematic inversion of this kind is rife; after all, if the sensations that different subjects experience were the same, then we might expect that different subjects would find them equally pleasing, which they do not. For Malebranche, the most that is required for secondary quality sensation to fulfil its distinctive epistemic function—of serving to distinguish and reidentify objects, and thereby facilitate the preservation of the substantial union of mind and body—is that for each individual subject, the sensations occasioned by a certain object remain largely constant (Search, I.13, 66).

In contrast, Arnauld, like modern day Intentionalists, takes the intrinsic representationality of perceptual experience to preclude the possibility of a systematic permutation of colour sensations. Arnauld argues that secondary quality perception could only fulfil its distinctive epistemic function by virtue of representing, albeit obscurely and confusedly,

²⁶ A similar case was earlier described by the Cartesian Rohault, in his System of Natural Philosophy: “two Persons looking in the same manner upon the same Object, may have very different Sensations; and I am the more perswaded of this, because I have experienced it in a particular manner my self. For when I had once quite tired and weakened my right Eye by looking intently for above twelve Hours together through a perspective Glass on a Battle betwixt two Armies, within a league of me; I found my Sight so affected afterwards, that when I looked upon Yellow Objects with my right Eye, they did not appear to me as they used to do, nor as they now do to my left Eye...This experience makes me believe, that there may be some Men born with that Disposition, which I at present have in one of my Eyes, and which may continue all their lives, and perhaps there are others whose Eyes are of the same Disposition with my other Eye” (1671, 1.27.6). Thanks to Hanoch Ben-Yami for drawing this to my attention. According to the details of the *varia* recorded in Robinet’s edition of the *Search* (1972, v1, 152), the example was added in the 4th edition of 1678, an edition owned by Locke (Harrison and Laslett 1965).

properties of material objects: for Arnauld, God has given us colour sensations to allow us to distinguish “different arrangement[s] of the small parts” of objects’ surfaces, which otherwise we would be liable to confuse (T&E, Chapter 16, 131f.). Because our colour sensations represent qualities of objects, spectrally inverted subjects are impossible.

Consistent with his ecumenical characterization of ‘idea’, Locke’s discussion of the inverted spectrum hypothesis steers a course between these two extremes, allowing that secondary quality sensations could fulfil their distinctive epistemic function—that of serving as “Marks of distinction in Things, whereby we may be able to discern one Thing from another; and so chuse any of them for our uses”—whether or not “the Idea of Blue, be in the Violet it self, or in our Mind only”. In other words, it could fulfil its distinctive epistemic function whether Arnauld *or* Malebranche were right.

If, as Arnauld supposes, it is the former, then:

that Texture in the Object, by a regular and constant operation, producing the same Idea of Blue in us, it serves to distinguish, by our Eyes, that from any other Thing (E II.xxxii.14).

But colour experience could still play its distinctive epistemic role if it were possible, as Malebranche supposes, that:

if by the different Structure of our Organs, it were so ordered, That the same Object should produce in several Men’s Minds different Ideas at the same time; v.g. if the Idea, that a Violet produced in one Man’s Mind by his, were the same that a Marigold produced in another Man’s, and vice versa (E II.xxxii.15).

As Malebranche suggests, secondary quality sensation would still play its epistemic role so long as the permutation was stable, and the same objects were reliably associated with the same types of sensation, for then “whatever those Appearances were in his Mind; he would be able as regularly to distinguish Things for his Use by those Appearances” (E II.xxxii.15).

Given that Locke is prepared to allow, with Malebranche, that the very same object could produce different sensations in different subjects, does this mean that Locke at least implicitly presuppose a determinate conception of the nature of ideas? According to Ayers, for example, this is evidence that Locke thinks of secondary quality ideas, not as intrinsically representational modifications of mind, but as “blank effects”, whose representative function is accounted for solely in terms of their causal origin.²⁷

²⁷ Ayers 1991 1, 40.

But Locke's attitude towards the inverted spectrum hypothesis differs importantly from Malebranche's. First, Locke does not think that spectral inversion is actual. Whereas Malebranche thinks that it would only be "through the most remarkable luck in the world" (Search, I.13, 63) that people saw the same colours as everyone else when they looked at the same objects, Locke insists that he is "very apt to think, that the sensible Ideas, produced by any Object in different Men's Minds, are most commonly very near and undiscernibly alike" (E II.xxxii.15), suggesting that there are in fact good reasons for thinking that the same objects do cause the same ideas in everyone, but characteristically dismissing the question—like other questions pertaining to the nature of ideas—as "being besides my present Business" (E II.xxxii.15).

More importantly, the emphasis that Locke places on the conditional when first introducing the inverted spectrum hypothesis ('If by the different Structure of our Organs, it were so ordered...') suggests that he might not think that spectral inversion is even metaphysically possible. Given the limits to human knowledge, the hypothesis is no doubt epistemically possible; but to say that we cannot rule it out falls short of saying that it is a genuine metaphysical possibility. As Ayers himself remarks in the course of arguing for an epistemic interpretation of Locke's claim that God *could* 'superadd' thought to matter:

for Locke whatever is not 'visibly' impossible or self-contradictory ought piously to be regarded as within God's power to create—even though, for all we know, it might be in itself impossible.²⁸

Indeed, we might wonder how we *could* know that altering the structure of the sense organs could bring it about that the same object produced systematically permuted colour sensations in different subjects, when there is no conceivable connection between motions in the brain and ideas in the mind? For all we know, God could bring it about that very different motions in the brain, due to the different structure of different subjects' sense organs, might yet cause the very same ideas. As Locke says in the context of discussing the superaddition of thought to matter:

Motion, according to the utmost reach of our Ideas, being able to produce nothing but Motion, so that when we allow it produce pleasure or pain, or the *Idea* of a Colour, or Sound, we are fain to quit our Reason, go beyond our *Ideas*, and attribute it wholly to the good Pleasure of our Maker (E IV.iii.6)

²⁸ Ayers 1991, 2, 150f.

4. The 'Sydenhamian' Approach to the Nature of Ideas

Locke's interest in the Malebranche-Arnould dispute continued after the publication of the *Essay*. Whilst in the process of revising the *Essay* for the second edition, Locke prepared two sets of comments on John Norris, and one set of comments explicitly about Malebranche; in a letter to Molyneux, Locke even suggested that these comments were written with an eye towards adding a new chapter in which he would directly examine Malebranche's *Vision in God*.²⁹

These posthumously published comments provide an alternative explanation of Locke's reluctance to engage in the enquiry into the nature of ideas. I have argued so far that Locke's approach in the *Essay* is simply to bracket the question of the nature of ideas. I have called this a 'Boylean' approach to the question of the nature of ideas because of its affinities to Boyle's diffident attitude towards questions about the nature of matter. But Boyle is not the only "Master-Builder" that Locke claims to be working as under-labourer to in the "Epistle to the Reader". Another, the physician Thomas Sydenham, also had a significant effect on Locke's intellectual development.³⁰

Whereas Boyle was a "diffident naturalist",³¹ Sydenham's scientific methodology was driven by a deep epistemological pessimism. Sydenham's *Methodus Curandi Febres* (1666, 2nd ed. 1668), revised and renamed *Observationes Medicae* (1676), presents a natural history of disease. In the Preface, Sydenham states that:

In writing the history of a disease, every philosophical hypothesis whatsoever, that has previously occupied the mind of the author, should lie in abeyance.³²

According to Sydenham, framing hypotheses about the nature of diseases is both unnecessary for the effective treatment of diseases, and impossible given that the ultimate or "remote" causes of diseases lie beyond the limited powers of human understanding. Instead of enquiring into the nature of diseases, we should focus merely on the tractable problem of their treatment. Whilst we have reason to regard:

the causes of the majority of diseases as inscrutable and inexplicable, the question as to how they may be cured is, nevertheless, capable of solution...As

²⁹ Locke to Molyneux 28th March 1693, de Beer 1979 IV, 665, no. 1620.

³⁰ See, for instance, Fox Bourne 1876, i, 214-235, Cranston 1957, 91-3.

³¹ In the words of Sargent 1995.

³² Sydenham 1676, i, 14

it is clearly impossible that a physician should discover those causes of disease that are not cognisable by the senses, so also it is unnecessary that he should attempt it. It is quite sufficient for him to know whence the mischief immediately arises, and for him to be able to distinguish with accuracy between the effects and symptoms of the complaint which he has in hand, and those of some similar one.³³

It has been claim that Locke collaborated on the Preface to Sydenham's *Observationes Medicae*.³⁴ Whether or not this is right, Locke certainly himself expressed a very similar attitude towards medical methodology and the treatment of disease in an early fragmentary manuscript, *De Arte Medica* (circa 1669):

True knowledge grew first in the world by experience and rational observations...; but proud man, not content with that knowledge he was capable of and was useful to him, would needs penetrate into the hidden causes of things, lay down principles and establish maxims to himself about the operations of nature, and thus vainly expect that nature, or in truth God, proceed according to those laws which his maxims had prescribed to him; whereas his narrow, weak faculties could reach no further than the observation and memory of some few effects produced by visible and external causes, but in a way utterly out of the reach of his apprehension, it being perhaps no absurdity to think that this great and curious fabric of the world, the workmanship of the Almighty, cannot be perfectly comprehended by any understanding but his that made it.³⁵

This suggests a different way of thinking of Locke's attitude towards the nature of ideas. Just as Sydenham thinks that the enquiry into the nature of diseases is unnecessary and impossible, so perhaps the enquiry into the nature of ideas is equally unnecessary and impossible. Perhaps it is within our power to produce a taxonomy of ideas on the basis of careful observation, the task undertaken in Book II of the *Essay*. We can then explain how these ideas combine to yield knowledge, and thereby assess the limits of our knowledge, the task undertaken in Book IV of the *Essay*. But what we do not need to do, and indeed cannot do given our limited cognitive capacities, is to enquire into the nature of ideas themselves. Like diseases, perhaps ideas are "inscrutable and inexplicable".

One of the overarching aims of the *Essay* is, after all, to delimit the "compass of human understanding". After stating the purpose of the *Essay* in E I.i.2, Locke tells us three sections later that "The Candle, that is set up in

³³ Sydenham 1676, i, 20.

³⁴ On Locke's collaboration, see Meynell 2006.

³⁵ Fox Bourne 1876, i, 225 (modernized).

us, shines bright enough for all our Purposes” (E I.i.5)—but no further. As such, one of the work’s objectives is to dissuade men from “extending their Enquiries beyond their Capacities, and letting their Thoughts wander into those depths, where they can find no sure Footing”, which leads them to “raise Questions, and multiply Disputes” (E I.i.7). The dispute about the nature of ideas in the seventeenth century might seem to be an example of precisely the kind of dispute that Locke is referring to, not least given that the very next section, E I.i.8, is the section in which Locke offers his multiply ambiguous characterization of ‘idea’ (and immediately after which, Locke launches straight into the enquiry into the origins of ideas (E I.ii.1).) Like the question of whether matter can think, perhaps the enquiry into the nature of ideas is one of the questions that is shown, by the enquiry undertaken in the *Essay*, to lie beyond the limits of human understanding. Indeed, if we cannot know what, essentially, thinking things are, then it is perhaps unsurprising that we should be unable to know what, essentially, thinking is either.

This far more pessimistic attitude towards the prospects of the enquiry into the nature of ideas comes across in Locke’s posthumously published comments on Norris and Malebranche. In his first reply to Norris, Locke begins by reiterating the essentially Boylean approach he adopts to the question of the nature of ideas in the *Essay*:

perhaps I was lazy & thought the plain historical method I had proposed to my self was enough for me perhaps I had other business & could afford noe more of my time to these speculations...

Locke continues, however, by suggesting a different, and more radical, reason for his reluctance to consider the question of the nature of ideas:

...nay possibly I found that discovery beyond my reach & being one of those that doe not pretend to know all things am not ashamed to confesse my ignorance in this & a great many other (*First Reply*, 10).

This theme is developed in more detail in the second draft of Locke’s reply to Norris, and subsequently in the much longer *Examination of P.Malebranche’s Opinion*. Both works present the enquiry into the nature of ideas as something of a wild goose chase, that is bound to fail once we consider:

the weakness of our minds, and the narrowness of our capacities, and have but humility enough to allow, that there may be many things which we cannot fully comprehend, and that God is not bound in all he does to subject his ways of operation to the scrutiny of our thoughts, and confine himself to do nothing but what we must comprehend. (*Examination*, §2)

For Locke, no account of the nature of ideas is any more intelligible to us than the others; given our limited cognitive capacities, all are equally “remote from our Comprehension” (E IV.iii.6), and so we cannot which (if any) is true.

On the one hand, the view that ideas are real beings distinct both from our perception of them and the material bodies they represent generates serious epistemological worries—epistemological worries of the kind that lead Reid to ultimately reject the “philosophical” theory of ideas. If ideas are real beings, then far from mediating our knowledge of the mind-independent world, they would appear to preclude it, by creating a ‘veil of ideas’: “for how can I know that the picture of any thing is like that thing, when I never see that which it represents?” (Examination, §51). Worse, if Malebranche is right that God always works in the “most compendious ways”, then there is the distinct threat of idealism, because there is reason to eliminate the mind-independent material world altogether:

what need is there that God should make a sun that we might see its idea in him when he pleased to exhibit it, when this might as well be done without any real sun at all (Examination, §20).

Besides, what exactly does it mean to say that ideas are ‘real beings’ in the first place? According to Malebranche’s version of this view, ideas are real beings in God. If this means that ideas are immaterial substances, then this renders unintelligible the way in which ideas represent the material objects that they are supposed to stand proxy for: following Gassendi (Fifth Objections, CSM II, 234/AT VII, 337f.) and Arnauld (T&E, Chapter 4, 61), Locke finds it inconceivable that an unextended substance should represent something extended, with which it has no “proportion” (Examination, §18). Moreover, this merely postpones the question of how we are supposed to see these immaterial substances in the first place. It is no better to say that ideas are not substances but modes, as this requires that there be distinct modes in the simple substance of God, and anyway does not constitute an explanation until we are told what it is for ideas to be modes. Finally, to say merely that ideas are real spiritual things, but neither substances nor modes, is not to offer any explanation at all; it is to offer:

no more instruction in their nature, than when I am told they are perceptions, such as I find them (Examination, §18)...so by being told they are spiritual beings, I know no more but that they are something, I know not what, and that I knew before. (Examination, §26)

The less exotic view that ideas are spiritual (immaterial) beings that are in the human mind, not in God, faces essentially the same problems.³⁶ And the hypothesis that ideas are material beings is no less difficult to conceive. Whether ideas are images traced in the brain is one of the questions that Locke sets aside at the beginning of the *Essay* (“whether those Ideas do in their Formation, any, or all of them, depend on Matter, or no”, E I.i.2), and is precisely the sort of speculation that Locke thinks our faculties are ill-suited to engage in. According to Locke, the relationship between motion in the brain caused by particles reflected from objects and hitting the retina, and ideas in the mind, is incomprehensible to us:

Impressions made on the retina by rays of light, I think I understand; and motions from thence continued to the brain may be conceived, and that these produce ideas in our minds, I am persuaded, but in a manner to me incomprehensible. This I can resolve only into the good pleasure of God, whose ways are past finding out. (*Examination*, §10)

To say that the view that ideas are real beings is unintelligible to us, however, is not to say that the alternative view of Arnauld is thereby intelligible. As Locke warns in discussing the extent of human knowledge in the *Essay*, there is:

An unfair way which some Men take with themselves: who, because of the unconceivableness of something they find in one, throw themselves violently into the contrary Hypothesis, though altogether as unintelligible to an unbiassed Understanding (E IV.iii.6)

According to Arnauld, ideas are not themselves real beings, but just modifications of the soul that we can consider under different aspects—either formally as modifications of material substance, or objectively with reference to their intentional object. But for one thing, it is unclear that this avoids the sceptical worries that plague the “philosophical” theory of ideas, given that we can think about and perceive things that do not exist: things which therefore exist objectively, but not actually (as Malebranche emphasises in argued for the Vision in God, *Search*, 217). Besides as Gibson notes,³⁷ the criticism that Locke makes of Malebranche’s view that sensations are modifications of mind, seems equally applicable to Arnauld’s view that all ideas are modifications of mind:

³⁶ This interpretation is suggested, for instance, by Matthews 1971.

³⁷ Gibson 1917, 27.

This word “modification” here, that comes in for explication, seems to me to signify nothing more than the word [sentiment] to be explained by it [...] [it] signifies nothing to me more than I knew before; v.g. that I have now the idea of purple in it, which I had not some moments since (*Examination*, §39).

For instance, how could you simultaneously see the black and white of paper, hear singing, feel the warmth of the fire and taste an apple, if perceptions were modifications of mind? How could the same immaterial indivisible substance be differently—inconsistently, in the case of the black and white paper—modified at the same time?

The theoretical distance between Locke and Arnauld is illustrated by their differing reactions to the argument by elimination that Malebranche uses to try to establish the Vision in God.³⁸ Malebranche argues for the Vision in God by arguing successively (in Chapters III.2.1-6 of the *Search*) through the possible accounts of how our acquaintance with ideas, understood as entities distinct from our perception of them, could explain the intentionality of perception. Both Locke and Arnauld reject this argument on the grounds that the Vision in God does not itself offer an intelligible explanation of perceptual experience. But whereas Arnauld thinks that no further explanation of perceptual experience is required because it is already perfectly intelligible, Locke thinks that no further explanation of perceptual experience is possible once we realise “the weakness of our minds, and the narrowness of our capacities” (*Examination*, §2).

5. Conclusion

Norris’s criticism is that a fundamental defect of the *Essay* is that an account of the nature of ideas “is not only neglected in its proper place, but wholly omitted and passed over in deep silence”. I have argued that giving an account of the nature of ideas is unnecessary for the enquiry undertaken in the *Essay*, inconsistent with the plain historical method Locke employs, and moreover shown by the enquiry into the extent of human understanding to lie beyond the limits of human knowledge. As Locke might therefore have said in response to Norris: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”³⁹

³⁸ A point noted by Ayers 1991 I, 60.

³⁹ I would like to thank to an audience at the University of York, M.G.F. Martin, Paul Snowdon, and two anonymous referees for *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* for comments and discussion of these issues.

Abbreviations

- AT *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by C. Adam and P. Tannery. Paris, 1964-1976.
- CSM *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, edited and translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, two volumes. Cambridge, 1984.
- CSMK *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, edited and translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny. Cambridge, 1991.
- E Locke, J. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689, fourth edition 1700), ed. P. Nidditch. Oxford, 1975. References are by Book, Chapter and Section.
- Examination Locke, J. *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God* (1693), in *The Works of John Locke*, 10 vols. London, 1823; reprinted Aalen 1963.
- First Reply Locke, J. *Locke's First Reply to John Norris* (1693), ed. R. Acworth, *Locke Studies* 2 (1971), 7-11.
- Remarks Locke, J. *Remarks Upon Some of Mr. Norris's Books* (1693), in *The Works of John Locke*, 10 vols. London, 1823; reprinted Aalen 1963.
- Search Malebranche, N. *The Search After Truth* (1674-5), eds. T. Lennon and P. Olscamp. Cambridge, 1997.
- T&F Arnauld, A. *On True and False Ideas* (1683), ed. S. Gaukroger. Manchester, 1990.

Bibliography

- Alanen, L. 1994. "Sensory Ideas, Objective Reality, and Material Falsity". In John Cottingham, ed., *Reason, Will, and Sensation: Studies in Descartes's Metaphysics*. Oxford.
- Allen, K. 2008. "Mechanism, Resemblance and Secondary Qualities: from Descartes to Locke". *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16, 273-291.
- 2010. "Ideas". In S.-J. Savonius-Wroth, J. Walmsley, P. Schuurman eds. *The Continuum Companion to Locke*. London: Continuum.
- Anstey, P. 2000. *The Philosophy of Robert Boyle*. London: Routledge.
- 2002. "Locke, Bacon and Natural History". *Early Science and Medicine* 7, 65-92, reprinted in P. Anstey ed. *John Locke: Critical Assessments*, v. 4. London.
- Ayers, M. 1991. *Locke*, 2 vols. London.
- de Beer, E.S. 1976. *The Correspondence of John Locke*, 8 vols. Oxford.

- Bolton, M. 2007. "The Taxonomy of Ideas in Locke's Essay". In L. Newman (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's 'Essay Concerning Human Understanding'*. Cambridge.
- Bonno, G. 1955. *Les Relations intellectuelles de Locke avec la France*. University of California Publications in Modern Philology, 38: 37-264.
- Boyle, R. 1675. *Experiments, Notes etc About the Mechanical Origine and Production of Divers Particular Qualities*. In T. Birch (ed.) *The Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle*. London, 1744.
- Chappell, V. 1986. "The Theory of Ideas". In A. Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*. Berkeley.
- 1994. "Locke's Theory of Ideas". In V. Chappell (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*. Cambridge.
- Cranston, M. 1957. *John Locke: A Biography*. Oxford.
- Fox Bourne, H.R. 1876. *The Life of John Locke*. London.
- Gibson, J. 1917. *Locke's Theory of Knowledge and its Historical Relations*. Cambridge.
- Harrison and Laslett, 1965. *The Library of John Locke*. Oxford.
- Hight, M. 2001. "Locke's Implicit Ontology of Ideas". *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 9, 17-42
- Hobbes, T. 1655. *De Corpore*. In W. Molesworth (ed.) *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*. London, 1845.
- Hoffman, P. 1996. "Descartes on Misrepresentation". *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34, 357-381.
- Hooke, R. 1680-2. *Lectures on Light*. In R. Waller ed. *The Posthumous Works of Robert Hooke*. London, 1971.
- Jacovides, M. 1999. "Locke's Resemblance Theses". *Philosophical Review* 108: 461-96.
- Kaufman, D. 2000. "Descartes On the Objective Reality of Materially False Ideas". *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 81, 385-408.
- Macintosh, J.J. 1983. "Perception and Imagination in Descartes, Boyle and Hooke". *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 13, 327-52.
- Matthews, H.E. 1971. "Locke, Malebranche and the Representative Theory". *Locke Newsletter* 2, 12-21.
- Meynell, G.G. 2006. "John Locke and the Preface to Thomas Sydenham's *Observationes Medicae*". *Medical History* 50, 93-110.
- Moreau, D. 2003. "The Malebranche-Arnould Debate". In S. Nadler ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*. London.
- Norris, J. 1690. *Cursory Reflections upon a Book call'd, An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. London.
- Pringle-Pattison, A.S. 1924. "Introduction". In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding by John Locke*. Oxford.

- Reid, T. 1785. *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, (ed.) B. Brody. Cambridge, Mass., 1969.
- Robinet, A. (ed.) 1972. *Oeuvres Complètes de Malebranche*. Paris.
- Rohault, J. 1671. *Traité de physique*. Translated by J. Clarke as *Rohault's System of Natural Philosophy*. London, 1723.
- Sargent, R. 1995. *The Diffident Naturalist*. Chicago.
- Sergeant, J. 1697. *Solid Philosophy Asserted*. London.
- Stewart, M.A. 1979. "Locke's Mental Atomism and the Classification of Ideas". *Locke Newsletter* 10, 53-82.
- Sydenham, T. 1676. *Observationes Medicae*. Translated by R. Latham in *The Works of Thomas Sydenham M.D.*, 2 volumes. London, 1848.
- Wilson, M. 1978. *Descartes*. London.
- Yolton, J. 1984. *Perceptual Acquaintance*. Minneapolis.