

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Philosophy Dissertations, Theses, & Student  
Research

Philosophy, Department of

---

5-2015

# A Deflationary Interpretation of Locke's Theory of Ideas

Danielle N. Hampton

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [danielle.hampton@gmail.com](mailto:danielle.hampton@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/philosophydiss>



Part of the [History of Philosophy Commons](#)

---

Hampton, Danielle N., "A Deflationary Interpretation of Locke's Theory of Ideas" (2015). *Philosophy Dissertations, Theses, & Student Research*. 8.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/philosophydiss/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Dissertations, Theses, & Student Research by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A DEFLATIONARY INTERPRETATION OF JOHN LOCKE'S THEORY OF IDEAS

by

Danielle N. Hampton

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Philosophy

Under the Supervision of Professor Albert Casullo

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2015

# A DEFLATIONARY INTERPRETATION OF LOCKE'S THEORY OF IDEAS

Danielle N. Hampton, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2015

Adviser: Albert Casullo

This dissertation is a defense of a deflationary interpretation of Lockean ideas. The orthodox view is that Locke uses the term 'idea' to designate a collection of things that share some philosophically significant characteristic in common. While there is much debate over what this unifying characteristic might be, it is largely agreed upon that there is one, and only one, such characteristic. This is the assumption that I deny. I argue that Locke uses 'idea' as an umbrella term to cover several different types of mental items.

In Chapter 1, I look at six non-deflationary interpretations of Locke's theory of ideas and show that while a few of these readings can account for some Lockean ideas, none of these readings can account for all of them. In Chapters 2 and 3, I argue for my deflationist view. I proceed by outlining the various parameters Locke uses to distinguish ideas into several distinct categories. The source, means of acquisition, content and the way in which ideas are related to their targets are all factors that create these divisions.

The most basic division I draw is between actual sensations and stored ideas. I argue that reading sensations as appearances, i.e external objects as they appear to an observer, not only better accords with the text, but also circumvents notorious veil of perception worries. This reading is controversial insofar as I read Locke as subscribing to a form of direct realism rather than the strong form of indirect realism that is usually attributed to him. I then divide stored ideas into ectypes, (copies of appearances), archetypes, and fantastical ideas. Simple ideas and real ideas of substances are ectypes, ideas of modes and relations are archetypes and fantastical ideas are ideas of substances that we create that have no conformity to the real existence of things.

Ectypes and fantastical ideas are images, whereas ideas of modes and relations are definitions or signs.

While my reading of Locke is more complex than the standard non-deflationary views, it is preferable for several reasons. First, it accounts for all categories of Lockean ideas. Secondly, it is consistent with the text, whereas traditional readings are forced to explain away text that doesn't support their non-deflationary views. And lastly, it avoids skeptical concerns concerning the veil of perception. The more simplistic readings that have pervaded the Lockean literature simply do not do justice to the complexities of Locke's theory of ideas.

*For Eldon,*

Mommy finished her “book”. I can come out and play again!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I suppose it is cliché to say that my road to finish my doctorate was a long and arduous one, however I don't think it is overstating it to say that mine was longer, if not more arduous, than most. Were it not for the help and support of a number of people at various stages of my doctoral program, I would not have been able to complete it.

First, I'd like to thank my advisor Albert Casullo and my committee member Harry Ide for their feedback on multiple drafts of this dissertation. In addition, I'd like to thank Colin McLear for helping me to focus and shape the chapters into their final form. Thank you also to my other three committee members Joseph Mendola, Jennifer McKittrick and Carole Levine.

Early in my graduate career at UNL I received a tremendous amount of inspiration and valuable feedback from several of my fellow graduate students. In particular, I'd like to thank Brent Braga, Clayton Littlejohn, Eric Nelson, Howard Hewitt, Leo Iacono, and Mark Decker.

I'd like to offer a special thanks to four people who believed in me when I had a difficult time believing in myself: Mark VanRoojen, Amanda Gailey, Abbie Gonzalez and Margit Payne. They will never know how much their encouragement and kind words meant to me. I'd also like to thank, Ashley Moran, Delana Ryan, Gabby Migliore, and Joceyln Kramer both for their support and for watching my son occasionally so that I could get in a few more hours of writing. To my parents Ralph and Monique Hampton I

give thanks for their love, understanding and for being proud of me regardless of how this all turned out.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my husband John for his love, support and patience. We met right after I began my doctoral program, so he has endured the many ups and downs of this process right along with me. In the past five and a half years he has often had to take on more than his fair share of the child rearing and household duties so that I could write. I can't thank him enough. There is no way I could have done this without him. I am lucky to have such an understanding and supportive partner, friend, co-parent, and husband.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER 1: NON-DEFLATIONARY VIEWS OF LOCKEAN IDEAS	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. An Imagist Interpretation of Lockean Ideas.....	4
a. Locke’s Use of Imagist Language.....	6
b. Ayers’ Imagist Reading of Locke.....	10
3. A Semiotic Interpretation of Lockean Ideas.....	20
4. Interpreting Lockean Ideas as Mental Events.....	30
5. Interpreting Lockean Ideas as Intentional Objects or Contents.....	35
6. Interpreting Lockean Ideas as Appearances.....	41
7. Conclusion.....	44
CHAPTER 2: LOCKEAN IDEAS OF ACTUAL SENSATIONS	
1. Introduction.....	47
2. Ideas Qua Mental Objects, Modes, States or Events.....	49
a. The Ontological Concern.....	51
b. The Epistemological Concern.....	55
3. Sensations versus Stored Ideas.....	57



	viii
4. Ideas Qua Appearances.....	60
5. Appearances versus Reality.....	66
6. Locke’s Pragmatic Argument.....	69
7. Locke’s Semantic Argument.....	72
8. Appearances of Non-Existent Objects.....	74
9. Conclusion.....	78
 CHAPTER 3: LOCKEAN STORED IDEAS	
1. Introduction.....	80
2. The Sources and Means of Acquisition of Stored Ideas.....	81
3. Simple Ideas.....	85
4. Complex Ideas of Substances.....	88
5. Ideas of Modes and Relations.....	96
6. Fantastical Ideas.....	104
7. Abstract Ideas.....	106
8. Conclusion.....	111
CONCLUSION.....	113
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	117

## CHAPTER 1: NON-DEFLATIONARY VIEWS OF LOCKEAN IDEAS

*1) Introduction*

After more than 300 years, scholars still can't agree on what Locke's ideas are and how they represent their objects.<sup>1</sup> While there is a consensus that the collection of things designated by the term 'idea' has some unifying characteristic, there is little agreement about what that characteristic might be. The predominant view is that Lockean ideas are fundamentally mental objects with phenomenal character. These may manifest themselves as either mental images<sup>2</sup> or signs<sup>3</sup>. Yolton presents the most well-known opposition to this view, claiming instead that these ideas are mental events — specifically acts of perception<sup>4</sup>. More recently, interpreters have attributed the notion of intentionality to Locke, arguing that his ideas are either intentional objects or contents<sup>5</sup>. Lennon presents an interesting alternative to these three basic readings of Locke, describing Lockean ideas as appearances<sup>6</sup>. The extent of the disagreement over what characteristic

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Locke's work cited by book, chapter and section are from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology & Ontology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 44-51.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Panaccio, Ockham and Locke on Mental Language, in *The Medieval Heritage in Early Modern Metaphysics and Modal Theory 1400-1700*, ed. Russell L. Friedman and Lauge O. Nielsen (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003) 37-5; Walter Ott, *Locke's Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7-33.

<sup>4</sup> John W. Yolton, "Ideas and Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13 (1975): 145-65 and *Locke: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 148-151.

<sup>5</sup> Vere Chappell, "Locke's Theory of Ideas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 26-55. J.L. Mackie *Problems From Locke*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 37-51; Gabor Forrai, "Lockean Ideas as Intentional Contents," in *Intentionality: Past and Future*, ed. Forrai Gabor and George Kampis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 37-50.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Lennon, "Locke and the Logic of Ideas," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol 18, No. 2 (April, 2001), 155-177.

unifies Lockean ideas has led many interpreters to simply abandon the project altogether, declaring it insoluble.

While this stalemate is largely due to Locke's own ambiguity, I will argue that ultimately it is the project itself that is misguided. The reason interpreters have had such trouble finding one philosophically significant characteristic that all Lockean ideas share in common is simply because there isn't one. Note how imprecisely Locke consistently defines 'idea'. He claims that an idea is "whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ'd about in thinking", "whatever is meant by *Phantasm, Notion, Species...*", and "whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks".<sup>7</sup> He is being deliberately vague. All he wants to say here is that ideas are in some sense something mental and that they are in some way involved in the act of thinking. Since there are innumerable ways in which something can be *something mental*, by itself, this minimal sense in which all ideas share something in common is philosophically uninteresting. For example, various events, dispositions, objects, perceptions, abilities and states are mental insofar as they occur in the mind or are dependent on the mind. On my reading of Locke, ideas do not fit neatly into just one of these classifications; the specific account of how an idea is mental is not the same for all Lockean ideas. This goes against the orthodox view in the secondary literature that aims to provide a single correct account. While these interpreters differ on what that account is, (for example arguing that all Lockean ideas are a specific type of mental act or mental object) they at least believe there is one, and only one, account. This is the assumption that I deny.

---

<sup>7</sup> Locke, 1.1.8

It is my contention that Locke does not intend for ‘idea’ to be used as a term of art. Instead, he uses it loosely as an umbrella term to let the reader know he is referring to the sphere of the mental. When introducing the term ‘idea’ he is simply distinguishing these mind dependent items from extra-mental items. Ultimately, in Chapters 2 and 3, I will argue that some Lockean ideas turn out to be appearances while others are mental objects (or at least object-like).<sup>8</sup> Those ideas that fall into the category of mental objects will be further broken down into images, signs and definitions. While his commentators consistently insist that Lockean ideas can only be one type of thing, I shall show that this reading belies Locke’s own descriptions of ideas.

I find support for my reading in Locke’s delineation of several different categories of ideas. He spills a great deal of ink distinguishing ideas into these various categories in order to show how many different types of things fall under this broader term ‘idea’. These categories reflect the different mental processes involved in the formation of ideas, the various ways in which ideas are acquired, and the types of things the ideas are ideas of. Because of these differences, we won’t find any substantive commonalities that cut across all categories of ideas. For example, not all ideas are images as Ayers suggests, or appearances as Lennon claims. What we shall find however, is that there is some internal unity -- some unifying characteristic that ties all of its members together -- within each particular category that Locke specifies. These defining characteristics however, will turn out to differ greatly from category to category. Accordingly, I will argue that the search

---

<sup>8</sup>I will pursue this in more detail in the following chapters, but the basic difference between the two are that appearances are objects as they are perceived or as they appear to an observer and mental objects are internal mental items distinct from the objects that cause them.

for a substantive unifying characteristic that cuts across all categories of Lockean ideas is futile.

I will show that my deflationary view of Lockean ideas is preferable over the four non-deflationary views that dominate the secondary literature. In this chapter, I will look at each specific view in turn and show how the unifying characteristic championed by that view cannot account for some category of ideas. In the following two chapters, I will present my positive project by showing that 1) different categories of ideas have different defining characteristics that don't cut across other categories, 2) my reading better accords with the text, and 3) my reading helps to circumvent veil of perception worries that plague many of the standard views.

## *2.) An Imagist Interpretation of Lockean Ideas*

Many interpreters understand Lockean ideas as mental objects that have phenomenal character. An imagist interpretation of Locke is one such reading.<sup>9</sup> On this view, all ideas are either actual sensations or sensory images, i.e. copies of perceptual experiences. In sensation, we perceive an imagistic proxy that stands between the world and us. These proxies are in some way produced in us by external objects. Accordingly, we can't be sure that this image matches up to the thing as it is in the world. On the other hand, when we think about something in the absence of the actual object, we entertain a mental representation generated by the imagination. These mental representations are

---

<sup>9</sup> Discussions of Locke's imagism are included in Ayers, *Locke*, 44-51; J.C. Walmsley's *John Locke's Natural Philosophy (1632-1671)* (London: King's College), 117-18; Nicholas Jolley, *Locke: His Philosophical Thought* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 177-8.

copies of sensory experiences. Accordingly, ideas of things like tables and chairs are mental pictures of these objects, while ideas of sounds, smells and tastes are mental copies of these sensations. Both the imagistic proxies and their copies are mental nonmaterial objects that do not have any physical extension.<sup>10</sup> The copies are much less vibrant than their originals, but they are presented to the mind in basically the same way.

In both cases, to have an occurrent idea is to be in a particular mental state in which a particular sensation or sensory image is being attended to. But the idea is the sensation or image, not the mental state itself. In other words, the mental state is a particular condition at a specific time that involves the thought or feeling of imagistic proxies and internal mental representations. On an imagist reading of Locke, his ideas are the proxies and representations rather than the states in which these images are entertained.

In the following two subsections, I will compare the language Locke uses to describe ideas with the imagistic language of Gassendi and Hobbes – two philosophers with whose work Locke is deeply familiar.<sup>11</sup> I will then look at arguments for an imagist reading of Locke. Michael Ayers presents the most thorough and clear case for Locke's imagism and is often cited as the champion for this view, so the discussion will focus on him. In the end, I will argue that while Locke does seem to hold that some ideas are

---

<sup>10</sup> Some of these objects have mental extension (like a visual field) but others do not even have extension in this sense.

<sup>11</sup> For evidence that Locke read Gassendi, see Michael Alexander Stewart, *Philosophy in the Age of Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 90-98. For evidence that Locke read Hobbes, see Joanna S. Forstrom, *John Locke and Personal Identity: Immortality and Bodily Resurrection in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Philosophy* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 54-57.

images, not all Lockean ideas can be accounted for in this way; at least some Lockean ideas are not images.

*a.) Locke's Use of Imagist Language*

Imagist language can be found throughout the *Essay*. Locke describes ideas as 'images',<sup>12</sup> 'pictures',<sup>13</sup> 'copies',<sup>14</sup> 'phantasms',<sup>15</sup> and 'representations'<sup>16</sup>. The first three of these terms are obviously imagistic. 'Phantasm' is defined by Locke's contemporary John Sergeant as a "*Corporeal Resemblance*" or a "kind of *Image*, or *Picture*"<sup>17</sup> while Locke himself presents 'representation' as a synonym for 'picture' and 'image'. More than once Locke refers to the resemblance some types of ideas have to their causes (i.e. ideas of primary qualities).<sup>18</sup> He also claims that ideas are analogous to the images we see in mirrors<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, A.J. Pyle notes, Locke's description of memory is similar to that of Hobbes' notion of the "decaying sense" insofar as ideas of memory are like 'fading pictures'.<sup>20</sup> The imagination then has the power to summon and rearrange these

---

<sup>12</sup> Locke, 2.1.15; 2.2.25; 2.10.5; 2.13.7; 2.30.2

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.23.6; 2.24.1; 4.7.16; 2.26.2

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.31.8; 2.31.12; 2.32.13; 4.4.12

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.1.8

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.24.1; 2.30.2; 2.31.1; 2.31.6; 2.32.20; 4.21.4

<sup>17</sup> John Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy Asserted, Against the Fancies of the Ideaists: or, the Method to Science Farther Illustrated*. (London, 1967), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Locke, 2.8.8; 2.8.15, 2.30.2

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.1.25; 2.8.16

<sup>20</sup> A.J. Pyle, *Locke*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 50.

pictures at will. This kind of language is reminiscent of imagist language used by his predecessors Gassendi and Hobbes as well as that of his successors Berkeley and Hume.

When describing how he uses the term ‘idea’, Locke states:

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...1.1.8

Note the marked similarities to Gassendi’s own definition of an idea.

An image...is what revolves before the mind and is as it were presented to it when we are thinking of anything. It gets given a number of other names. It is also called an ‘idea’ and a ‘species’, a ‘notion’, ‘forenotion’ or ‘anticipation,’... and again a ‘concept’. Another name is ‘phantasm’, in that it is located in the fancy or imaginative faculty. I will more frequently call it an ‘idea’ because that is now a familiar and well-worn term, and suffers less from ambiguity than the others.<sup>21</sup>

The similarities between these two definitions, as well as the other imagist language they share in common, gives us some reason to suspect that Locke is indeed sympathetic to imagism. Overall, Gassendi offers a more straightforwardly imagist account, but it is easy to see how interpreters see some of the same views reflected in Locke.

It is important to note in Gassendi’s definition above that he locates ideas in the imagination; the imagination generates images. The seat of the imagination is usually taken to be material. Historically this is important, because it reveals a crucial difference between Gassendi’s view and the Cartesian tradition that precedes it. Descartes insists that in addition to sensory ideas, which are images, there are non-sensory ideas provided

---

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Gassendi, *Opera Omnia* (Lyons, 1658), 33



by an immaterial, pure intellect.<sup>22</sup> Gassendi, as well as his fellow imagist Hobbes, reject the notion that an immaterial intellect is necessary for the acquisition, storage, or apprehension of ideas. In fact, Hobbes chastises those who locate some ideas in the imagination and others in a pure intellect.

In the same manner also, they err, which place some ideas in the understanding, others in the fancy; as if from the understanding of this proposition, man is a living creature, we had one idea or image of a man derived from sense to the memory, and another to the understanding; wherein that which deceives them is this, that they think one idea should be answerable to a name, another to a proposition, which is false...<sup>23</sup>

This divide amongst seventeenth century mechanists marks the divide between substance dualism and materialism. Descartes and his followers are substance dualists while Hobbes endorses materialism. Gassendi vacillates between dualism and materialism in his work,<sup>24</sup> but like Hobbes, he is clear that all ideas are generated by the imagination alone.

Without a pure intellect to appeal to, the scope of possible ideas is a bit more limited for the materialist than the dualist. As Hobbes explains, a determinate mental image that corresponds to the thing thought about is required.

---

<sup>22</sup> See Rene Descartes, "Third Meditation," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Volume II*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 25- 36.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury: Volume I*, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London, 1839; Reprint Elibron Series, 2005), 61.

<sup>24</sup> Most of his philosophical views align with a materialist worldview, however he embraces some religious doctrine that appears to depend on a belief in an immaterial soul. Considering the political climate of his time, Gassendi may simply have been afraid of the consequences of coming out in favor of the more radical materialism of Hobbes. Hobbes himself was ostracized and accused of atheism.

When I think of a man, I am aware of an idea or image made up of a certain shape and colour; and I can doubt whether this image is the likeness of a man or not...But when I think of an angel, what comes to mind is an image, now of a flame, now of a beautiful child with wings; I feel sure that this image has no likeness to an angel, and hence that it is not the idea of an angel.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, he claims, we cannot have an idea of God because we cannot have an image of God in our mind.

Descartes believes we do have ideas of angels and God and that his view, unlike the imagist view, can account for them. Beyond these, he claims that ideas that the materialists accept, like *fear* and *volition*, cannot be accounted for with imagism.<sup>26</sup> The Hobbesian notion of an image however, is more robust than Descartes allows. An idea of fear, for example, may be a copy of the feeling of fear, or it may be a mental image of someone experiencing it. Similarly, the idea of volition may be either a mental image of someone willing himself to do something or the feeling of that pull on our own will. Even the idea of time is described as “a phantasm of motion” in which an object moves in continual succession from one point to another in a series of pictures in the mind.<sup>27</sup>

The question at hand then, is does Locke align himself with Gassendi and Hobbes and believe that all of our ideas can be accounted for in imagist terms alone. Ayers does indeed point to these historical influences in his case for Locke’s imagism. However, he believes that simply comparing and contrasting their descriptions of ‘idea’ against

---

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Hobbes, “Third Set of Objections to Descartes’ Meditations,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume II*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 126.

<sup>26</sup> Descartes, op. cit., 127

<sup>27</sup> Hobbes, *English Works*, 95.

Locke's isn't going to get us anywhere — it isn't the best way to determine whether or not Locke is an imagist. Instead, he argues, we need to look at the historical question of where Locke stands on the issue of the existence of a distinct faculty of intellect. If Locke shares the dualists' belief that there is an immaterial faculty of intellect that provides us with purely intellectual, non-sensory ideas, he is not an imagist. If, on the other hand, he sides with the materialists in claiming that no such faculty is required, he is an imagist. Ayers admits that this is not the usual way to approach this issue, but insists that this approach yields better results than others. In fact, he goes so far as to say that his findings reveal, "the grounds for holding [Locke] an imagist are conclusive".

*b.) Ayers' Imagist Reading of Locke*

Ayers lays out the historical background on this issue starting with Aristotle. On Aristotle's view, all sensible forms or species are particular. It is only by means of the intellect acting on them that these sensible forms become objects of universal thought. This process starts with perception. We perceive an object in the world. The object contains sensible forms that are somehow transmitted through the air to the eye. From there, they are then transmitted to the faculties of common sense and imagination. The faculty of intellect, which is both immaterial and immortal, abstracts information from these sensible forms thereby creating intelligible forms. These intelligible forms are purely intellectual, non-sensory ideas that are the matter for all universal thought. When our faculties are working properly there is a resemblance or conformity between how

things exist in reality and how they exist in the mind. That is, our perceptual apparatus reveals the world to us as it actually is; the world does in fact have the properties we commonly ascribe to it.

This Aristotelian worldview was famously overthrown in the mid-seventeenth century by Cartesian mechanism. According to mechanism, nature consists of intricate patterns of corpuscles (or atoms) of various shapes and sizes working together like a machine. While the mechanical interaction of these corpuscles is in some way responsible for the way the world is revealed to our senses, we do not perceive these underlying workings. Contrary to the Aristotelian model then, there may be vast differences between the world as we perceive it and the world as it actually is. Properties previously attributed to bodies are 1) reduced to quantitative descriptions of arithmetic and geometry, 2) reclassified as something mental rather than physical, or 3) discarded altogether. Ideas are among those items that are reclassified as something mental. So, while Descartes agrees with Aristotle's claim that an image exists in the eye and the imagination, he reduces these images to mechanical processes. Some complex organization of corpuscles makes up the objects that produce these images in the imagination, but there is no reason to believe that these images must conform to the external objects themselves.

Since mechanism creates a disconnect between how things exist in reality and how they are perceived by the mind, a debate emerged among seventeenth century mechanists about whether or not our minds are capable of apprehending the underlying nature of things. While Descartes rejects Aristotle's view about how the intellect grasps

intelligible forms, he agrees that an immaterial intellect grants us epistemic access to purely intellectual ideas. Conversely, the materialists deny the existence of an immaterial intellect. They don't believe there is any faculty that gives us epistemic access to the underlying nature of things; there is no way to get beyond the imagistic proxies that bar our access to the external world.

As Ayers sees it, the question about whether Locke is an imagist can be answered by determining whether Locke sides with the substance dualists (Aristotle, Descartes and their followers) or the materialists (Gassendi and Hobbes) on the issue of whether or not there exists a pure immaterial intellect in addition to the material imagination. Locke doesn't make it easy for him by insisting at the beginning of the *Essay* that he "shall not at present meddle with the physical consideration of the Mind" or try to determine whether "Ideas do in their Formation, any, or all of them, depend on Matter, or no". Accordingly, Ayers notes that if Locke does indeed side with Gassendi and Hobbes by rejecting the existence of a pure intellect, he must be motivated by strictly epistemological rather than metaphysical concerns.

To make his case, Ayers begins by pointing to the simple fact that Locke never mentions a pure intellect in the *Essay*. He claims that while it is perhaps a bit surprising that Locke doesn't explicitly deny the existence of a pure intellect, "it would be far more surprising if a philosopher on the other side, who believed in intellectual notions as well as sensory images, should have refrained from discussing or even mentioning the

difference and relation between the faculties of intellect and imagination”.<sup>28</sup> I would argue however, that it really isn’t that surprising that Locke doesn’t address this issue. He is quite forthcoming regarding his desire to remain neutral on ontological considerations concerning the mind. Any discussion of “the difference and relation between the faculties of intellect and imagination” would undermine his promise to remain agnostic on this point.

The real difficulty with Ayers’ assessment however, is the way in which he sets up the problem. He gives us two possible alternatives: 1) all Lockean ideas “can be explained adequately in terms of the imagination” alone, or 2) some Lockean ideas cannot be so explained, and therefore must require a faculty of pure intellect. According to this formulation of the problem, Ayer’s task is to show that Locke doesn’t accept a pure intellect. If he can show this, he believes he can conclude that Locke is an imagist. There is however, another alternative that Ayers does not consider. It is certainly conceivable that Locke does not embrace a faculty of pure intellect yet still believes that imagination alone is insufficient for all thought. If there are ideas that are produced by a faculty other than the imagination, Locke is not an imagist. In other words, this other idea-producing faculty need not be a pure intellect. I am not suggesting a search of the pages of the *Essay* in order to discover whether or not Locke believes said faculty exists — a simpler approach is available. I need merely to show whether or not there are at least

---

<sup>28</sup>Ayers, *Locke*, 47

some ideas that are not images. If some Lockean ideas are not images, Locke is not an imagist.

Locke's response to Descartes' distinction between conceiving and imagining demonstrates that he does in fact believe that there are at least some ideas that aren't images. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Meditation, Descartes wants to show that our idea of a chiliagon (a one thousand-sided figure) may be clearly conceived but it cannot be imagined. He claims that if we try to imagine, or picture, a chiliagon we will be left with "a confused representation of some figure" that is indistinguishable from other many-sided figures — so most certainly not a chiliagon. But, since we do have a clear and distinct idea of a chiliagon, some other faculty besides the imagination must be doing the work. Descartes concludes, of course, that this other faculty is pure intellect. Locke replies:

In a Man who speaks of a Chiliaëdron, or a Body of a thousand sides, the Idea of the Figure may be very confused, though that of the Number be very distinct; so that he being able to discourse, and demonstrate concerning that part of his complex Ideas, which depends upon the Number of a Thousand, he is apt to think, he has a distinct Idea of a Chiliaëdron; though it be plain, he has no precise Idea of its Figure, so as to distinguish it, by that, from one that has but 999 sides... 2.29.13

Locke makes the point that philosophers (like Descartes) who claim that we have a distinct idea of a chiliagon, are mistaking what exactly we have a clear idea of. We do not have a clear idea of the figure or shape; we only have a clear idea of the number of its sides.

Ayers argues that since Lockean ideas of numbers originate in sensation and reflection, there is no reason to think that the grasping of ideas like that of a chiliagon requires a pure intellect. While Ayers may be correct (and I believe he is) in concluding that this argument shows that a pure intellect is not required for these kinds of ideas, he is not justified in making the further claim that these ideas must therefore be images. Again, this isn't the only option left open. In fact, Locke's counter-argument to Descartes' distinction between conceiving and imagining is stronger evidence against, rather than for, an imagist reading of Locke. Locke is claiming that we can fully grasp the notion of a *1,000-sided closed figure*, but a mental image of such a shape is incapable of supplying this understanding. The shape would be indeterminate; it would be indistinguishable from a 999-sided closed figure. This means that we have an idea of a chiliagon, but that idea is not an image.

Of course, Ayers may counter that Locke is simply being inconsistent here. However, Locke goes on in the following three sections to use this same argument to show that we cannot fully grasp ideas of *eternity*, *infinite divisibility*, or *infinite space* if images are all that are available to us.

For that Idea, which is to represent only Bigness, must be very obscure and confused, which we cannot distinguish from one ten times as big, but only by Number: so that we have clear, distinct Ideas, we may say of Ten and One, but no distinct Ideas of two such Extensions....but it returns, as all our *Ideas* of Infinite do, at last to that of Number always to be added; but thereby never amounts to any distinct Idea of actual, infinite Parts. 2.29.16



Differentiating various mental images requires the ability to differentiate various extensions. Locke demonstrates here that if all of our ideas were mental images, we would be left with only obscure and confused ideas of *infinity*. Since we have clear and distinct ideas of *infinity*, these ideas must be something other than images. A reading of Lockean ideas which takes into account all of the time and space Locke devotes to this discussion is better than one that would have us explain it away as mere inconsistency.

While Ayers is right to say that Locke believes our ideas of numbers originate in sensation, sensation alone does not provide them — a mental action is also required. According to Locke, we derive the simple idea ‘unit’ from sensation. Through the mental act of composition we repeat this idea and get the idea of ‘two’. If we repeat it again, we get the idea *three*, and so on. So, we arrive at our ideas of numbers by adding additional units to the simple idea *unit*. While we understand that continuing to add 1 to a unit inevitably generates ‘244’, we don’t actually have to endure the process of counting that high in order to grasp the idea *244* – nor do we need to try to form a mental picture of 244 things. This is of course most clear when the numbers become very large. The idea *1,000* simply cannot be an image. So, while an image of an indeterminate closed figure may accompany one’s idea of a chiliagon, the idea itself that includes the determinate number of sides is not an image. So whatever ideas of figures, infinities and numbers are for Locke, they are not images insofar as they are neither actual sensations nor copies of perceptual appearances.

It may be argued that while these ideas are not images in this strict sense, they are images insofar as they are signs. In section 2, I will discuss a semiotic interpretation of Locke. This reading maintains that in addition to sensations and copies of sensations, some ideas are conventional signs. However, despite the fact that this looser sense of imagism might be able to account for ideas of figures and numbers, we will find that it still isn't sufficient to account for other Lockean ideas, including the various ideas of infinity.

Although Ayers' argues for an imagist interpretation of Locke, he confesses that the Lockean idea of *substance* is not an image. Instead, Ayers calls it a "place-marker" for the unknown.<sup>29</sup> He clarifies that the reason this idea is not an image is not because it is a special non-sensory idea, but simply because it doesn't have any determinate content. Ayers takes it that since this idea does not require a pure intellect, Locke is still an imagist. He doesn't consider the option that some faculty besides the imagination and pure intellect could be at work.

It is difficult to determine if Locke is indeed committed to the existence of an idea generating faculty besides the imagination. The difficulty arises because he doesn't use the terms 'faculty', 'imagination', or 'intellect' in the same way as many of his contemporaries. For example, Locke states, "faculty, ability, and power...are but different names of the same things". So, while Gassendi and Hobbes speak of faculties in terms of locations or parts/aspects of the body or soul and locates all ideas in the imagination,

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 49.

Locke speaks of faculties as abilities and places all ideas more generally in the understanding<sup>30</sup>. He reserves the term ‘imagination’ for one power, among many, that the mind exercises on its ideas. This power is such that the mind manipulates ideas it already contains and joins them together in unique ways thereby creating new idea-images. We might therefore rephrase Ayers’ question and ask whether the power of the imagination is the only power capable of producing ideas. While Locke doesn’t address this question directly, he does give us reason to suspect that it isn’t.

Besides imagination, Locke refers to reason, judgment, discernment, wit, perception, and retention as various faculties of the mind. When speaking of the power of discernment, Locke claims “This is so absolutely necessary, that without it there could be no knowledge, no reasoning, no imagination, no distinct thoughts at all.”<sup>31</sup> This suggests that this power is prior to our image making power and through it we acquire ideas like *unit* and *other*. He tells us that our ideas of modes are acquired through our power of repeating and joining ideas together. He says that they are “Modifications of the same idea; which the Mind either finds in things existing, *or is able to make within it self, without the help of any extrinsical Object, or any foreign Suggestion*”.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, he says that our ideas of relations are acquired through the exercise of our power of

---

<sup>30</sup> The ‘understanding’ is yet another term he uses differently than some of his contemporaries and predecessors. For example, Hobbes uses this term to refer to the elusive pure intellect.

<sup>31</sup> Locke, 1.4.4

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.13.1

comparison. These relations are “not contained in the real existence of Things, but something *extraneous and superinduced*”.<sup>33</sup>

These comments suggest that at least some of our ideas are not images and that they require more than the power of imagination. For example, the idea of the relation ‘taller’ may involve comparing images of two people standing next to one another, but the idea of the relation itself isn’t this image nor is it created by combining existing ideas in a new and unique way; it is something “extraneous and superinduced”. I will give a closer look to ideas of modes and relations in Chapter 3, but for my purposes here I simply need to show that Locke does not believe that all of our ideas are generated by the imagination alone. By Ayers’ own admission, Locke embraces at least one non-imagistic idea. I have shown that there are others.

Although Ayers’ arguments are mostly driven by his insistence that Locke rejects the notion of a pure intellect, he is clear that Locke’s overall motivation for this belief stems from epistemic rather than metaphysical considerations. Locke is skeptical, or at least agnostic, about the possibility of our ability to grasp the underlying essence of things. Historically, a pure intellect is viewed as a prerequisite for grasping these essences. So, Ayers reasons, Locke’s skepticism leads to his rejection of a pure intellect, which in turn, leads to his imagist sympathies. Certainly Ayers is correct in concluding that Locke’s skepticism regarding our knowledge of essences leads him to reject a pure intellect. Locke is steadfast in his claims that we cannot reach beyond how things appear to us to how they are in and of themselves. However, it is the last move that I take issue

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 2.25.8

with. Locke does not have to be an imagist in order to consistently hold those other two views. One of our faculties of reason, judgment, and discernment or our powers of repeating and comparing ideas (or some combination thereof) produce ideas that the imagination, by itself, can't account for. This additional faculty or power doesn't reveal the real underlying essences of things, but it provides us with ideas other than images.

### 3.) *A Semiotic Interpretation of Lockean Ideas*

Another interpretation that takes Lockean ideas to be mental objects with phenomenal character is the view that these ideas are all signs. The main difference between this view and imagism is this: an imagist believes that stored ideas (i.e., ideas had in the absence of the external objects that produced them) resemble their original perceptions, whereas a semiotic view of ideas has no such requirement. Accordingly, the semiotic interpretation of Locke is more inclusive than the imagist interpretation. While all signs have phenomenal character, some signs are images that resemble their targets, while other signs bear no such qualitative resemblance. Those that are not images are signs insofar as they point to or indicate their targets in the same way that a red octagon tells us to stop (with or without the word printed on it), a picture of a dove indicates peace, and '\$' signifies particular currencies.

Indeed, Locke often refers to ideas as signs.

For since the Things, the Mind contemplates, are none of them, besides, it self, present to the Understanding, 'tis necessary that something else, as a Sign or

Representation of the thing it considers, should be present to it: And these are Ideas. 4.21.4

[T]ruth properly belongs only to propositions; whereof there are two sorts, viz. mental and verbal; as there are two sorts of signs commonly made use of, viz. ideas and words. 4.5.2

It is plain... That General and Universal, belong not to the real existence of Things; but are the Inventions and Creatures of the Understanding, made by it for its own use, and concern only Signs, whether Words, or Ideas. 3.3.11

Hobbes, who is also sometimes read as offering a semiotic rather than imagist view of ideas, defines a sign in the following way:

Now, those things we call SIGNS are the antecedents of their consequents, and the consequents of their antecedents, as often as we observe them to go before or follow after in the same manner. For example, a thick cloud is a sign of rain to follow, and rain a sign that a cloud has gone before, for this reason only, that we seldom see clouds without the consequence of rain, nor rain at any time but when a cloud has gone before. ... a bush hung up, signifies that wine is to be sold there... and words so and so connected, signify the cogitations and motions of our mind. <sup>34</sup>

Walter Ott characterizes this description of the relation between a sign and its significate as indication.<sup>35</sup> Note that unlike contemporary indication theory, Ott claims that this relation isn't necessarily temporal or causal. Clouds indicate rain just as rain indicates

---

<sup>34</sup> Hobbes, *English Works*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Ott, "Locke and Signification," *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol 27 (2002) 449-473; Ott, *Language*, 7-33.

clouds. A hanging bush indicates that wine is sold in a particular place of business, but the bush certainly doesn't cause the selling of wine.

Ott argues that Locke has a similar notion of indication in mind; simple ideas indicate their objects by being reliable signs of them. Ott derives this argument from some of Locke's discussions of the primary/secondary distinction. As Locke tells us, objects in the world contain powers to produce ideas in us. He distinguishes these powers or qualities into two types: primary and secondary. Primary qualities (e.g. bulk, figure, extension, number, motion) in objects produce ideas of primary qualities in our minds. These ideas resemble their causes. Secondary qualities are various configurations of primary qualities, and these powers produce ideas that bear no resemblance to anything in the objects themselves. Our ideas of colors, sounds, smells, temperatures, and tastes are some examples of ideas of secondary qualities. Accordingly, primary qualities are real properties in external objects whereas secondary qualities are not.

When Locke claims simple ideas "agree to the reality of things", his view of primary and secondary qualities dictates that this agreement isn't necessarily one of resemblance. While the idea *roundness* resembles the roundness of a yellow ball, the idea *yellow* doesn't resemble anything in the physical object. Nevertheless, it agrees to the reality of things because it is an effect of a secondary quality in the ball. So, regardless of whether simple ideas resemble something in their objects or are simply the effects of qualities in those objects, they agree to the reality of things insofar as they are reliable signs of their targets.

This means that if I have the simple idea *hot* in mind in the presence of a stove, I have good reason to suspect that the stove is, in fact, hot. A particular configuration of primary qualities has come together (as a secondary quality) to cause the idea in me. Ott concludes from this that simple ideas “serve as grounds for inference to their causes... [M]y having the idea white gives me a basis for inference to the presence of a secondary quality in a physical object. It is in this sense that the idea is a sign or mark of its cause.”<sup>36</sup>

Note that on this view simple ideas are all images in the imagist sense of the term. The idea yellow is a mental image of the color yellow. The color is presented to us in thought in fundamentally the same way as it is presented to us in experience (despite the fact that it doesn't resemble anything in an external object). Complex ideas may also be images in the imagist sense of the term. However, they need not be; the semiotic view is not limited to images. Images are simply one kind of sign. We may also have complex ideas with phenomenal character that do not resemble anything presented in experience. The difference between images and these other signs correlates to the distinction between natural and conventional signs. A natural sign indicates something else by their very nature. Conventional signs, on the other hand are those that, as Hobbes tells us “we make choice of at our own pleasure.” These ideas do not resemble any perceptual experience that may have played a part in their acquisition, nor do they stand in a reliable causal relation with their target.

---

<sup>36</sup> Ott, *Language*, 22.



Ott is more concerned with Locke's theory of language than his theory of ideas, so he doesn't pursue whether ideas besides simple ideas are natural signs. Claude Panaccio however proclaims, "It is clear at any rate that ideas are mental signs for [Locke], and they are certainly not conventional signs"<sup>37</sup>. Reading Locke in this way does nothing to distinguish it from an imagist reading. In fact it sounds a lot like Ayers' claim: "The names of a conventional language owe their signification to an arbitrary relation, but ideas are linked to what they signify by a natural, casual relation"<sup>38</sup>. Despite Panaccio's and Ayers' protestations to the contrary, the very reason a semiotic reading of Locke is preferable over an imagist reading is the fact that it leaves open the possibility that some ideas are conventional, rather than natural, signs.

On a semiotic reading, all Lockean simple ideas are natural signs. They are natural insofar as 1) they bear a casual relation to their targets, and 2) they resemble the genuine experiences of their external objects (not the objects themselves). This does not mean that an individual cannot consciously pick an instance, or even a particular shade, of *yellowness* to stand as a representative for all instances of yellow. Being a natural sign on this view simply means that whatever image the individual picks must in fact be an image of yellow; it must resemble its target. Complex ideas, on the other hand, may be either natural or conventional signs. They may resemble their targets and bear a causal relation to them, but there is no such requirement. So, for example, if my idea *dog* is an image of my friend's dog Fergus, my idea is a natural sign. It is a natural sign on this

---

<sup>37</sup> Panaccio, *Ockham and Locke*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Ayers, *op. cit.*, 62

view, insofar as it is an image that was caused by a dog and resembles a dog. Even though I could have picked a different image of a dog, the idea is still considered a natural sign. On the other hand, if my idea ‘stop’ is an image of a stop sign, the palm of a hand indicating one to stop, or even the word ‘stop,’ my idea is a conventional sign; none of these idea-signs resemble what it means to stop.

When we extend an imagist view to a semiotic view, thereby including both natural and conventional signs, the view allows for all of the ideas the imagist can account for, plus some that it cannot. For example, as mentioned in the previous section, the imagist interpretation has a difficult time providing a satisfactory explanation of Lockean ideas of numbers. Recall that we arrive at our ideas of numbers by adding additional units to the simple idea *unit*. Using the mental act of composition, we continually repeat the idea *unit* to get ideas of various numbers. These ideas are mental names or marks. For example, when thinking of the number 679, we don’t need to try to form a mental picture of 679 things. Instead we allow the “name or mark” ‘679’ to stand for that idea. As Locke explains:

For he that will count twenty, or have any idea of that number, must know, that nineteen went before, with the distinct name or sign of every one of them, as they stand marked in their order; for wherever this fails, a gap is made, the chain breaks, and the progress in numbering can go no farther. So that to reckon right, it is required, 1, That the mind distinguishes carefully two ideas, which are different one from another, only by the addition or subtraction of one unit. 2, That it retain in memory the names or marks of the several combinations from an unit to that number; and that not confusedly, and at random, but in that exact order...2.16.7

So, my idea of a chiliagon is completely distinct from my idea of a 999-sided figure. This is due to the fact that my idea of *1,000* and *999* are distinct mental signs and because we grasp the notion of adding or subtracting units. An imagist, on the other hand would be hard pressed to tell the difference between a chiliagon and a 999-sided figure. Our perceptual apparatuses are simply incapable of making such fine distinctions. All that would be grasped in either case would be the confused idea of a figure with a great number of sides.

Numbers may be marked by either numerals or names, both of which are signs. Locke more often refers to them as names, but he is clear that names are conventional signs. He claims that without language we could only have ideas of very small numbers. He tells us that the reason children take so long to learn their numbers is from their want of language. If these ideas were images rather than signs, this wouldn't be a concern. In contemplation of the reason why many Americans he has spoken with cannot count to one thousand (he does at least provide the caveat that they were otherwise "of quick and rational parts"), Locke conjectures:

Because their Language being scanty, and accommodated only to the few necessaries of a needy simple Life...had no Words in it to stand for 1000; so that when they were discoursed with of those greater Numbers, they would shew the Hairs of their Head, to express a great multitude, which they could not number; which inability, I suppose, proceeded from their want of Names....2.16.6

He also claims that we ourselves would have ideas of larger numbers than we already have if we had names that would distinguish them and prevent confusion. As it is, he states, "we take now to name them by Millions of Millions of Millions, etc.". The

problem isn't only communicating these ideas to others. He is clear that it is our lack of names or signs that prevents us from conceptualizing numbers past a certain point. Other ideas of measurement of space and time also rely on the "addibility" of numbers. We couldn't have ideas of expansion, duration, or any modes thereof, without including ideas of numbers. For this reason, it is reasonable to conclude that these ideas too are, at least in part, conventional signs.

Locke states that the same object can produce different qualitative ideas in several men's minds. Another advantage of a semiotic reading then is that it can easily account for these differences. The ideas are considered the same insofar as they are all evidence for the same objects (or qualities thereof) that caused them. On this view then, the epistemic role of the idea, rather than the qualitative content, is what is important. As long as two people can indicate the same objects and speak intelligibly about them, they have the same ideas. It doesn't matter that their internal mental signs are different. This is best demonstrated in Locke by his formulation of an inverted spectrum scenario. He imagines a case in which a violet produces an idea in one man's mind that is qualitatively identical to the idea a marigold produces in another man's mind and vice versa. He concludes that despite these qualitative differences, neither the men's own private musings about the flowers nor their communications with others about them would be confused or contain any "falsehood". He explains:

For all Things, that had the Texture of a Violet, producing constantly the Idea, which he called Blue, and those which had the Texture of a Marigold, producing constantly the Idea, which he as constantly called Yellow, whatever those

Appearances were in his Mind; he would be able as regularly to distinguish Things for his Use by those Appearances, and understand, and signify those distinctions, marked by the Names Blue and Yellow, as if the Appearances, or Ideas in his Mind, received from those two Flowers, were exactly the same, with the Ideas in other Men's Minds. 2.32.15

Accordingly, the epistemic roles of the ideas are being served: they reliably allow the subject to distinguish objects and communicate about those objects to others. On the semiotic reading this is especially important because many idea-signs are conventional mental marks that are arbitrarily attached to their targets. In these cases, there is little chance that two people will have qualitatively identical, or perhaps even similar, ideas. So instead, this view focuses on whether or not the same epistemic role is served. Ott calls this notion of sameness “significative sameness”: two signs are the same if they are grounds for inference for the same object.<sup>39</sup>

Lastly, for those who share this interpretation of Locke, an advantage of a semiotic reading over an imagist reading has to do with how ideas are used rather than what they are. For example, Panaccio calls attention to Locke's use of mental propositions and the role they play in acquiring knowledge. These propositions are composed of ideas, which are signs that represent external things. As Locke describes them, mental propositions are the “joining or separating of ideas” and are the primary objects (as opposed to the objects themselves) of knowledge. We are capable of knowledge of the external world since these propositions can be about external things.

---

<sup>39</sup> Ott, *op. cit.*, 22.

In summary, this semiotic reading is preferable over the imagist reading insofar as it better accounts for Lockean numbers and measurements, it addresses the qualitative differences between ideas, and it highlights the role ideas play in acquiring knowledge. Despite these advantages, it is still incomplete; like all non-deflationary interpretations of Locke's theory of ideas, it cannot account for all Lockean ideas. For example, it faces the same problem the imagist reading faces in accounting for many ideas of modes and relations as well as ideas like *substance* and *God*. For example, Locke defines our idea of a substance as follows:

So that if any one will examine himself concerning his Notion of pure Substance in general, he will find he has no other *Idea* of it at all, but only a Supposition of he knows not what support of such Qualities, which are capable of producing simple *Ideas* in us...2.23.2

And he defines our idea of God as:

I think, I may say we have no other *Idea* of him, but a complex one of Existence, Knowledge, Power, Happiness, etc. infinite and eternal: which are all distinct, *Ideas*, and some of them being relative, are again compounded of others...  
2.23.35

Just as natural signs, i.e. images, can't encapsulate either of these ideas, neither can conventional signs. Even collections of images and signs joined together would be inadequate in conveying the definitions outlined above. This is because even though we get these ideas by manipulating ideas we acquire through sensation and reflection, the ideas themselves are something above and beyond the images and signs being put together or compared. For example, our ideas of numbers may be signs, but our idea that these can go on *ad infinitum*, which is required for our idea of God, is acquired by

comparing larger numbers to smaller numbers. This comparison yields an idea which is extraneous and superinduced to the ideas of the numbers themselves. In fact, nothing other than their definitions impart what our ideas *substance* and *God* consist of.

Similarly, other ideas of modes and relations involve putting together and comparing ideas the mind already contains, but the ideas of modes and relations themselves aren't merely a collection of these ideas.

#### 4.) *Interpreting Lockean Ideas as Mental Events*

While commentators disagree about how to precisely characterize Lockean ideas, they mostly agree that they are objects. Yolton is a solitary, yet strong voice of dissent claiming instead that ideas are events. Contrary to Ayers and Ott, he argues that Locke's view is much more in line with Arnauld's position than either Gassendi's or Hobbes'.

Arnauld claims "To think, to know and to perceive are the same thing. I also take the idea of an object and the perception of that object to be the same thing".<sup>40</sup> By identifying the perception of x with the idea of x, Arnauld is interpreting 'idea' as a mental act rather than a mental object. Yolton points out that Locke's *Essay* is riddled with instances in which Locke, like Arnauld, equates ideas with perceptions. Here are three examples:

- (1) To discover the nature of our *Ideas* the better, and to discourse of them intelligibly, it will be convenient to distinguish them, as they are *Ideas* or

---

<sup>40</sup> Antoine Arnauld, *On True and False Ideas*, trans. Stephen Gaukroger (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 65.

Perceptions in our Minds; and as they are modifications of matter in the Bodies that cause such Perceptions in us...2.8.7

(2) ...and as they are Sensations, or Perceptions, in our Understandings, I call them *Ideas*...2.8.8

(3) To ask, at what time a Man has first any Ideas, is to ask, when he begins to perceive; having *Ideas*, and Perception being the same thing. 2.1.9

Yolton points out that not only does Locke use some of the same language as Arnauld when describing ideas, he weighs in on a high profile three-year debate between the philosopher and his contemporary Malebranche, on whether ideas are objects or events. Malebranche argues that ideas are real, spiritual beings (objects) that are present to our minds and intimately united to them. He goes on to claim that since our minds cannot perceive at a distance, our minds cannot perceive things directly. Instead, Malebranche claims, they perceive objects called ideas.

Yolton argues that many comments in Locke's *Essay*, his *Examination of Malebranche*, and some of his letters to John Norris reveal that he sides strongly with Arnauld in this debate. For example, both Locke and Arnauld criticize Malebranche for making ideas proxies of objects that obstruct our direct access to the world. It would be surprising to find that Locke holds the view that ideas are these proxy objects, as he is often accused of holding, since he challenges Malebranche on this very issue. As he states:

I shall here only take notice how inconceivable it is to me, that a spiritual, i.e. unextended substance, should represent to the mind an extended figure...Next,



supposing I could conceive an unextended substance to represent a figure, or be the idea of a figure, the difficulty still remains to conceive how it is my soul sees it.<sup>41</sup>

Locke questions Malebranche's assumption that a non-extended mind can somehow be united with ideas of extended figures, yet an object view of ideas will entail precisely that. Instead, Yolton argues, Locke shares Arnauld's view that an idea is simply the awareness of physical objects and/or their qualities. So, while physical objects cannot be spatially present to the mind, they can be cognitively present. This cognitive presence is what is captured by the term 'idea'. Yolton explains:

To say that we know objects by means of ideas is to say no more than that objects become known through sensory awareness. If the indirectness sometimes charged to Lockean ideas is simply this fact that objects are mediated by awareness, then skeptics can find no support in that fact.<sup>42</sup>

Malebranche criticizes the event sense of idea in part because he believes that it dismisses the representational character of ideas. While Arnauld believes that the modes or acts of mind are representational, he rejects the notion that ideas must be "superfluous entities" which are distinct from perceptions. He insists that we mustn't think that in order to be representational, ideas have to be something like little pictures or images that resemble the things they represent. Rather than believing that the mind is related to such abstract entities, Arnauld insists that the term 'idea' simply captures the relationship the act of perception has to its external object, namely it represents it. Since there is no

---

<sup>41</sup> John Locke, "An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God," in *The Works of John Locke: In Nine Volumes. Vol. 8* (London 1824), 219.

<sup>42</sup> Yolton, *Locke*, 151.

object/act distinction at work, this relation is not one of resemblance, but rather a directedness towards something else; the idea is directed toward some object or quality in the world.

So when Arnauld claims that “the things we conceive are *objectively* in our mind and in our thought” he is claiming that the ideas are directed or pointing to something else. He attempts to clarify...

I have said that I take *perception* and *idea* to be the same thing. It must nevertheless be noted that, while this thing is single, it stands in a twofold relation, to the soul that it modifies, and to the thing perceived in so far as this latter is objectively in the soul, and the word ‘perception’ more directly refers to the former relation, the word ‘idea’ to the latter.<sup>43</sup>

The first of the two relations mentioned here is between the idea and the soul. In other words, the relation is between the action and the actor. Just as the act of running requires a runner, so the act of perception requires an intellect or soul. The second relation, which the Scholastics refer to as ‘objective reality’, is between the idea and the external object. The action is directed toward something in the world. Those ideas that fail to so direct themselves are considered materially false. They give the impression of representing or pointing us to something when in fact the external object they purport to represent does not exist.

Malebranche scoffs at this weakened conception of ‘representational’; he doesn’t believe that *directedness* captures the same robust sense of ‘represent’ as resemblance. Interestingly however, it isn’t altogether unlike the contemporary notion we have of

---

<sup>43</sup> Arnauld, *op. cit.*, 66.

intentionality (to be discussed further in the following section). An idea is intentional insofar as it is about something else, namely the object perceived. Arnauld seems to have something like this in mind. Likewise, Yolton claims, Locke also shares this notion of intentionality. As we shall see, other interpreters agree with Yolton on this point, however claiming that Lockean ideas are intentional objects or contents rather than intentional acts.

There are a couple of problems with Yolton's comparison of Locke to Arnauld. First, the textual evidence he cites isn't quite as straightforward as Yolton would lead us to believe. The term 'perception' can refer to acts or objects of perception. An act of perception is the physical and mental process of perceiving an object whereas an object of perception is what is perceived. When we look at the passages in which Locke seems to identify ideas with perception, we find that he is not using the term to describe an action. In (1) and (2) above, Locke uses the term to designate objects of perception or percepts. In (3) he does have the act of perception in mind, but he equates the *having of ideas* with this act, not the ideas themselves. This is because, for Locke, in order for an act of perception to take place, an idea must be formed in the mind. So, for every act of perception, there must be an idea and conversely, for every idea there must be an act of perception. Accordingly, Locke does take there to be a necessary connection between acts of perception and ideas, but unlike Arnauld, he doesn't believe that this connection is one of identity. Throughout the essay Locke calls ideas objects and only dubs them perceptions when he is using the object sense of 'perception'.

Secondly, while it is true that Locke, like Arnauld, rebukes Malebranche for turning ideas into proxy objects, it does not follow that he must embrace Arnauld's alternative view. Instead, all it shows is that Locke doesn't believe that actual sensations are mental objects that stand in the way of our access to the physical world. Like his fellow commentators, Yolton assumes that all ideas must share one single unifying characteristic. This assumption, together with Locke's rejection of Malebranche's proxy objects, leads Yolton to the conclusion that Lockean ideas cannot be mental objects. Once we reject the assumption, we leave open the possibility that at least some ideas are mental objects. Stored ideas, for example, may still indeed be images, signs or other such objects.

##### *5) Interpreting Lockean Ideas as Intentional Objects or Contents*

Like Yolton, other commentators committed to a non-deflationary reading of Lockean ideas, interpret Locke as having something like intentionality in mind when he speaks of ideas. Rather than intentional acts however, they attribute the notion of intentional objects or contents to Locke. So, while Yolton identifies Lockean ideas with acts of thinking and perceiving, this view identifies the content of Lockean ideas with the intended targets of those thoughts and perceptions.

In order to reconcile Locke's rejection of Malebranchian proxy objects with his multiple claims that ideas are still in some sense objects, Vere Chappell advances the view that ideas are intentional objects. Intentional objects are supposed to differ enough

from other possible mental objects that this apparent inconsistency disappears. He looks at Locke's view of the nature of thinking as his starting point. Locke believes that all thought must be directed toward something; there is no such thing as thinking without thinking of something. The something in question is an idea. So, for Locke, an idea is an object insofar as it is the object of thought, or that which the thought is about. Chappell believes that veil of perception worries stem from failing to grasp this loose sense of 'object'. When interpreters attribute the more restrictive sense of the term to Locke, he is read as having the untenable position that ideas are real, separate, distinct beings that stand between perceivers and the world. At this point, he is admonished for being careless, ambiguous, and/or inconsistent, or alternatively, he is simply dismissed altogether.

As we have seen, Yolton takes up the former strategy by claiming that Locke is merely being sloppy when he speaks of ideas as objects. He claims that despite appearances, Lockean ideas are not objects or entities at all, but rather mental acts. Chappell argues that this claim demonstrates that Yolton not only uses 'object' in the restrictive sense, but that he also uses the term 'entity' in a very restrictive sense. Chappell argues that the way in which Yolton uses 'entity' accords neither with Locke's own use, nor common use. Yolton is supposing that something is an entity only insofar as it is an independent being that is able to exist on its own. Chappell, on the other hand, claims that anything capable of being referred to, considered, or spoken of, is an entity. Locke wants to refer to the subject matter or target of thinking and so he uses the term

‘idea’ to do it. On Chappell’s reading, an idea is an entity in this sense. Locke doesn’t believe that ideas are capable of existing on their own, but he does believe they are capable of being referred to. Similarly, Chappell concludes, Locke doesn’t believe that ideas are real beings, but instead are objects of thought or rather, “that to which thought, feeling or action is directed”.<sup>44</sup>

Chappell claims that while every Lockean idea is the object of some act of thinking, these ideas are not the only things that we can think about. He tells us that according to Locke, we can think about things that are outside of our minds too. In a sense then, these external objects are also objects of thought. The difference is simply that ideas are internal objects of thought while things in the world are external objects of thought — they exist outside of our minds and are completely independent of them. Every act of thinking requires an internal immediate object, but does not necessarily require an external mediate object. This allows for hallucinations and fantastical ideas.

Ideas are intentional objects whereas things in the world are real objects. One of the key differences between an intentional object and an external real object is that an intentional object need not be fully determinate. A real object, on the other hand, must have a particular size, shape, color, etc. Chappell admits that intentional objects may seem bizarre. He tries to clarify his position by pointing to Locke’s declaration “Let any Idea be as it will, it can be no other but such as the mind perceives it to be”. Objects of perception only have those features that they are perceived to have. For example, perceivers tend to perceive features an external object doesn’t in fact have, just as they

---

<sup>44</sup> Chappell, *op. cit.*, 32.

fail to perceive many of the features it does have. Chappell claims that given this fact about human psychology, the indeterminacy of intentional objects is “perfectly normal”. He believes that they seem odd only because we tend to compare them to material objects.

Despite the advantages of the indeterminacy of intentional ideas, it is unclear from his explanation what Chappell really means by “intentional object”. Some of his discussion implies that these objects have phenomenal content. Although he insists that they don’t have to be fully determinate in terms of colors and shapes, he doesn’t say that these ideas fail to exemplify colors or shapes altogether. If they do have phenomenal content, perhaps Chappell is merely trying to differentiate intentional objects from the static images of imagism — characterizing them as ever-shifting images instead. This gives the impression that these are still objects in the more robust sense of the term. If he does in fact believe that these intentional objects are dynamic images, his view may circumvent veil of perception worries that plague the imagist, but other problems with the imagist view of Lockean ideas persist.

On the other hand, he does explicitly state that intentional objects are not distinct objects; they aren’t objects in the traditional sense of the term. He also makes a big point of claiming that the ideas themselves aren’t colored or shaped. For example, an idea of an apple can’t really be red because redness is a physical property that simply can’t be attributed to an idea. This isn’t something that the imagist would deny though. Ayers certainly doesn’t argue that Locke believes there is an actual little blue square imprinted

on the mind when one is thinking of a blue square. The imagist is clear however, that the idea *appears* blue to the subject. Is Chappell making the further claim that ideas don't appear colored or shaped to the subject? If this is the case, then he is not only rejecting the notion that ideas are static images, but is also claiming that they aren't indeterminate images either. If this is his intention, he needs to give a better positive description of what these objects are. Besides claiming that they are indeterminate, he doesn't say much else about their nature.

What this boils down to is that Chappell seems to waffle between two views. When he discusses the loose sense of "object" he appears to deny that an intentional object is, in fact, an object in its own right; he doesn't appear committed to the view that there are objects of any kind to which the subject is relating. On the other hand, when he discusses the indeterminacy of intentional objects, and the oddness of them, he tends to revert back to language that is often associated with a view of objects as distinct separate objects.

J.L. Mackie's description of intentional objects is less ambiguous. He makes it clear that he is not committed to a view of distinct separate objects. He explains by saying that when we say, "I see a horse" there is a sense in which what I report is necessarily true and another in which it is not. The proposition is true insofar as what I perceive is exactly as I perceive it. It is not necessarily the case however that there is an actual horse existing independently of my perception of it. This means that I can accurately report that I see a unicorn despite the fact that there isn't one, or that I can feel



the ground rocking after spending several weeks on a small ship even though the ground isn't actually moving. He concludes "To say that there is an intentional object of a certain sort is only to say, in what could be a misleading style, that that is how things look (or feel, or sound, and so on) to the person in question."<sup>45</sup>

This way of speaking doesn't try to explain the difference between the external object and how it is seen or perceived, but rather directs our attention to this difference. So, when Locke says that ideas of primary qualities resemble their causes whereas ideas of secondary qualities do not, he is simply saying that some aspects of our perceptions appear to us exactly as they are in the world, while others appear quite differently. How the world is in itself and how it seems to us would come apart even if we always saw the world as it actually is. In order to dispel some of the discomfort of using the term 'object', Mackie often chooses to call this "intentional *content*" instead. Chappell occasionally makes this same concession by claiming that ideas have "cognitive content".

Gabor Forrai, who also adopts an intentional content reading of Locke, explains that objects of thought are always conceived in some particular way.<sup>46</sup> For example, he sometimes thinks of the deflated ball as simply a deflated ball, while at other times he thinks of it as his son's favorite toy. These different ways of conceiving of the same thing are called contents. So, this view of ideas distinguishes the object of thought (the thing in the world) from its content (the way the object is conceived). Forrai can therefore conceive of the deflated ball as yellow even though color is only an effect of various

---

<sup>45</sup> Mackie, op. cit., 48.

<sup>46</sup> Forrai, op. cit., 37-8.

casual powers in the object. This content is representational only insofar as the external object is conceived in a particular way. Moreover, we could not have certain ideas (like colors), or rather, we could not conceive of certain objects in certain ways, if certain things (or configurations of primary qualities) didn't exist. Put another way, the existence of certain contents implies the existence of the objects they specify.

Using the terms “intentional *content*” or “cognitive *content*” instead of ‘intentional object’ is preferable for a couple of reasons. First, the notion of some odd kind of object with a special sort of being is, as Ayers claims, “ontologically intolerable”. While Chappell tries to dispel this concern by claiming they aren't actually beings at all, the term ‘intentional object’ carries with it reminders of the Meinongian jungle. Secondly, Mackie's and Gabor's descriptions of intentional contents are more detailed and clearer than Chappell's description of intentional objects; they present a more complete positive project. Before looking at the challenges this view faces however, I will move on to an interpretation of ideas that closely resembles this reading. As we shall see, both views suffer the same difficulties.

#### 6) *Interpreting Lockean Ideas as Appearances*

Thomas Lennon presents a reading of Locke that is similar to the intentional content view. He formulates his position in the following way: “to say my idea of x is an appearance of x is to say that an idea of x is x as it appears to me”<sup>47</sup>. Like the intentional content reading, this view distinguishes between reality (being) and how something looks

---

<sup>47</sup> Lennon, *Through a Glass Darkly*, 329.

or appears (non-being) to the subject. This appearance is not something in addition to the thing it is an appearance of, but rather just the thing itself as perceived from a particular point of view. If I see *The Nutcracker* performed from the mezzanine, my point of view will be different than if I see the same ballet from the balcony. The shift in my point of view changes the angle, distance, lighting and sound conditions of my subjective perspective, which in turn affects the appearance of the performance. Despite these changes, I see the same ballet no matter which seating location I find myself in.

Unlike the intentional object reading, Lennon makes clear that ideas qua appearances have no ontological status distinct from the things of which they are appearances; they are not like appearances, they *are* appearances. He explains:

To be sure, appearances are not simply mysterious, and in fact are largely nomological. Thus there will be an ontology “associated” with them, on which their regularity depends. For Locke, with his mechanistic causal concerns, the ontology will be that of material impressions in the perceiver’s body. But those impressions are not what we perceive any more than the air molecules that condition a mirage in the desert are what we see when we claim to see water on the dry highway ahead.

Moreover, there doesn’t have to be an external thing in the world causing the appearance. As Locke tells us “The having of the Idea of any thing in our Mind, no more proves the Existence of that Thing, than the Picture of a Man evidences his being in the

world, or the Visions of a Dream make thereby a true History”.<sup>48</sup> An idea of a unicorn then, is an appearance of how a unicorn would appear if a unicorn caused the appearance.

Lennon finds support for this reading in Locke’s many claims that when we speak our words signify our ideas and not the things themselves. Locke attributes many “Disputes in the World” to confusing things for ideas. Lennon argues that if we read this with his interpretation in mind, it makes perfect sense: when we speak as if we are discussing things themselves, rather than how they appear to us, we find ourselves speaking of “we know not what”.

This interpretation of Locke makes a lot of sense of simple ideas of sensation and reflection; these ideas are simply the way in which we experience things, i.e. the way things seem to us. We view the world from a particular point of view and with the filter of our own perceptual apparatuses. Accordingly, the appearances, or the things in the world as they are perceived, are different from how they are apart from our perception of them. However, this interpretation runs into trouble when it addresses some Lockean stored ideas, i.e. ideas that we think on when not in the presence of the object we are thinking about.

Perhaps stored ideas of simple ideas and ideas of substances are simply copies of appearances the subject has previously perceived. So, for example, a stored idea *cat* is a copy of the appearance of the subject’s childhood cat, while the stored idea *red* is a copy of that aspect of the previous appearance of a red balloon. The copy isn’t, strictly speaking, an appearance, but we can imagine a way to make this work. Fantastical ideas

---

<sup>48</sup> Locke, 4.11.1

like unicorns and mermaids are not appearances at all, but Lennon could perhaps say that they are copies of parts of appearances put together in unique ways. However, once we move beyond simple ideas, ideas of particular substances and fantastical ideas, this non-deflationary view of ideas becomes problematic. It is difficult to see how ideas like *theft*, *100*, *substance*, and *God* could be appearances. It isn't simply, as in the case of hallucinations, that there isn't anything causing the appearance, nor is it the case that these are copies of pre-existing appearances; it is the fact that there is no appearance whatsoever. Moreover, the more general an abstract complex idea becomes, the more difficult it is to conceive of it as an appearance. For example, the idea *human* isn't simply a copy of an appearance of a human. It is something more general that doesn't include notions of race, gender or any other trait that would render the idea more specific.

Note that the intentional content reading of Lockean ideas shares this same difficulty. It can account for ideas of sensation and reflection insofar as these simple ideas are the way things seem to us. It can also be formulated in such a way that copies of the way things look and feel to us are also intentional contents. But, it is ill equipped to deal with some abstract ideas, ideas of relations and modes and ideas like *substance* and *god*. None of these ideas are experienced *per se*. Locke tells us that we acquire these ideas by taking ideas received through sensation and reflection and manipulating them via various mental actions, namely acts of comparison, abstraction and composition.

## 7) Conclusion

In the introduction to the *Essay*, Locke seems to be aware that his use of the term ‘idea’ may elicit some criticism. He makes the following apology:

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. 1.1.8

Despite his attempts to evade criticism for his choice of terms, the secondary literature is fraught with disapproval over his use of ‘idea’. Most of these criticisms stem not from the fact that he uses it so often, but that he uses it in more than one way. As I have shown, his defenders have tried to save him from these criticisms by trying to give an account of Lockean ideas that reveals the one philosophically significant unifying characteristic all ideas share in common.

While several of these interpretations of Locke provide a good account of one or more particular categories of ideas, none of them are capable of accounting for all Lockean ideas. This is because Locke doesn’t believe that there is one single unifying characteristic — other than the fact that they are all modifications of the mind. Locke uses ‘idea’ as an umbrella term to cover several different types of mental items. This is why he spends so much time and effort in his *Essay* detailing all of the various kinds of ideas. The natures of these various items are determined by a number of factors including which mental processes are involved, how the ideas are acquired and what types of things the ideas are ideas of. Corresponding to each of these different categories of ideas are

unique unifying characteristics within the category. In the next two chapters, I will offer a closer look at these different categories. In doing so, I will show how the text demands a deflationary reading of Lockean ideas.

## CHAPTER 2: IDEAS OF SENSATION

### *1) Introduction*

If Locke had explicitly delineated different types of ideas by introducing distinguishing terms, he could have circumvented much of the confusion surrounding his theory of ideas. Instead, he uses 'idea' as an umbrella term to stand for many different categories of mental items. This has resulted in the various non-deflationary readings cited in Chapter 1; interpreters have sought to find one philosophically significant unifying characteristic that all ideas share in common. However, as we have seen, while many of these interpretations adequately account for some category or categories of Lockean ideas, none of them can account for the full range of things Locke calls 'ideas'.

For example, both actual sensations of things outside of us as well as mental copies that stand in the absences of external objects are called 'ideas'. These two types of ideas however, share little in common other than the fact that they are both things that the mind can think of. In order to subsume both of these under one unifying notion of idea, commentators have tried characterizing our sensations of the external world using the same language Locke uses to describe internal mental copies of that world.

As a result, those who interpret Lockean stored ideas as objects (e.g. substances, images, signs or real beings that are otherwise ontologically distinct from or independent of the things they are ideas of) are therefore led to the unfortunate conclusion that sensations must also be objects that are ontologically distinct from the external objects



they represent. In other words, these critics argue that a natural consequence of an object interpretation of Lockean ideas is that there are objects, i.e. epistemic intermediaries, standing proxy between the world and us, creating a veil of perception — a view that, as we shall see, Locke himself says he rejects. If instead one interprets Lockean ideas as modes of minds, mental states or events instead of objects, one could certainly argue that veil of perception worries persist. After all, when I look at external objects in the world, surely the targets of my perceptions are supposed to be those mind-independent objects, not modes, mental states or events. Once we understand that ‘idea’ is being used in more than one sense, this and several other apparent inconsistencies dissolve.

In this chapter, I will focus on distinguishing the two most basic senses of idea Locke has in mind: actual sensations and stored ideas (stored ideas include ideas had in the absence of the external objects that produced them as well as other ideas we invent). I will argue that Lockean sensations are appearances, i.e. things-as-experienced (as opposed to things-in-themselves), rather than real independent beings, modes, mental states or events. Distinguishing sensations from stored ideas in this way will lead me to defend a direct realist reading of Locke, despite the common charge that his theory of ideas commits him to a very strong form of indirect realism. Even if it turns out that his stored ideas are actually mental objects, modes, events or states, his distinction between stored ideas and sensations rescues his view from the skeptical problems many interpreters attribute to it; occurrent sensations simply don’t have the characteristics of

any such epistemic intermediaries. A detailed look at the different types of stored ideas is then taken up in Chapter 3.

2) *Ideas Qua Mental Objects, Modes, States or Events*

The ample textual evidence for the view that at least some Lockean ideas are objects is compelling:

Whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate *Object* of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call Idea...2.8.8

*IDEA* is the *Object* of thinking. 2.1.1

Since the Mind, in all its Thoughts and Reasonings, hath no other immediate *Object* but its own Ideas...it is evident, that our Knowledge is only conversant about them. 4.1.1.

In his famous apology for using the term ‘idea’ so often, Locke defines an idea as “whatsoever is the *Object* of the Understanding when a Man thinks”. Besides directly referring to ideas as objects, he also calls them ‘pictures’<sup>49</sup>, ‘images’<sup>50</sup>, ‘copies’<sup>51</sup>, ‘signs’<sup>52</sup>, and ‘representations’<sup>53</sup>— all of which are typically understood as mental objects that are ontologically distinct from external objects.

As we have seen, this object reading of Lockean ideas generates two potential problems. The first has to do with ontological concerns while the second deals with

<sup>49</sup> Locke, 2.23.6; 2.24.1; 4.7.16; 2.26.2

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 2.1.15; 2.2.25; 2.10.5; 2.13.7; 2.30.2;

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 2.31.8; 2.31.12; 2.32.13; 4.4.12

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 2.32.19; 3.3.11; 4.5.2; 4.21.4

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 2.24.1; 2.30.30; 2.31.1; 2.31.6; 2.32.20; 4.21.4

epistemic worries. The ontological concern is that Locke is introducing superfluous (and perhaps odd) entities to the perceptual process. Rather than clutter our ontology, it is preferable if we can find an explanation of perception that doesn't entail multiplying entities.

The epistemic worry is that such a reading leads us into skepticism about the existence and/or nature of the external world. If ideas are ontologically distinct beings, they stand proxy for external objects. Since we don't have access to external objects except through these proxies, we can have little to no knowledge about the external world. It is my suggestion however, that just as Locke's use of the term 'idea' is intentionally ambiguous, so is his use of the term 'object'. While it may turn out that stored ideas are objects in the sense of being real beings, sensations are not.

Even if we understand Lockean ideas as modes, mental states or events rather than real beings of some kind, the problem persists. In each of these cases, ideas still wind up being dependent on minds, they are still independent of external existences and therefore are still epistemic intermediaries of some sort. So, the overall concern is that our perceptual beliefs wind up being about mind-dependent entities, events or states rather than mind-independent entities. In order to move from beliefs about ideas to beliefs about the world, we would have to make explicit, unverifiable inferences from one to the other. In the following two subsections, I will address the ontological concern regarding real beings and the epistemological worry regarding epistemic intermediaries.

a) *The Ontological Concern*

The oft-quoted Reid refers to Lockean ideas as “a shadowy kind of beings, intermediate between the thought and the object of thought”.<sup>54</sup> However, as Yolton argues<sup>55</sup>, Locke explicitly criticizes Malebranche for characterizing ideas as real ontologically distinct beings. For Malebranche, all things that exist are either substances or modes of substances. Locke admits that while Malebranche does not straightforwardly call ideas substances, this must be what he means when he calls them ‘real spiritual beings’. Locke observes:

The mind cannot produce ideas, says he, because they are “real spiritual beings,” i.e. substances...I shall here only take notice how inconceivable it is to me, that a spiritual, i.e. unextended substance, should represent to the mind an extended figure...Next, supposing I could conceive an unextended substance to represent a figure, or be the idea of a figure, the difficulty still remains to conceive how it is my soul sees it...<sup>56</sup>

Locke says that if instead Malebranche means that an idea is a mode of a spiritual substance, i.e a mode of God, then once again Malebranche “proposes to me something inconceivable”. Locke concludes:

---

<sup>54</sup> Reid, Thomas. *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.: Now Fully Collected with Selections from his Unpublished Letters*, preface, notes and supplementary dissertation by Sir William Hamilton, Bart. (Edinburgh: Maclachlan and Stewart, 1846), 279.

<sup>55</sup> John Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance: From Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 88-98.

<sup>56</sup> Locke, *An Examination*, 219.

So that supposing ideas real spiritual things ever so much, if they are neither substances nor modes, let them be what they will, I am no more instructed in their nature than when I am told they are perceptions, such as I find them.<sup>57</sup>

Yolton concludes that perceptions are events and therefore Lockean ideas are events rather than substances or modes. As I have shown in Chapter 1, Locke's use of 'perceptions' turns out to be almost as ambiguous as his use of 'ideas'. When he does use the term 'perception' he refers not to some mental act, but to objects of perception. Accordingly, Yolton's conclusion that Lockean ideas are events does not follow from this discussion. What does follow however is that Locke rejects Malebranche's characterization of ideas as either substances (i.e. "real beings") or modes. Locke's reticence to accept these characterizations of ideas ought to make us suspicious of claims that his view entails that very assumption.

What then does Locke mean when he refers to ideas as objects? From the text, it isn't clear. Recall that Mackie, Forrai, and to some extent, Chappell, argue that ideas are objects for Locke insofar as they are how things seem to the subject or how they are conceived. As I will show in section 4 below, I do believe they are on to something here. I will argue that Lockean ideas qua sensations are things as they look to us, as they are conceived, or as I put it, things-as-experienced. However, unlike these philosophers, I don't believe that this characterization cuts across all categories of ideas. Many ideas (including those of modes and relations) don't look like anything at all or aren't things that are experienced *per se*. So, while I think that some of what these interpreters say is

---

<sup>57</sup>Ibid, 220.

applicable to sensations (and perhaps even to some stored ideas that are imagistic in nature), many ideas still aren't accounted for by this interpretation. Moreover, I don't believe that Locke's use of the term 'object' indicates that he embraces this characterization of ideas. So, instead of imposing this use of 'object' onto Locke, I suggest that we look to the different ways he himself uses the term in the *Essay*.

While Locke most often uses the term to refer to external objects that are clearly real beings, he uses it a handful of times to mean something closer to 'target', 'aim', or 'objective'. He says that the "proper *Object* and Motive of our Assent be Probability"<sup>58</sup>, the "proper and only *Object* of the Will is some Action of ours"<sup>59</sup>, that "all good be the proper *Object* of Desire"<sup>60</sup> and that revelation is not "the Sole *Object* of Faith"<sup>61</sup>. In each of these passages, the objects in question are not real beings, substances or anything even remotely substance-like. Probability, action, good and revelation just aren't the types of things that one might consider to be real beings in this strong sense. Instead, they are simply the targets of assent, the will, desire and faith. If we interpret Locke's use of the term 'object' with reference to ideas in this same manner, we find that just as probability is the object of assent, action is the object of the will, good is the object of desire and revelation is the object of faith, so too may an idea be the object, aim or target of thought.

---

<sup>58</sup> Locke, 4.20.1

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 2.21.40

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 2.21.43

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 4.18.6

With this view of ‘object’ in mind we can look back at the previously quoted passages and reinterpret them as:

Whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate [*Target*] of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call Idea...2.8.8

*IDEA* is the [*Target*] of thinking. 2.1.1

Since the Mind, in all its Thoughts and Reasonings, hath no other immediate [*Target*] but its own Ideas...it is evident, that our Knowledge is only conversant about them. 4.1.1.

In each of these passages, the substitution I have provided certainly makes sense. These substitutions are also in line with other things that Locke says about ideas. For example, when speaking of ideas of reflection, Locke observes that these ideas come with maturity since they require that the understanding “turns inwards upon itself, reflects on its own operations, and makes them the *object* of its own contemplation”<sup>62</sup>. This doesn’t mean that we turn operations of our minds into real beings; it simply means that we turn our attention to these operations — we make them the target of contemplation.

However, it must be admitted that while the meaning of ‘object’ that I propose is consistent with the text, Locke’s failure to confront the issue head-on leaves it difficult to ascertain definitively whether or not his use of ‘object’ with reference to ideas is analogous to his use of it with reference to probability, action, good and faith. Norris calls this failure a “fundamental defect” of the *Essay* arguing:

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 2.24.2

[Locke] 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.<sup>63</sup>

In response to Norris's criticism Locke retorts:

Perhaps I was lazy and thought the plain historical method I had proposed to myself was enough for me, perhaps I had other business and could afford no more of my time to these speculations, nay possibly I found that discovery beyond my reach.<sup>64</sup>

As such, we are left ill prepared to remark with certainty that Lockean ideas are not real beings.

Fortunately, his treatment of the difference between sensations and stored ideas equips us with a more straightforward strategy in addressing the ontological concern. Actual sensations simply aren't the same kind of things as stored ideas for Locke. So whatever stored ideas turn out to be, I shall show that sensations are not real beings.

### *b) The Epistemological Concern*

There are several reasons for concluding that Locke does not believe that ideas are epistemic intermediaries that obstruct our access to the world. First, we can look at the text to see that even though Locke doesn't explicitly say as much, it is clear that he

---

<sup>63</sup> John Norris, *Christian Blessedness or, Practical Discourses Upon the Beatitudes of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ with Three other Volumes of Practical Discourses* (London: Bible and Crown, 1724), 34.

<sup>64</sup> Locke, Locke's First Reply to John Norris, by Richard Acworth, *Locke Newsletter* 2 (1971), 10



does not see this as a consequence of his position. In fact, he criticizes Malebranche's view for inevitably leading to this veil of perception.

...according to his hypothesis of "seeing all things in God," how can he know that there is any such real being in the world as the sun? Did he ever see the sun? No, but on occasion of the presence of the sun to his eyes, he has seen the idea of the sun in God, which God has exhibited to him; but the sun, because it cannot be united to his soul, he cannot see. How then does he know that there is a sun which he never saw?<sup>65</sup>

Are we to assume that Locke's thinking is so muddled that he is incapable of seeing how his own theory leads to the same unfortunate conclusion as Malebranche's? Although some commentators have certainly come to this conclusion<sup>66</sup>, there are ways to reconcile Locke's rejection of the veil of perception with his object-talk of ideas.

Explicitly stated, Locke appears to hold two seemingly inconsistent views: *a*) ideas are objects, and *b*) ideas are not epistemic intermediaries standing between the world and us, i.e. there aren't any ontological beings that block our access to the world. The supposed inconsistency stems from understanding 'object' as 'real being'. Four possible conclusions are available to us: 1) Locke is indeed being inconsistent. He believes ideas are objects qua real beings, but fails to understand how this conflicts with the view that nothing stands between us and the world, 2) Locke believes that ideas are objects, but he does not believe that 'object' means 'real being'; the type of object he

---

<sup>65</sup> Locke, "An Examination," 434.

<sup>66</sup>For defenses of this conclusion, see Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997), 16-24; Lex Newman, "Locke on Sensitive Knowledge and The Veil of Perception - Four Misconceptions," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2004): 273-300.

takes an idea to be, or the way in which he uses the term, does not entail a veil of perception, 3) *a* is false; Locke does not actually believe that ideas are objects, or 4) Locke does not believe that *all* ideas are objects. Most argue for options 1 or 2. Yolton and a very few followers, opt to argue for 3. As I showed in section *a* above, there is good reason to believe that 2 is true: Locke does not use the term ‘object’ to mean ‘real being’. Instead he uses it to mean something more general like ‘target’. Ultimately however, I believe the best way to square Locke’s object talk of ideas with his insistence that these ideas do not obstruct our access to the world, is to opt for conclusion 4: Locke does not believe that all ideas are objects. There are no epistemic intermediaries standing between the world and us because although actual sensations are ideas for Locke, they are appearances and not mental objects, modes, events or states. The remainder of Chapter 2 will be devoted to demonstrating this.

### *3) Sensations versus Stored Ideas*

Although it is true that Lockean ideas stored in memory and revived periodically are often spoken of as if they are in some sense real beings, I shall argue that Locke’s view of sensations does not suffer from this same ambiguity. Actual sensations are quite different from stored ideas. He lumps both under the same name ‘ideas’ merely to point out that both require minds and are things our minds can ‘be employed about’. Unfortunately, Locke’s reluctance to distinguish these two different types of things by

using different terms for them has led many commentators astray — forcing them to try to characterize both types of ideas in the same way.

David Hume, possibly benefiting from Locke’s error, recognizes the potential problems that conflating the *thought of something* from the *experience of something* may present. Appropriately, he clearly distinguishes one from the other.

Every one will readily allow, that there is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind, when a man feels the pain of excessive heat, or the pleasure of moderate warmth, and when he afterwards recalls to his memory this sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination. These faculties may mimic or copy the perception of the senses; but they never can entirely reach the force and vivacity of the original sentiment.<sup>67</sup>

Hume calls occurrent sensations “impressions”, thereby reserving the term ‘idea’ for those copies recalled through memory. Locke would have been well served by a similar distinction. I shall argue that despite the fact that he doesn’t articulate as much, Locke has something very similar in mind. I suggest that Locke’s occurrent sensations are appearances<sup>68</sup>, that is, things-as-experienced as opposed to things-in-themselves. In Chapter 3, I shall argue that all other Lockean ideas are stored mental items of some sort.

Before detailing what I take these appearances to be, I will show that although Locke doesn’t give ideas qua sensations and ideas qua stored objects distinguishing names, he does acknowledge the difference between them:

---

<sup>67</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 63.

<sup>68</sup> It should be noted that Thomas Lennon offers a variant of this view. He explores the connection between an idea and its object by looking at the genitive case in Latin. He concludes that all Lockean ideas are appearances. Both his conclusion and the reasoning that gets him there differ considerably from mine. Unlike Lennon, I argue that only occurrent perceptions are appearances.

For I ask any one, Whether he be not invincibly conscious to himself of a different Perception, when he looks on the Sun by day, and thinks on it by night; when he actually tastes Wormwood, or smells a Rose, or only thinks on that Savour, or Odour? We as plainly find the difference there is between any *Idea* revived in our Minds by our own Memory, and actually coming into our Minds by our Senses, as we do between any two distinct *Ideas*. 4.2.14

Here he admits that the idea of a table revived from memory is as different from an actual sensation of a table as “any two distinct Ideas”. In other words, these two ideas are as different from one another as the idea of a table is from the idea of a chair.

Locke repeats this sentiment when discussing our knowledge of the existence of things outside of us:

Because *sometimes I find, that I cannot avoid the having those Ideas produced in my Mind*. For though when my Eyes are shut, or Windows fast, I can at Pleasure re-call to my Mind the *Ideas of Light*, or the *Sun*, which former Sensations had lodg'd in my Memory...So that there is a manifest difference, between the *Ideas* laid up in my Memory; (over which, if they were there only, I should have constantly the same power to dispose of them, and lay them by at pleasure) and those which force themselves upon me, and I cannot avoid having. 4.11.5

Furthermore, he claims that the pleasure and pain that often accompanies sensations do not necessarily accompany the stored ideas of those sensations that we revive at another time. We can think about the pain of heat or cold in the absence of external objects causing these sensations in us and it “gives us no disturbance; which, when felt, was very troublesome”. In these passages, and others like them, he makes clear the divide between sensations and stored ideas.

I submit that, for Locke, the disparity between stored ideas and sensations is more than simply a difference in the “force and vivacity” of the ideas, but a difference in kind. A stored memory of a table is an image of a table in the mind.<sup>69</sup> During Locke’s time mental images were often considered mental objects, so it is understandable why many interpreters wish to attribute an object view of stored ideas to Locke. However, the sensation of an actual table is an appearance, not an image, and most certainly, not an object.

#### *4) Ideas qua Appearances*

I call Lockean sensations ‘appearances’. ‘Appearance’ is a good substitute for the more general term ‘idea’ here, because it captures what is different about this particular kind of idea. These ideas are things-as-experienced, that is, things as they appear to a subject. My sensation of a tree is how the tree appears to me.

While the traditional approach is to view Lockean ideas as distinct items from the things of which they are ideas, I suggest that there is no real distinction when it comes to sensations. Instead, there are simply two aspects of, or perspectives on, the same external object. We can think of an external object as it is in itself, that is, as it is apart from experience, or we can think of it as it is experienced. In both cases, there is only one thing.

---

<sup>69</sup> A defense of this reading is forthcoming in Chapter 3.

Lennon likens an appearance to a view.<sup>70</sup> He argues that the view of Paris from the Samaritaine doesn't obstruct the viewer from seeing Paris; the view isn't something in addition to Paris. He clarifies that what one sees from that building is "just Paris". Just as ideas depend on minds, so do views; there are no views without viewers. This is more than simply an analogy. Views are appearances. The view or appearance of Paris is simply Paris regarded from a particular perspective, that is, regarded from a particular spatio-temporal position. Similarly, the appearance of a tree is the tree looked at from one particular vantage point.

This means that these ideas are not mental objects, modes, states, or mental events. In fact, they are not ontologically distinct from the external objects they are appearances of at all; they are external things in the world *as they are perceived*. Accordingly, they are only mental in a minimal sense; they are mental items insofar as appearances require the presence of minds. In order to be an appearance, there has to be someone to appear to. Moreover, appearances contain some features that aren't a product of the external objects alone, but rather are produced because of the interaction between the external objects and the sensory apparatuses and mind of a subject.

This may seem somewhat tautological: one perceives something only insofar as it is perceived. However, we must keep in mind Locke's historical context. Among several of the dominant school philosophies that Locke questions is the belief that the world appears to us as it actually is. His interest in experimental results of natural philosophy, as

---

<sup>70</sup> Lennon, "Through a Glass Darkly," 325. Again, Lennon proposes that all Lockean ideas are appearances. I limit my argument to actual sensations.

well as his belief that Boyle's corpuscularian hypothesis goes the farthest in providing an intelligible explanation of the powers in corporeal substances,<sup>71</sup> leads him to reject this view on the basis that it is epistemically naive. In the *Epistle to the Reader*, Locke claims:

But everyone must not hope to be a Boyle, or a Sydenham... 'tis  
Ambition enough to be employed as an Under-Labourer in clearing  
Ground a little, and removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way  
to Knowledge; which certainly had been very much more advanced in  
the World, if the Endeavors of ingenious and industrious Men had not  
been much cumbred with the learned but frivolous use of uncouth,  
affected, or unintelligible Terms, introduced into the Sciences...<sup>72</sup>

Locke sees it as his task to "clear the ground" a little so that we might have a chance at acquiring real knowledge. He believes that only once we understand how and to what extent our subject-centered (though not necessarily subjectivist) perspective influences how the world appears to us, can we begin to ask questions about the nature of the world.

He uses the term 'idea' to talk about the external world as it is perceived in order to distinguish it from talk about what the world is actually like. He isn't skeptical about whether or not appearances are of external objects. He is only skeptical about the veracity of these appearances. So, while claiming that one perceives something only insofar as it is perceived may seem trite, Locke believes that our failure to recognize this basic fact leads us into confusion and farther away from knowledge.

Vague and insignificant Forms of Speech, and Abuse of Language,  
have so long passed for Mysteries of Science, and hard or misapply'd

---

<sup>71</sup> Locke, 4.3.16

<sup>72</sup>The Epistle to the Reader p.10

Words, with little or no meaning, have, by Prescription, such a Right to be mistaken for deep Learning, and height of Speculation, that it will not be easie to persuade, either those who speak, or those who hear them, that they are but the Covers of Ignorance, and hindrance of true Knowledge.<sup>73</sup>

Henry Allison<sup>74</sup> interprets Kant's phenomena/noumena distinction in a fashion similar to the one I recommend for Locke. Allison suggests that rather than think of Kant's phenomena and noumena as ontologically distinct "worlds", we ought to understand phenomena and noumena as two ways of considering the same object; phenomena are objects as they are experienced, whereas noumena are objects as they are abstracted from experience. Whether or not Allison's suggestion is a satisfactory way of interpreting Kant is well beyond the scope of my project, however it is relevant insofar as I believe Locke has something along these same lines in mind.

It must be admitted however, that this way of reading Locke means that the appearances afforded us will often be misleading. For example, external objects are presented in sensation as having determinate colors. However, the corpuscularian hypothesis dictates that the world is in fact colorless. These two ways of considering objects of perception provide different, and conflicting, conceptions of those objects. However, this is precisely the point Locke wants to make. Locke, like Kant, is interested in how our subject-centered perspective affects how we see the world and how this in turn affects the extent and limits of our knowledge about the world. By distinguishing

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>74</sup> Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1983), 237-254



primary from secondary qualities for example, Locke believes we will be in a better position to discover which features of appearances are veridical and which aren't.

...it will be convenient to distinguish them, as they are ideas or perceptions in our minds; and as they are modifications of matter [qualities] in the bodies that cause such perceptions in us" 2.8.7

Locke follows Boyle in claiming that corpuscles make up the solid parts of material substances. Primary qualities including bulk, figure, number, etc. of the solid parts have the power to produce ideas of bulk, figure, number, etc. in us. As such, these primary qualities really are in objects. The various configurations of these parts (the secondary qualities) have the power to create ideas of colors, sounds, smells, etc. in us. These colors and sounds are not, however in the objects; only the powers to produce these ideas are properly said to be in the objects. By distinguishing primary from secondary qualities, we make clear which aspects of external objects are within our epistemic grasp and therefore allow us to restrict our pursuit of knowledge to those things we can actually know. We can have knowledge of primary qualities in objects insofar as appearances reveal these as they are in objects. Our ideas of secondary qualities, on the other hand, do not reveal anything about external objects other than the fact that external objects have the power to produce these appearances in us.

If the interpretation I propose is correct, the epistemic worries that have plagued Locke's theory of ideas lose some of their force. Recall that he controversially suggests that when we see an external object there is some sense in which we see an idea of the object rather than the object itself. Since most take him to mean that the idea is a

completely distinct ontological object from the external object, many conclude that the occurrent sensation is an intermediary that stands proxy for the external object. On my interpretation however, the veil need not fall. When Locke states that we immediately perceive ideas rather than things, all he really means is that when I see a table, I see it insofar as it is perceived or as it appears to me; I cannot see the table as it is in-itself apart from my perception of it. This is not the same thing as saying that I don't see the table. As such, I attribute a form of direct realism to Locke; we do in fact see the external world despite the fact that some of its features are colored by our unique perspectives. He is not committed to the more radical indirect realist claim that what we see are merely internal representations distinct from the objects they represent.

It is tempting to try to individuate views or appearances in the same way we might individuate material substances — on the basis of qualitative differences alone. The view of Paris from the Samaritaine is qualitatively different and therefore numerically distinct from the view of Paris from the Eiffel Tower. However, individuating views isn't as straightforward as individuating material substances. What one sees from the Samaritaine is Paris. What one sees from the Eiffel Tower is Paris. This same point applies to distinguishing appearances from the things they are appearances of. While the view of Paris may be qualitatively different from Paris itself, this is not sufficient to say that the view and Paris are numerically distinct. The view is

simply Paris as viewed.<sup>75</sup> The identity conditions for views or appearances (while admittedly may be a bit odd) simply aren't the same as they are for material substances.

Recall Ott's notion of "significant sameness"<sup>76</sup>: two signs are the same if they are grounds for inference for the same object. It doesn't matter if the signs are qualitatively similar, it only matters whether they both serve the same epistemic role. I want to say that something similar applies to appearances. Two people having occurrent sensations of the same object can be said to have the same idea insofar as they are both being appeared to by the same object. Even though their differences in spatio-temporal position may result in qualitative differences, the subjects are both relating to the same object. So, while we can certainly discuss the qualitative differences amongst appearances, these differences aren't essential to the epistemic role these ideas play.

### *5) Appearances versus Reality*

The Essay is filled with mentions of this gap between how the world is and how it appears. In fact, Locke rarely speaks about things except as they are perceived. This is what motivates Locke to use the term 'idea' when he is speaking of sensory perceptions; he wants to be clear that he is referring to things in the world as they are experienced. When he does speak of things in themselves, he does so in order to distinguish them from appearances and to discuss their causal influence on those appearances.

---

<sup>75</sup> Hallucinations present a problem for this reading and as such I will address it separately in section 5 below.

<sup>76</sup> See Chapter 1, p. 28.

And it is equally from that appearance to be denominated blue, whether that be that real colour, or only a peculiar texture in it, that causes in us that idea: since the name blue notes properly nothing but that mark of distinction that is in a violet, discernible only by our eyes, whatever it consists in, that being beyond our capacities distinctly to know, and perhaps would be of less use to us, if we had faculties to discern. 2.32.14

Things appear to us in ways that are caused by the interaction between qualities in external objects and our senses. Some features of these appearances appear as they are in the object, whereas others do not. While this gap may be enough to generate some mediation issues, they are not enough for the veil to fall. Although Locke believes that we may remain skeptical about how well the appearances afforded us approximate the things they are appearances of, he does not believe that we should remain skeptical that the external things exist or that we can have some knowledge about those things.

By calling appearances ‘ideas’, Locke calls attention to the fact that we see external objects as they are filtered through our senses. If our sensory apparatuses were different, the appearances, or ideas, yielded by them would be different as well.

But were our senses altered, and made much quicker and acuter, the appearance and outward scheme of things would have quite another face to us... 2.23.12

Perhaps we would only perceive primary qualities and not secondary qualities. Perhaps our senses would be so acute that we would perceive the minute corpuscles that make up substances. Locke isn't exactly sure how the world would look different, only that it would. He notes that in our every day lives, we often forget how much our sensory apparatuses and our own unique perspectives affect how things look to us. As such, it is

easy to speak as if appearances are appearances of external objects as they are in themselves. He admits that he too sometimes makes this mistake.

Thus a snow-ball having the power to produce those ideas in us, as they are in the snow-ball, I call qualities: and as they are sensations or perceptions in our understandings, I call them ideas; which ideas, if I speak of them sometimes, as in the things themselves, I would be understood to mean those qualities in the objects which produce them in us. 2.8.8

Although Locke acknowledges that he too is prone towards this error, he chastises those who consistently confuse the appearance of things with the things as they are in themselves. He believes that many of our disputes stem from this tendency to speak as if we are speaking about things as they are in the world.

Because men would not be thought to talk barely of their own imaginations, but of things as really they are; therefore they often suppose their words to stand for the reality of things. ...it is a perverting the use of words, and brings unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for any thing but those ideas we have in our own minds. 3.2.6

Locke's real concern regarding this "perversion" of language is that it obstructs our pursuit of knowledge.

By this means it comes to pass, that men speaking the proper language of their country...do yet speak very improperly of things themselves; and by their arguing with one another, make but small progress in the discoveries of useful truths, and the knowledge of things, as they are to be found in themselves, and not in our imaginations...3.2.24

By calling sensations 'ideas', Locke hopes to circumvent many of the disputes that are caused by conflating appearances and reality. The mind affects the way the world is revealed to us. Locke believes grasping this fundamental fact about human understanding

is essential if we are to have any success in determining the limits and extent of knowledge. So, while it is important to note that  $x$  and the appearance of  $x$  are not numerically distinct objects, we must be aware that there are qualitative differences between them.

#### 6) *Locke's Pragmatic Argument*

Locke also provides a pragmatic argument for the distinction between how the world is and how it appears to us. He maintains that our inability to see the world, as it is in-itself is actually imperative to our survival. Things appear to us as we require them to appear to us.

He notes that if our sensory apparatuses were different than they are, we would indeed have a truer picture of the world. Microscopes, for example, allow us to get close enough to objects that they no longer appear to possess color. As it turns out, at least unaided, our senses simply aren't equipped to reveal the real constitutions of things. However, Locke argues that while our epistemic limitations may keep us from ever perceiving the world, as it is in-itself, the appearances we are afforded suit our everyday needs.

The infinitely wise Contriver for us, and all things about us, hath fitted our senses, faculties, and organs to the conveniences of life, and the business we have to do here. We are able by our senses to know and distinguish things, and to examine them so far as to apply them to our uses, and several ways to accommodate the exigencies of this life....2.23.12

We need senses that allow us to find food, water, and shelter, ward off enemies, and search for mates. If our senses were altered to the extent that we could hear and see a thousand times better than we do, it would not serve our well-being. For example, a perpetual noise would keep us from sleeping or continually distract us from our thoughts. A person with “microscopial eyes” might be able to view the underlying constitutions of things, but this would be of little help to him in his day-to-day activities. Such eyes “would not serve to conduct him to the Market and Exchange; If he could not see things, he was to avoid, at a convenient distance, nor distinguish things he had to do with”.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, Locke claims, our senses are such that they “lead us to the Knowledge of the Creator, and the Knowledge of our Duty”<sup>78</sup>. As such, our senses, dull and weak as they are, are proper for the tasks required of them.

This pragmatic reply to skeptical concerns has done little to alleviate doubts about whether we can have knowledge of the existence of an external world within a Lockean framework. However, if we adopt the dual notion of Lockean ideas I am recommending, namely *ideas qua stored items* and *ideas qua appearances*, this pragmatic argument has a bit more force. This argument addresses ideas as appearances only. Locke wants to be clear that when we see a tiger, we need to get out of its way. We are in fact seeing an actual tiger. While we may remain skeptical that everything in the appearance of the tiger resembles the tiger as it is in-itself, we need not be skeptical that our experience of the tiger is, in fact, an experience of a tiger. He calls appearances ‘ideas’ only to draw

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 2.23.12

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 2.23.12

attention to the role our subjectivity plays in our sensations of the external world. He is not making a further claim that these appearances are something wholly distinct from the external objects themselves.

Locke tells us that a “perfect, clear and adequate knowledge” of things is beyond a finite being’s comprehension and would be “inconsistent with our Being, or at least well-being in this part of the Universe, which we inhabit”. Just as razor-sharp vision and hearing would impede rather than assist us in our daily pursuits, so would a god’s-eye view of the world in which we weren’t limited by our own subjective perspectives. While God is not constrained by a single perspective, it is the necessary condition of being a finite subject that whatever we perceive we perceive from a particular perspective. Our bodies can only be in one place at a time and therefore so must our perspectives of our surroundings. For example, we cannot simultaneously perceive the top, bottom and sides of an external object. Although such a perspectiveless view of the world might prove useful to a supreme being, it serves no purpose in the lives of finite beings. Mind independent external objects as they are in-themselves enjoy this perspectiveless way of being in the world. Appearances, on the other hand, require a particular perspective.

Accordingly, despite traditional readings of Locke, ideas qua sensations need not bar our access to the external world. On my reading, Locke believes that there is a sense in which we do see the external world — we simply see it through our unique perspectives. In fact, Locke is quite critical of the conclusion that our lives are nothing but “the series and deluding appearances of a long Dream, whereof there is no reality”



causing us to “question the Existence of all Things, or our Knowledge of any thing”<sup>79</sup>. If actual sensations were proxy objects instead of appearances, Locke wouldn’t be justified in this criticism. It is only if we interpret Locke as saying that we do actually see the world (albeit through dull sense organs and from a subjective perspective) that we can give credence to these claims. So, rather than the infamous veil that blocks our view of the external world, I would suggest we modify the metaphor by recognizing that the veil is sheer. What we see through the veil may be a bit distorted owing to our limitations, but we see through it nonetheless.

### *7) Locke’s Semantic Argument*

Consider the analogy of looking into a mirror. When I look in the mirror there is a sense in which I see myself and another sense in which that view is mediated by the glass in which my image is reflected. In our ordinary way of speaking, I say that I see myself – I don’t say that I see an image of myself. Similarly, I don’t say that I see an idea of the Brooklyn Bridge, I simply say that I see the Brooklyn Bridge.

According to Locke, this is because in our ordinary way of speaking, we choose brevity and straightforwardness over precision. Moreover, we often mistakenly believe that our words do in fact pick out things in the world as they are in-themselves. He attributes this to learning the words of things as children while we still have very imperfect notions of things. Through habit, we continue to use words imperfectly since they serve us well enough in our daily lives.

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 4.11.8

By this means it comes to pass, that men speaking the proper language of their country, i.e. according to the grammar-rules of that language, do yet speak very improperly of things themselves; and by their arguing one with another, make but small progress in the discoveries of useful truths, and the knowledge of things, as they are to be found in themselves...3.11.24

So, in our common use of words, we don't distinguish things as they appear from how they are in-themselves. All we register is that something is in our perceptual field -- it doesn't matter in these instances if it is reflected by another surface, caused by insensible particles or is the real underlying constitution of the external object. As it turns out, what we see when we view the external world are appearances that are caused by the interaction between insensible particles and our sensory apparatuses. However, this isn't what Locke thinks we are referring to when we ordinarily say that we see tables and chairs. Only once we do our philosophy, do we distinguish the appearances in our perceptual field, i.e. ideas, from those insensible particles that cause them.

Common use regulates the meaning of words pretty well for common conversation; but nobody having an authority to establish the precise signification of words, nor determine to what ideas any one shall annex them, common use is not sufficient to adjust them to philosophical discourses...3.9.8

Locke calls them 'ideas' in our philosophical discourse, not because he believes that they are wholly distinct ontological objects, but simply to make clear that we are speaking of things in the world as they are experienced by perceivers. He believes this precision is required for our pursuit of other philosophical questions. While he admits that it would be nice if the precision of our philosophical discourse could extend itself to our everyday lives, he doesn't believe that it would serve us well:

This exactness is absolutely necessary in inquires after philosophical knowledge, and in controversies about truth. And though it would be well, too, if it extended itself to common conversation, and the ordinary affairs of life; yet I think that is scarce to be expected. Vulgar notions suit vulgar discourses: and both, though confused enough, yet serve pretty well the market and the wake. 3.11.10

Locke admits that sometimes he too is guilty of speaking as if these appearances reveal the world as it actually is claiming “if, I speak of [ideas] sometimes, as in the things themselves, I would be understood to mean those qualities in the objects which produce them in us”<sup>80</sup>. Unless he is specifically discussing a subject matter that dictates this philosophical distinction, he too will lapse into the convenient common way of speaking for the sake of brevity and to avoid the clumsy way of speaking that talk of ideas qua appearances requires.

#### 8) *Appearances of Non-Existent Objects*

A possible counter-argument to reading Lockean sensations as appearances is the fact that we sometimes have appearances of non-existent objects — hallucinations being the most obvious examples. If Lockean appearances are, as I suggest, simply external objects as perceived, then what are we to make of sensible ideas had in the absence of any external object?

Unfortunately (and surprisingly), Locke does not address this issue; he makes no direct mention of the problem of hallucination anywhere in the *Essay*. The only times he comes close to approaching the subject is when he discusses Descartes’s dream argument.

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 2.8.8

Of course, the dream argument addresses an all-encompassing complete hallucination rather than the more believable cases of particular instances of hallucination. However, since it is the only text that provides us with any hint about how Locke might want to deal with this issue, it is worth pursuing.

When addressing the dream argument Locke appears to deny the very possibility of true hallucination. He offers only flippant replies to anyone who might suggest otherwise. When faced with those who question whether we can “certainly infer the existence of any thing without us” that corresponds to ideas in our minds, he responds by differentiating between stored ideas, which do not give us any such assurance, and appearances, which do.

But yet here, I think, we are provided with an Evidence, that puts us past doubting: For I ask any one, Whether he be not invincibly conscious to himself of a different Perception, when he looks on the Sun by day, and thinks on it by night; when he actually tastes Wormwood, or smells a Rose, or only thinks on that Savor, or Odour? We as plainly find the difference there is between an *Idea* revived in our Minds by our own Memory, and actually coming in our Minds by our Senses, as we do between any two distinct *Ideas*. If any one say a Dream may do the same thing, and all these *Ideas* may be produced in us, without any external Objects, he may please to dream that I make him this Answer: 1. That ‘tis no great matter, whether I remove this Scruple, or no: Where all is but Dream, Reasoning and Arguments are of no use, Truth and Knowledge nothing. 2. That I believe he will allow a very manifest difference between dreaming of being in the fire, and being actually in it. 4.2.14

Locke claims here that although there is a notable difference between actually sensing an external object and reviving the idea of that object later from memory, reviving an idea

from memory is in no way analogous to a dream state. His opponent may wish to say that they are comparable insofar as both situations involve having ideas without the presence of an external object. Locke answers first by mocking the suggestion and then by providing an example in which one would have no doubt about whether he were experiencing pain or merely dreaming of it. Locke doesn't appear to take the objection seriously. Later, in the same vein, he pokes fun at those who suggest that we can have sensations of what doesn't exist.

But yet, if after all this, any one will be so sceptical as to distrust his Senses, and to affirm, that all we see and hear, feel and taste, think and do, during our whole Being, is but the series and deluding appearances of a long Dream, whereof there is no reality; and therefore will question the Existence of all Things, or our Knowledge of any thing; I must desire him to consider, that if all be a Dream, that he doth but dream that he makes the Question; and so it is not much matter that a waking Man should answer him. But yet, if he pleases, he may dream that I make him this answer, That *the certainty of Things existing in rerum Natura*, when we have *the testimony of our Senses* for it, is not only *as great* as our frame can attain to, but *as our Condition needs*. 4.11.8

Unfortunately this is as close to an answer to the problem of hallucination as Locke gives. He seems to reject the possibility of the dream scenario altogether but says, for those who might find it plausible, he will simply say that the testimony of our senses that the external world exists is all the certainty we need and can attain. Of course, particular instances of hallucination are far more plausible than the dream scenario, but he doesn't address this possibility.

As I see it, there are two options left to Locke. If he does in fact deny the possibility of true hallucination altogether, he may be able to explain away seeming hallucinations as instances of mere illusion. If, on the other hand, he wants to admit the possibility of true hallucination, he can claim that such hallucinations are not actually sensations.

In the first case, he might say that there are cases in which we see, hear, smell, taste, or feel something that exists, but that the appearance of that object, due to internal abnormalities or extreme environmental obstacles, renders a misperception of that appearance. For example, someone might think that they hear their name being called when the radio is playing, or think that they see their deceased grandmother standing in the folds of their drapery. In this way, the sensation is still an appearance; it is simply an appearance that would seem otherwise if certain abnormal conditions were not present. The thing appearing is distorted in some way well beyond what we can expect under normal conditions. It isn't the case that we are perceiving something without any external stimuli whatsoever causing that appearance. We can correct these types of illusions by changing the abnormal conditions. For example, we can turn down the radio to see if someone is in fact calling our name, or we can turn on the over head light to verify that our deceased grandmother is not in fact haunting our draperies.

If instead, Locke chooses to admit the possibility of true hallucination he would have to claim that they aren't sensations at all. This would then require him to give some other separate account of what they are. Perhaps they are a distinct category of ideas

caused by illness, sleep deprivation, neurological disorders, psychosis or medication.

They seem like sensations to the subject, but since there are no external stimuli causing these perceptions, they are not true sensations. They are ideas caused by abnormal internal stimuli. They present themselves as appearances, but instead they are some sort of stored ideas.

In either case, Locke can respond to the problem of hallucination in a way that is consistent with my direct realist reading of him. Hallucinations are anomalies that can either be explained away as illusions or accounted for as stored ideas. Either of these options are available to Locke, though it isn't clear which one he might adopt. Of course, any theory of Lockean ideas will need to address the complication that hallucinations present. Lockean sensations interpreted as proxy objects are supposed to be objects that are caused by external stimuli. An account of hallucinations will have to explain how and why there are proxy objects that aren't actually proxies for anything. Since my account better accords with the overall text, avoids other potential pitfalls and fares no worse than others when attempting to account for hallucinations, it remains preferable.

### 9) *Conclusion*

Locke uses the word 'idea' as an umbrella term to stand for anything that we can think on. There are two major categories of ideas that fall under this umbrella: our sensations and our stored ideas. I have proposed that occurrent sensations are best described as 'appearances'. When I see an external object I am in fact experiencing the

object, I am simply doing so through my subjective viewpoint. The resulting appearance is an idea insofar as it is the object as it appears to me. My inability to divorce myself from this viewpoint prevents me from experiencing external objects as they are in themselves, but this is not enough to support an indirect realist reading of Locke.

He uses the term 'idea' simply to distinguish things as experienced from things as they are in the world apart from our experiences of them. Our stored ideas, on the other hand, are mental items of another sort altogether. The source, means of acquisition, type of thing being represented and way in which it represents are all factors that determine what kind of mental item any particular stored idea is. Chapter 3 will be dedicated to enumerating and analyzing these different sorts of ideas.



### CHAPTER 3: LOCKEAN STORED IDEAS

#### *1) Introduction*

I have shown that while Locke calls anything that “the Mind can be employ’d about in thinking” an idea, he believes that there are various kinds of ideas that fit under this umbrella term. In order to more clearly establish this multiplicity, I have suggested delineating Lockean ideas into several categories according to parameters that Locke himself utilizes. For example, in Chapter 2, I show that Locke recognizes a fundamental difference between sensations and stored ideas. Sensations, which I have labeled ‘appearances’, are external objects as they are experienced. Stored ideas, on the other hand, are ideas had in the absence of the external objects that produce them and ideas produced through the manipulation of ideas the mind already has. As I shall show in this chapter, stored ideas do not enjoy the same homogeneity as appearances, so it isn’t appropriate to group them under the same name or category. Accordingly, I will reveal the various parameters Locke uses to distinguish several different kinds of stored ideas. My concern is not to show the philosophical plausibility of these distinctions, but rather to show that Locke does in fact make them. The failure of the non-deflationary views discussed in Chapter 1 to account for these fundamental distinctions is what renders them unsatisfactory.

Lockean stored ideas vary in many ways. Their sources, means of acquisition, and the efficacy of their representations are all factors that affect their nature. They vary by

content insofar as there are simple ideas of sensation, reflection, and combinations of both sensation and reflection, complex ideas of substances, ideas of modes, and ideas of relations. All of these ideas are either simple or complex, general or particular, real or fantastical, true or false, adequate or inadequate, clear or obscure, and distinct or confused. Locke's analysis of these various factors yields different types of ideas. It is my contention that many of these differences correspond to real, substantive differences in the nature of the ideas themselves. Despite traditional approaches to Locke's theory of ideas then, Locke does not believe that all stored ideas are the same kind of thing.

In this chapter I will lay out Locke's taxonomy of stored ideas and provide a nomenclature for the various kinds of ideas revealed in the process. In doing so, I hope to show that despite the accusations of his most fervent critics, Locke is not being carelessly ambiguous with his use of 'idea'; there is a coherent worked-out theory of ideas underlying his multiple uses of the term. Since his categorization of stored ideas into different kinds relies so heavily on the various factors described above, a brief survey of some of these factors is required before undertaking this project.

## *2) The Sources and Means of Acquisition of Stored Ideas*

First, all Lockean ideas are either simple or complex. Simple ideas are distinct and uncompounded and therefore, cannot be broken down further into other ideas. For example, *red*, *sweet*, and *square*, are all simple ideas. The idea of a snowball however, is complex — it can be broken down into smaller parts like *white*, *cold* and *round*. Once the

mind has acquired a bounty of simple ideas, it can “repeat, compare, and unite them even to an almost infinite Variety, and so can make at Pleasure new complex *Ideas*”<sup>81</sup>. It is impossible however, to create or invent a new simple idea.

The ultimate source of all Lockean ideas is the external world. Ideas of objects like animals, tables and trees as well as ideas of color, solidity, temperature, smell and sound are all sourced from the external world. Once the mind is supplied with a store of ideas to think on, we can reflect on the workings of our own mind. As Locke puts it: “The other Fountain, from which Experience furnisheth the Understanding with Ideas, is the Perception of the Operations of our own Minds within us, as it is employ’d about the Ideas it has got”<sup>82</sup>. Through reflection and the manipulation of the ideas the mind already contains, we acquire new ideas. Although the fodder for these new ideas is traceable back to the external world, the ideas themselves come from minds. Ideas like *perception*, *thought*, *small*, *time*, *four* and *obligation* are all ideas that are sourced from minds.

These two sources of ideas dictate the three means of acquisition of Lockean ideas: sensation, reflection, and the exercise of some act of mind on ideas the mind already possesses. All simple ideas are acquired directly from sensation or reflection whereas complex ideas require the exercise of a mental action in addition to sensation or reflection or are acquired from a mental action alone.

Sensation is the observation of external, sensible objects and reflection is the observation of the internal operations of our minds. Locke likens reflection to sensation

---

<sup>81</sup> Locke, 2.3.1

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 2.1.4

claiming “..though it be not Sense, as having nothing to do with external Objects; yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be call’d internal Sense”<sup>83</sup>. So, just as sensations of external objects are appearances of those objects (i.e objects as experienced), so reflections of our own mental operations are appearances of those operations (operations as experienced). Simple ideas include ideas of color, smell, shape, temperature, extension, perceiving, willing, pleasure, pain, power, and unity. A simple idea is “uncompounded”, that is, it “contains in it nothing but one uniform Appearance, or Conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different ideas”<sup>84</sup>. There is no way to acquire any of these ideas without firsthand experience of their causes. A person who has never tasted pineapple can no more imagine the taste than a blind man can imagine the color blue. I will call sensations and occurrent reflections ‘simple appearances’ and will reserve the term ‘simple idea’ to pick out their stored counterparts. Locke refers to both as simple ideas, but as I have shown in Chapter 2, he speaks about them differently in context.

In addition to sensation and reflection, there are three mental acts that we can perform in order to acquire new complex ideas. Complex ideas of substances are acquired through the combination of sensation and the mental act of compounding several ideas into one complex idea. So if I think of a snowball as one distinct object, I am combining the ideas *white*, *round* and *cold* into one idea, namely *snowball*. I will call the actual

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 2.1.4

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 2.2.1

sensation of a snowball a ‘complex appearance’ in order to distinguish it from its stored counterpart.

I can also invent new complex ideas by combining ideas my mind already contains in unique ways. Fictional ideas like *unicorn* and *Santa Claus* are created through this act of composition, as are ideas of modes like *justice*, *revenge*, and *companionship*. The possible combinations are infinite. Through the act of comparison, the mind lays two or more ideas next to one another and looks for some relation between them. Our ideas of relations like *taller*, *father*, and *after* are all created in this manner.

We acquire general ideas through a third mental act, namely abstraction. This mental act yields both simple and complex ideas. Locke describes abstraction in this way:

[T]he Mind makes the particular Ideas, received from particular Objects, to become general; which is done 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. This is called ABSTRACTION, whereby Ideas taken from particular Beings, become general Representatives of all of the same kind...E 2.11.9

Through abstraction we can abstract a component from a complex idea and concentrate only on that simple idea. For example, we can abstract *whiteness* from a snowball. Then, when we observe instances of chalk, milk, or swans, we will be able to recognize that these experiences all share the color white in common. Without this ability, our thoughts would be limited to immediate particulars. Abstraction also occurs when we abstract away those things that are peculiar to individual complex ideas and retain only what is common to

them all. For example, we can consider the idea *human* by leaving out the peculiarities of particular humans. Each of these two forms of abstraction provides us with general ideas that are applicable to many distinct individual things. The first form produces a simple idea, whereas the second produces a complex idea.

From this discussion we can see that we have simple ideas, complex ideas of substances (both real and fictional), ideas of modes, ideas of relations and abstract ideas. I will look at each of these categories in turn to discover the parameters Locke uses to distinguish them as well as the kinds of ideas these parameters yield.

### *3) Simple Ideas*

When I hold a snowball in my hand, I can see that it is round and white and I can feel that it is cold and hard. All of these simple appearances are caused by powers or qualities in the snowball. I can distinguish each of the simple appearances that make up the appearance of a snowball and store them in my mind for future use. I do this by making duplicates or replicas of the original simple appearances. They are replicas because they resemble their originals. Since simple appearances are all sensations, replicas of these appearances that are stored in the mind are images in the Hobbesian sense described in Chapter 1. For example, the idea of white taken from the appearance of a snowball is a mental picture of whiteness; the idea of cold is a copy of the feeling of cold.

Locke calls these stored ideas of sensations ‘ectypes’ or ‘copies’. He characterizes them as copies, not only because they are images, but also because they are real ideas. Only real ideas can be copies of things really existing; fantastical ideas are inventions rather than copies. Locke defines real ideas as those that “have a Foundation in Nature” or “have a Conformity with the real Being, and Existence of Things, or with their Archetypes”.<sup>85</sup> Simple appearances conform to real external existences insofar as they are caused by real qualities in external objects. Stored ideas of sensations conform to real external existences insofar as they are copies of appearances of those external objects. These copies could not have been produced in us if there weren’t powers in the external objects to produce their appearances.

Our simple *Ideas*, being barely such Perceptions, as God has fitted us to receive... their Truth consists in nothing else, but in such Appearances, as are produced in us, and must be suitable to those Powers, he has placed in external Objects, or else they could not be produced in us...2.32.14

Some simple ideas of sensation resemble their causes while others do not. For example, our idea *round* may be caused by a primary quality in the snowball by resembling it. The color white, on the other hand, does not resemble anything in the snowball. It is caused by secondary qualities, i.e. a particular configuration of primary qualities, in the object.

...whether they be only constant Effects, or else exact Resemblances of something in the things themselves: the reality lying in that steady correspondence, [ideas] have with the distinct Constitutions of real Beings. 2.30.2

---

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 2.30.1

On Locke's view, it doesn't matter if a simple idea of sensation corresponds to the thing to which it is tacitly referred by being a "constant effect" or by being an "exact resemblance" — what is important is that this correspondence is steady.

Besides ideas of sensation, Locke also characterizes our other stored simple ideas (namely those of reflection and those of both sensation and reflection) as copies or ectypes. Perception, he tells us, is something that we experience anytime we see, hear, feel or think. We can only grasp the idea *perception* by reflecting on what goes on in our own minds. He maintains "And if he does not reflect, all the Words in the World, cannot make him have any notion of it"<sup>86</sup>. The key here is that we acquire the idea *perception* through the experience of reflection just as we acquire the idea *white* through the experience of sensation. On his view, one can no more define 'perception' than one can define 'white'. Certainly we can give scientific explanations for each, but the experience of seeing white is something that one must encounter oneself in order to grasp the idea.

Ideas of pleasure and pain accompany almost every idea we have of either sensation or reflection. This is because good and bad feelings arise from ideas caused by both external stimuli and our own minds. We also acquire our ideas of the various passions from these feelings of pleasure and pain. Locke calls these ideas "internal sensations" since it is the experience of a particular passion or emotion that gives us the idea of that passion — just as the experience of feeling something warm gives us the idea warmth.

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 2.9.1



Note that like simple ideas of sensations, none of these other simple ideas can be acquired through definitions or by compounding or comparing various ideas we already have. We can only acquire simple ideas through experience — whether through sensation, reflection or a combination of both. Our stored ideas of these appearances are all copies of those experiences. Accordingly, all simple ideas are copies or ectypes. If one never experiences the smell of sulfur, the sound of a bird singing, the feeling of asserting one's will, or the delight of pleasure, he or she will be unable to acquire these various simple ideas. 'Ectypes' in my proposed taxonomy then, are stored real ideas that are copies, i.e. images, of original experiences.

#### 4) *Complex Ideas of Substances*

When perceiving the external world, the mind recognizes that many appearances produced by primary and secondary qualities constantly seem to occur together. We assume therefore, that there must be something that underlies these appearances supporting or holding them all together. This underlying thing we call a substance.

The idea then we have, to which we give the general name Substance, being nothing but the supposed, but unknown support of those Qualities we find existing, which, we imagine, cannot subsist, *sine re substante*, without something to support them, we call that Support *Substantia*; which, according to the true import of the Word, is in plain English, *standing under*, or *upholding*. 2.23.2

We don't have sensations of this unknown support or substance, so we have no real conception of what this thing is like. We can't get beyond the appearances of things; we

simply infer its existence in an attempt to explain why these simple appearances always coincide. To verify this inference we would be required to shed our subjective perspectives; this is simply beyond our epistemic limits.

For our Senses failing us, in the discovery of the Bulk, Texture, and Figure of the minute parts of Bodies, on which their real Constitutions and Differences depend, we are fain to make use of their secondary Qualities, as the characteristical Notes and Marks, whereby to frame Ideas of them in our Minds, and distinguish them one from another.

2.23.8

Locke suggests that since we can't grasp more than an "obscure and relative idea of substance in general," we ought to look at our ideas of particular sorts of substances instead. Once we do this, he argues, we shall find that these ideas are nothing but collections of simple ideas that are constantly conjoined.

Thus we come to have the ideas of a man, horse, gold, water, etc., of which substances, whether any one has any other clear idea, farther than of certain simple ideas co-existing together, I appeal to every man's own experience. 2.23.3

For example, when I perceive a snowball, I sense a collection of several appearances co-existing. These include, but are not limited to, the simple appearances *white*, *cold*, and *round*. While I can consider any of these simple appearances in isolation, I can also consider the appearance of the snowball as a whole — with all of its various simple appearances inhering together. It is through sensation and the mental act of compounding multiple simple appearances together that we arrive at our complex appearances of substances.

Some collections of simple appearances are more complex than others. A lion, for example, has a more diverse collection of simple appearances than does a snowball. It has so many different simple appearances in fact, that even the best perceivers will be unable to grasp all of them. Instead, each perceiver concentrates on a specific handful of features that he or she finds most salient. This specific collection makes up the complex appearance and enables the perceiver to distinguish lions from other substances.

Like simple appearances, we store copies of these complex appearances in our minds for future use. Our firsthand sensations of substances are collections of visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory experiences. The stored ideas we have of them are copies of these collections. Accordingly, like simple ideas of sensation, these stored ideas of substances are ectypes or copies (and therefore images) of appearances.

Like simple ideas, complex ideas of substances tacitly refer to real existences. When we think of our ideas of substances as collections of simple ideas occurring together in one substance, our ideas are real. Qualities in external objects produce appearances of substances in us, and our stored ideas of these substances are copies of these appearances. If however, we think of our ideas of substances as referring to real essences or things in the world as they really are, then these ideas are not real. It matters what we intend for our ideas to refer to.

Our complex ideas of substance being made, all of them, in reference to things existing without us, and intended to be representations of substances, as they really are, are no farther real, than as are such combinations of simple ideas, as are really united, and co-exist in things without us. 2.30.5

Despite the fact that simple ideas and ideas of substances are both ectypes, there is an important difference between them. We can only acquire simple ideas through firsthand experience. For example, in order to acquire the idea *soft* I must actually feel something soft. Ideas of substances do not have this requirement; I have the ideas *platypus*, *George Washington*, and *dinosaur* despite the fact that I've never directly encountered any of these substances. The problem presents itself then: How can all of our ideas of substances be copies of appearances if some of these ideas refer to things we have never actually experienced? Or better yet, how can they be copies of appearances of substances that have long since ceased to exist? We can find the suggestion of an answer to this problem when Locke distinguishes real ideas from fantastical ideas.

On the contrary, those are fantastical, which are made up of such collections of simple ideas as were really never united, never were found together in any substance. Whether such substances as these can possibly exist, or no, it is probable we do not know; but be that as it will, these ideas of substances being made conformable to no pattern existing, that we now, and consisting of such collections of ideas as no substance ever showed as united together, they ought to pass with us for barely imaginary...2.30.5

Note the language Locke uses when describing ideas that aren't real: "as were never united," "never were found together in any substance," and "as no substance ever showed as united together". Instead of simply claiming that fantastical ideas are collections of simple ideas that are not united in any actual substance, he is clear that they were never so united. This suggests that in order for an idea to be real, the idea must conform to a

substance that has existed at some point, regardless of whether or not we've personally had firsthand experience of it.

Although Locke doesn't fill in the details, we can imagine an explanation of how these ideas are connected to their targets involving some sort of causal chain between the substance and the idea. For example, I may have my idea of a platypus through drawings, photographs or descriptions of that animal. Even though I may not have seen one firsthand, there is a causal chain between my idea and the animal itself. That causal chain will include those who have had such experiences (even if it is only through reading a description of the animal in a book). Since all ideas of substances are collections of simple ideas, I need only to have had firsthand experiences of the simple ideas in the collection in order to be able to grasp the idea of the platypus.

Similarly, I came to have my idea *George Washington* because it has been passed down through generations. Since the collection of simple ideas that make up my idea *George Washington* were in fact united in a being that once existed, and I can grasp the simple ideas that make up this complex idea, my idea of him is real; my idea conforms to a collection of simple ideas that really were united in a substance. My idea of a dinosaur is made up of a collection of constantly conjoined simple ideas that were discovered by scientists through the excavation of fossils. Again, Locke does not address this issue directly, but we can imagine how a casual explanation might go. Some ideas of substances are farther removed from their originals than others. Regardless of how long the causal chain is between my idea of a substance and the actual substance, these ideas

are real insofar as they conform to a collection of simple ideas that are, or were, actually united in nature.

Despite the fact that all ideas of substances are collections of simple ideas, they are not all on a level playing field. Ideas like *George Washington* and *dinosaur* may be more obscure than those we acquire through direct contact. Locke describes the difference between clear and obscure ideas by addressing our simple ideas.

...our *simple Ideas* are *clear*, when they are such as the Objects themselves, from whence they were taken, did or might, in a well-ordered Sensation or Perception, present them. 2.29.1

Both simple and complex appearances are usually clear because during an actual perception of an external object we are in the best position to observe minute details.

When our memories retain copies of these appearances and are able to produce these stored ideas at will in a similar fashion, they too are considered clear. On the other hand, when these ideas aren't as vivid or are "faded or tarnished by Time", they are obscure.

Our ideas of substances, being collections of simple ideas, are clear or obscure depending on how clear or obscure those collections are. Since we never had the opportunity to have firsthand experience of the appearances of George Washington and dinosaurs, the stored ideas we have of them may be far less clear than those ideas acquired through firsthand contact.

Ideas of substances, whether acquired through first or secondhand contact, are always inadequate. Simple ideas, on the other hand, are always adequate. Locke begins the chapter on adequacy by differentiating adequate from inadequate ideas:

Those I call Adequate, which *perfectly represent* those Archetypes, which the Mind supposes them taken from; which it intends them to stand for, and to which it refers them. Inadequate Ideas are such, which are but a partial, or incomplete representation of those Archetypes to which they are referred. 2.31.1 (italics mine)

He claims that simple appearances are always adequate because they are always complete. There is nothing that can be added to the sensation of ‘red’ that will supply one with a better grasp of that idea. This is because simple appearances are nothing but the effects of powers in external objects.

Because being nothing but the effects of certain Powers in Things, fitted and ordained by GOD to produce such Sensations in us, they cannot but be correspondent, and adequate to those Powers. 2.31.2

The copies of these appearances in the mind, namely the stored simple ideas, are also adequate. They are exact complete copies.

Complex appearances, on the other hand, are always inadequate. These collections of simple appearances are partial or incomplete. We cannot perceive every feature of an external object. We can always be supplied with a larger collection of appearances in order to get a better grasp of the object. Stored ideas of substances are copies of complex appearances, but they are not perfect copies; they often have even fewer features than their original appearances. Accordingly, they too are inadequate.

Sometimes they are only design’d to be Pictures and Representations in the Mind, of Things that do exist, by Ideas of those qualities that are discoverable in them... [yet] these Copies of those Originals, and Archetypes are imperfect and inadequate. 2.31.6

Our mental images of substances are not perfect copies because they do not perfectly resemble the original appearances or archetypes. This resemblance is imperfect because our internal images can't possibly include all of the properties the original appearances included. He continues:

The complex Ideas of Substance are Ectypes, Copies too; but not perfect ones, not adequate: which is very evident to the Mind, in that it plainly perceives, that whatever Collection of simple Ideas it makes of any Substance that exists, it cannot be sure, that it exactly answers all that are in that Substance. 2.31.13

There is one last important thing to note about ideas of substances. Both complex appearances and their stored counterparts are caused by real external existences (regardless of how far we are removed from these existences); various primary and secondary qualities in external objects produce these ideas in us. Accordingly, these complex ideas of substances are real. Ideas of unicorns and centaurs, on the other hand, are fantastical. They do not have any real archetypes in nature, so they cannot be copies of external objects. Even though some liberty is taken when creating complex ideas of substances (to the extent that we choose which salient features are included), we do not include any simple ideas in these collections that are not actually united in their original appearances. Fantastical ideas, on the other hand, are collections of simple ideas that we put together at will. Since these collections are not copies of anything really existing (or anything that has ever existed), they are not ectypes. Therefore, it remains to be shown what kind of idea these substances are. I will pursue this question later in the chapter.



### 5) *Ideas of Modes and Relations*

Complex ideas can be ideas of substances (both real and fictional), modes, or relations. Complex real ideas of substances are ectypes. Ideas of modes and relations, on the other hand, are not. This is because of the difference in the source and means of acquisition between real ideas of substances and ideas of modes and relations. Complex real ideas of substances are acquired through the combination of the sensation of external existences and the mental act of composition. Ideas of modes and relations, on the other hand, are constituted via some mental action alone. These ideas are pure inventions, whereas real ideas of substances are caused by independent external existences.

Ideas of modes are general ideas that are invented by minds through the act of composition; they are not meant to be copies of anything existing. No matter how complex these ideas of modes become through various acts of compounding, they are not to be understood as being capable of subsisting on their own; they are dependent on substances. Ideas of simple modes are combinations of the same simple ideas, whereas ideas of mixed modes are combinations of different kinds of simple ideas. For example, *unit* is a simple idea. If we repeat this idea again, we get the idea of the simple mode *two*. If we repeat it again, we get the idea *three*, and so on. *Envy*, on the other hand, is an idea of a mixed mode because it is composed of different kinds of ideas. It is *a feeling of resentment accompanied by the desire to have a quality or possession belonging to someone else*.

A triangle is also a mixed mode. As Locke states, it is an idea of something which...

must be neither Oblique, nor Rectangle, neither Equilateral, Equicrural, nor Scalenon; but all and none of these at once. In effect, it is something imperfect, that cannot exist; an *Idea* wherein some parts of several different and inconsistent *Ideas* are put together. 4.7.9

Unlike a simple idea or an idea of a substance, this idea of a triangle cannot be a mental image (Hobbesian or otherwise). A particular mental image of a triangle doesn't capture the notion that it must stand for "all and none of these at once". Moreover, unlike a simple idea or an idea of a substance, a triangle is not a copy of an appearance of any real existing thing. Accordingly, modes are not ectypes; they are clearly stipulated voluntary collections of simple ideas.

No archetypes exist in nature that match the contrived combinations of modes. Rather, modes are themselves archetypes created by minds. *Obligation*, *beauty*, and *theft* are all examples of modes.

To know whether his Idea of *Adultery*, or *Incest*, be right, will a Man seek it any where amongst Things existing? Or is it true, because any one has been Witness to such an Action? No: but it suffices here, that Men have put together such a Collection, into one complex *Idea*, that makes the *Archetype* and specifick *Idea*, whether ever any such action were committed *in rerum natura*, or no. 3.5.3

The importance a particular culture places on certain values, practices and behaviors will determine which modes its subjects create. In order to specify what is contained in a particular idea of a mode, the subject must define those parameters. For example,

hypocrisy is *the practice of purporting to adopt a moral standard or belief that is inconsistent with one's own behavior*. This idea does not contain any ideas other than those stipulated by the subject. For this reason, there is nothing else that can be added to this definition to make the idea *hypocrisy* more clear; it contains everything required of it, while at the same time precluding extraneous information.

Locke's triangle example is even more instructive. A triangle is *a plane closed figure with three straight sides and three angles*. This definition leaves open the full range of possible types of triangles, whereas a mental image does not. A mental image may accompany the idea, but it can't possibly encapsulate everything Locke insists an idea of a triangle must. At the same time, this definition limits the scope of triangles appropriately; nothing that is not a triangle will be included.

Additionally, consider Locke's answer to Descartes' chiliagon puzzle. Locke points out we have a clear idea of a chiliagon despite the fact that we can't conjure up a distinct mental picture of it. This is because the idea of a chiliagon is a definition, not an image. We can fully grasp the notion of *a 1,000-sided closed figure*, but a mental image of such a shape would be indeterminate; it would be indistinguishable from a 999-sided closed figure. Unlike Descartes' account, these ideas are not intellectual ideas acquired via a pure intellect, but rather are definitions that include combining various ideas we already have. Recall from Chapter 1<sup>87</sup> that these ideas are not simply collections of simple ideas but rather are something that "one is able to make within itself, without the

---

<sup>87</sup> Chapter 1, p.18.

help of any extrinsically object, or any foreign suggestion” and are something “not contained in the real existence of things, but something extraneous and superinduced”.

This leads us to ideas of numbers. As mentioned in Chapter 1, we arrive at these simple modes by adding units to the simple idea *unit*. The simple mode ‘679’ is not exactly a definition then. It is more like a mark or sign. While we understand that continuing to add 1 to a unit generates ‘679’, we don’t actually have to endure the process of counting that high in order to grasp the idea 679 – nor do we need to try to form a mental picture of 679 things. We simply utilize the mental mark of the numeral itself, or some other such conventional sign. Other ideas of measurement of space and time may also be signs rather than definitions. Definitions and signs are importantly similar insofar as they are both archetypes that are stipulated by minds and they both fully capture the essence of their objects.

Relations are treated similarly. Like modes, relations aren’t things that exist in the world — we impose them on the world. We do not arrive at them through sensation or reflection of what exists in the world or in the mind. Instead, we invent these ideas through a mental action. We do so by comparing ideas we already have. *Father*, *tall*, *far*, *under*, and *friend* are all examples of relations. They are arbitrary insofar as there is nothing in nature that dictates that we understand things in these ways. By defining these relations, we create these kinds of ideas.

Locke distinguishes the way we constitute ideas of modes and relations from the way we acquire our ideas of substances:

For [ideas of modes and relations] he puts *Ideas* together, only by his Imagination, not taken from the Existence of any thing; and to them he gave Names to denominate all Things that should happen to agree to those his abstract *Ideas*, without considering whether any such thing did exist or no: the Standard there was of his own making. But in the forming his *Idea* of this new Substance, he takes the quite contrary Course; here he has a Standard made by Nature, and therefore being to represent that to himself, by the *Idea* he has of it, even when it is absent, he puts no simple *Idea* into his complex one, but what he has the Perception of from the thing itself. He takes Care that his *Idea* be conformable to this *Archetype* and intends the Name should stand for an *Idea* so conformable. 3.6.46

This difference between ideas of substances and those of modes and relations results in a difference of kind. Ideas of real substances are copies of appearances. These copies are images because of the phenomenal nature of the things (namely appearances) they are copies of. Ideas of modes and relations, on the other hand, are definitions or signs that we create.

...Complex ideas of Modes and Relations, are Originals, and Archetypes; are not Copies, nor made after the Pattern of any real Existence, to which the Mind intends them to be conformable, and exactly to answer. 2.31.14

Since ideas of modes and relations are archetypes that we invent rather than copies of real existences, I will distinguish them from ectypes by calling them ‘archetypes’. In some cases, ideas of modes and relations have mental images that accompany them, however it is only after we come to understand the definition of the mode or relation that we can form an appropriate mental image to stand for it.

Locke maintains that unlike simple ideas and ideas of real substances, ideas of modes and relations do not tacitly refer to any real outside existences; we do not intend them to refer to anything other than themselves. Since these ideas are invented by minds, there is nothing beyond themselves for them to correspond to. Like simple ideas and real ideas of substances however, ideas of modes and relations are real ideas. They do not acquire this reality by being caused by and referred to real external existences. An idea of a mode or relation is real simply because it is both archetype and idea — the idea conforms to its archetype because it is identical to it. As Locke tells us, these ideas have “no other reality, but what they have in the Minds of Men”. They don’t need to conform to anything else. Instead, there needs only to be “a possibility of existing conformable to them”.

For example, if I frame an idea of a relation of standing exactly one foot to the left of someone, I don’t need to worry about whether or not this relation actually holds somewhere in the world.<sup>88</sup> The fact that it is possible to exemplify this idea is enough to verify that my idea is real. If, on the other hand, someone tells me that he has an idea of a round square, I have every reason to doubt him. Such a mode is impossible insofar as it is made up of inconsistent ideas. As long as ideas of modes and relations are consistent and have the possibility of existing, Locke maintains that they “cannot differ from their Archetypes, and so cannot be chimerical”.

---

<sup>88</sup> Of course this idea would be of little use to me and Locke is quick to note that we only frame ideas of modes and relations that assist us in some way.

Locke's notions of ideas of modes and relations may seem odd insofar as we often talk about modes and relations as if we are indeed saying something about how the world is and not merely about something mental. For example, we can refer to a circular driveway, claim that the Empire State Building is taller than the Chrysler Building, or debate the distance between New York and Nebraska. In each of these cases, it seems as if we are talking about some real fact about the world, not some ideal in our minds.

Locke's view isn't committed to saying otherwise. All he is saying is that these ideas require minds to invent them. Substances have the internal compositions they have regardless of whether or not there are minds in the world to observe them, but modes and relations require minds to invent these standards. They do so by compounding and comparing ideas we already have. We then can then look out into the world and see if things do in fact exemplify the standards we've created. Ideas of modes and relations aren't intentional though; they don't have to be directed to anything other than themselves. If we do so choose to look out into the world, we may or may not find any exemplifications of them in the world. They are real however, regardless of whether or not they are, or ever have been, exemplified. Their reality is due the identity between the idea and the standard. They conform to their archetypes because these ideas just are the archetypes.

Locke claims that not only are all ideas of modes and relations real, they are also all adequate.

[Ideas of] Modes and Relations, being Archetypes without Patterns, and so having nothing to represent but themselves, cannot but be adequate, every thing being so to it self.

They are adequate despite the fact that they are inventions rather than copies. When explaining why all of our complex ideas of modes are adequate, Locke states that they have the “*perfections* which the Mind intended them they should” and therefore the mind “*can find nothing wanting*”. These ideas do not resemble anything; they are considered adequate because they want for nothing. He uses the term ‘complete’ as a synonym for ‘perfection’.

Thus by having the Idea of a Figure, with three sides meeting at three Angles, I have a complete Idea, wherein I require nothing else to make it perfect. That the Mind is satisfied with the perfection of this its Idea, is plain, in that it does not conceive, that any Understanding hath, or can have a more complete or perfect Idea of that thing it signifies by the word Triangle...”. 2.31.3

The mind can’t conceive that anyone can have a more complete idea of the thing in question. This is because the definition stipulates everything one needs to know in order to grasp the idea. Just as no expertise or knowledge beyond having the sensation equips one individual with a more complete idea of red than any other, no other expertise or knowledge beyond understanding the definition of ‘bachelor’ equips an individual with a more complete idea of bachelor than any other.<sup>89</sup> So, an idea isn’t perfect because it resembles or is an exact copy of its object; it is perfect because no other knowledge is required to better understand that object. It is perfect, because it is complete.

---

<sup>89</sup> Of course, someone could have a better grasp of light waves and frequency or other such scientific information, but that doesn’t better equip them with the sensation of redness.



To clarify, to say that an idea is adequate does not mean that the subject necessarily knows everything there is to know about the idea. Instead, it means that it is possible for the subject to discover everything there is to know about the object by contemplating the idea alone. For example, Locke claims that substances like gold have “infinite properties” that no complex idea could ever contain. Even an expert who can list ten times as many properties of gold as the average person can still only grasp a fraction of what it contains. For this reason, these substance ideas are always inadequate. Similarly, mathematical figures may contain many more properties than the average person grasps. The difference however, is that if one is willing to take the time and effort, all of the properties contained in these types of ideas are discoverable. He explains:

How uncertain, and imperfect, would our Ideas be of an Ellipsis, if we had no other Idea of it, but some few of its Properties? Whereas having in our plain Idea, the whole Esence of that Figure, we from thence discover those Properties, and demonstratively see how they flow, and are inseparable from it.

### 6) *Fantastical Ideas*

Simple ideas and ideas of real substances are ectypes. These ectypes are copies of appearances of external real existences or some experience of the workings of our own minds. These copies of experiences, or ectypes, are all mental images. Ideas of modes and relations, on the other hand, are archetypes. They are ideas that do not refer to any real existences; instead they are inventions of the mind. All archetypes are either definitions or signs. Ectypes and archetypes make up the bulk of our stored ideas.

Fantastical ideas of substances do not fit neatly into either one of these categories. While fantastical ideas share something in common with both ectypes and archetypes, they are also importantly different from each of them.

Fantastical ideas are ideas of substances not found in nature. Like archetypes, they are inventions of the mind. They are created by combining several simple ideas taken from various ideas of real substances and put together in a unique way. On the other hand, like ectypes, fantastical ideas are made up of copies of features of things really existing. These copies are mental images. For example, the idea of a unicorn is simply a mental image of a horse with a horn. It isn't a copy of a complex appearance, but it includes copies of parts of complex appearances.

Like all substance ideas, fantastical ideas of substances tacitly refer to things in the world. Since they don't actually correspond to real existing things, they are not real. For example, it is just as reasonable for a young child to ask if a mermaid exists as it is for her to ask if a kangaroo exists. If she has seen neither, they are equally a mystery to her. Moreover, they both give the impression of referring to something real. She can then figure out if these ideas are real by looking to see if anything in the world conforms to them. She then learns that her idea of a kangaroo corresponds to a real existence, whereas her idea of a mermaid does not. Of course, this means that it is possible that we will not always know which of our ideas are ectypes and which are fantastical. They are both images, but we only know if they are ectypes or fantastical if we know whether or not they conform to real existences.

Since fantastical ideas straddle the line between ectypes and archetypes, they deserve to be in a separate category of their own. This is fitting for two reasons. First, Locke clearly distinguishes real from fantastical ideas; ectypes and archetypes are real, whereas fantastical ideas are not. Simple ideas and real ideas of substances are all real ideas insofar as they are caused by real external existences, whereas ideas of modes and relations are real because they are archetypes that cannot but be identical to themselves. Fantastical ideas on the other hand, are not real. They appear to refer to real external existences by being images, but they do not in fact conform to anything outside of themselves. They may be made up of copies of simple ideas, but the complex idea as a whole is not a copy; the simple ideas are put together in unique ways that aren't, and have never been, united in nature. Secondly, fantastical ideas present unique challenges to any theory of ideas (Locke's included) that require separate attention. For example, what does it mean to have an idea that doesn't actually refer? What, if anything, do these ideas represent?

So, in my taxonomy of Locke's theory of ideas, stored ideas will branch off into real and fantastical ideas. The former will further branch off into ectypes and archetypes while the latter stands alone.

### *7) Abstract Ideas*

So far, I have proposed a taxonomical sketch of Locke's various kinds of ideas. I separate Lockean ideas into appearances and stored ideas. I further distinguish stored

ideas into three basic categories: ectypes, archetypes and fantastical ideas. The former two are real, whereas the latter is not. Ectypes are mental images and encompass both simple ideas and ideas of substances. Archetypes are definitions or signs and include ideas of modes and relations. Fantastical ideas are mental images, but not ectypes.

Note that both the source and means of acquisition of a particular idea dictates where it falls in this classificatory scheme. For example, ectypes are caused by the observation of external objects and the workings of our own minds and are acquired through sensation and reflection. Archetypes, on the other hand, are invented by minds and are constituted via various mental acts. Fantastical ideas are in a category of their own because they are partially caused by external objects and partially invented by minds and they are acquired through a combination of sensation, reflection and the mental act of composition.

While this all looks neat and tidy, there is one potential problem. This schema doesn't seem to account for abstract ideas. My idea *human* seems to pick out a real substance in the world. However, the idea is abstract insofar as it doesn't include gender, race, hair or eye color, or any other such contingent feature. This means that the idea can't be an ectype; it isn't a copy of a complex appearance and it isn't acquired through sensation and reflection alone — a mental act is also required. This abstract idea also can't be a fantastical idea or an archetype. I didn't invent the idea *human* by combining different ideas together in a unique way. Nor did I stipulate the various simple ideas that

make up the complex idea; instead, I discovered them. I framed the idea by recognizing what many individuals share in common and left out that which is peculiar to each.

One might argue, that abstract ideas are definitions. So, the abstract idea *human* is simply a list of the characteristics that are common to all individuals. This has initial plausibility given that all archetypes are abstract ideas and they are mostly definitions. The problem however, is that while this theory may account for abstract ideas of substances (both real and fictional) and ideas of modes and relations, it cannot account for abstract simple ideas. My abstract idea *blue* can represent many different appearances of blue, all of which may vary slightly in shade. While it is true that this multi-shade idea of *blue* cannot be a copy of a simple appearance, it also cannot be a definition. Locke explicitly claims, “simple ideas, and those only, are incapable of being defined.”<sup>90</sup> He explains that a definition includes an enumeration of “those simple ideas that are combined in the signification of the term defined.”<sup>91</sup> Simple ideas themselves have no composition and therefore are indefinable.

What then are abstract ideas and how do they fit into Locke’s taxonomical scheme? To find the answer, a closer look at the text is required. Locke defines the process of abstraction as follows:

[T]he Mind makes the particular Ideas, received from particular Objects, to become general; which is done *by considering them* as they are in the Mind such Appearances, separate from all other Existences,

---

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 3.4.7

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 3.3.10

and the circumstances of real Existence, as Time, Place, or any other concomitant Ideas... 2.11.9 (italics mine)

Ideas become general, *by separating from them* the circumstances of Time, and Place, and any other Ideas, that may determine them to this or that particular Existence. 3.3.6 (italics mine)

Wherein they *make nothing new*, but only leave out of the complex Idea ... that which is peculiar to each, and retain only what is common to them all. 3.3.7 (italics mine)

Note the italics in the three passages. In the first two passages, Locke describes the process of abstracting as one of *considering* ideas in a particular way or *separating* ideas from certain circumstances. In the third passage, Locke claims that this process involves *making nothing new*. This language suggests that abstract ideas are not a new distinct category of stored objects. Instead, they are a way of considering the various stored objects the mind already possesses.

If I separate the idea I have of my father from everything I know about him personally, including his relationships to others and the time and place he finds himself, I will recognize that he shares some characteristics with George Washington, Ella Fitzgerald and my friend's new baby. In doing so, I am considering him as an idea in my mind only, not as he is in the world. I do not actually strip him of his gender, race or age, and try to picture what remains, I simply move my attention away from those particular characteristics. Patricia Sheridan describes this as 'selective attention'<sup>92</sup>, while Michael

---

<sup>92</sup> Patricia Sheridan, *Locke: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 62.

Ayers calls it ‘partial consideration’<sup>93</sup>. As both philosophers point out, this process does not include a complete separation; I still have the mental image of my father in mind. I am simply focusing on certain features he shares in common with other individuals thereby temporarily ignoring others.

In Locke’s words:

And he that thinks [these ideas], are any thing else but such abstract and *partial Ideas* of more complex ones, taken at first from particular Existences, will, I fear, be at a loss where to find them. 3.3.9 (italics mine)

A Lockean abstract idea then, is a particular stored idea that stands for many things of the same type. Accordingly, my idea of an apple is a mental image of a particular apple that I can apply to many things of the same sort. Even though the idea may be an internal image of a red apple, I can apply it to green and yellow ones too. Similarly, my abstract idea of *blue* is not required to be simultaneously dark, light and medium in hue. The abstract idea itself is a copy of a particular appearance of blue. It is abstract insofar as it stands for various shades that share certain similarities with it. In this way these abstract ideas become “general representatives of all of the same kind”.

By this way of abstraction they are made capable of representing more Individuals than one; each of which having in it a conformity to that abstract idea, is (as we call it) of that sort. 3.3.6

This way of considering ideas is limited to ectypes and fantastical ideas. We don’t need to do this to ideas of modes or relations. By their very nature, archetypes are already

---

<sup>93</sup> Ayers, *Locke*, 249-52.

abstract ideas. They aren't picking out similarities in the world as much as they are imposing them. So, as it turns out, my taxonomy of Lockean ideas does not require an additional branch in order to accommodate abstract ideas. Archetypes are already abstract and all other existing ideas can be made abstract simply by considering them in a particular way.

#### 8) *Conclusion*

While traditional wisdom requires that all Lockean stored ideas must be subsumed under the same kind, Locke's *Essay* does not support this approach. Locke spends a significant amount of space in the *Essay* detailing the various differences between ideas, including but not limited to: their sources, means of acquisition, content, and even how well they represent their objects. These factors lead him to a theory of ideas that includes several different kinds of mental items.

It is my contention that we ought to adopt the following taxonomy of Lockean stored ideas: 1) simple ideas and ideas of substances are real ideas that are ectypes or copies of experiences, and therefore are images, 2) ideas of modes and relations are real ideas that are archetypes invented by minds. These ideas are definitions or signs, and 3) fantastical ideas, like simple ideas and ideas of substances are images, but they are not copies of anything existing — they are invented by minds by compounding several simple ideas in a unique way. Both Locke's discussion of these various types of ideas and his discussion of the various criteria for determining the efficacy of these ideas



(particularly that of adequacy) accord with my reading. Readings that depend on a homogeneous reading of Lockean ideas, on the other hand, fail to account for all Lockean ideas and are often inconsistent with other parts of the *Essay*.

## CONCLUSION

Locke's *Essay* is an examination of his theory of ideas. Despite the fact that he spends over 700 pages detailing this theory, there is still considerable disagreement among scholars about what precisely a Lockean idea is. I have argued that the source of this disagreement lies primarily in the methodology with which these commentators approach the *Essay*. Their aim is to find a single unifying characteristic that ties all Lockean ideas together. However, as I have shown, Locke does not present the homogenous theory these critics seek.

Critics usually attribute Locke's multiple uses of the term 'idea' to careless equivocation and either dismiss his theory outright or try to show which use he truly intends. As a result, they are left in the unenviable position of having to explain away much of the conflicting text. Conversely, I advance a deflationary view of Lockean ideas which makes sense of seemingly inconsistent claims regarding ideas and also accords better with the overall text. I argue that by taking his declaration seriously that an idea is "whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks" and that he uses it to express "whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about" we will find that Locke's vague use of 'idea' is deliberate. He wants to use 'idea' as an umbrella term to cover many different types of things; there isn't a single philosophically significant characteristic that Lockean ideas all share in common.

In order to better understand my deflationary reading of Locke, I create a taxonomy of Locke's various kinds of ideas. Although there isn't one unifying

characteristic tying all Lockean ideas together, I show that within each category of ideas there is some unity. In doing so, I hope to have shown the orderliness that lies behind the apparent ambiguity.

In Chapter 2, I argue that there are two very basic categories of Lockean ideas. First, he calls our immediate impressions or original sensations, 'ideas'. Secondly, he uses the term 'idea' to refer to any idea that is stored in the mind, including copies of those original impressions and ideas created through some act(s) of the mind. Accordingly, I distinguish these two distinct types of ideas into 'appearances' and 'stored ideas'. Appearances are our actual sensations of the world. We see the world as it appears rather than as it is in-itself. As such, we perceive the external world, but our minds and subjective viewpoints bring something to our experiences. Locke calls these appearances 'ideas' simply to draw attention to the part the mind plays in those experiences. By differentiating these two types of ideas, I hope to keep the proverbial veil of perception at bay. This reading refutes the orthodox position that Locke's theory of ideas epitomizes indirect realism. Instead, I argue, we ought to attribute a form of direct realism to Locke. Locke does not believe that mediate objects called 'ideas' stand between the world and us; we simply see the world from a perspective and are incapable of divorcing ourselves from that perspective.

In chapter 3, I delineate several different kinds of stored ideas. Real ideas conform to their archetypes (whether those be in nature or in the mind). Fantastical ideas, on the other hand, tacitly refer to things in the world, but don't actually match up to those

things. Simple ideas, ideas of substances, modes and relations are all real ideas. The first two, which I label 'ectypes', are copies of appearances. Ideas of modes and relations on the other hand, are invented by minds and can't be other than what we make them. I refer to these ideas as 'archetypes'. Despite the apparent complexity of the taxonomical designations I am proposing, ultimately there are only three basic kinds of Lockean stored ideas: images, definitions and signs. Ectypes, including both simple ideas and ideas of substances are images. Archetypes, including both modes and relations are either definitions or signs. And lastly, fantastical ideas, like ectypes, are images but unlike ectypes, they are not copies of real existences.

Although at first glance they may appear otherwise, abstract ideas are not a distinct category of ideas. Instead, to call an idea 'abstract' for Locke, is to refer to a way in which a currently held idea can be considered. Ideas acquired through sensation, namely simple ideas and ideas of substances, can be considered abstractly through a process of selective attention or partial consideration. By considering ideas in this way, we are capable of applying the same idea to many external things. Ideas of modes and relations, by their very nature, are applicable to multiple states, events, geometric figures, etc. Nothing more is required to make them abstract.

All of these various types of ideas fit under Locke's general umbrella term 'idea'. The source of these ideas, their means of acquisition, their content, and the ways in which they represent their objects (if they represent anything at all) determine where they fit into my proposed taxonomy. Although the overall system may be intricate, it is consistent

and accords well with the text. Moreover, it circumvents skeptical concerns concerning the veil of perception. The more simplistic readings that have pervaded the Lockean literature simply do not do justice to the complexities Locke addresses in the *Essay*.

### Bibliography

- Alexander, Peter. "The Names of Secondary Qualities." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 67 (1977): 203-220.
- . *Ideas, Qualities and Corpuscles: Locke and Boyle on the External World*. Cambridge, London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Allison, Henry E. *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983.
- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. In *Selections*, edited and translated by Terence Irwin and Gail Fine. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995.
- Arnauld, Antoine. *On True and False Ideas*. Translated by Stephen Gaukroger. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990.
- Ayers, Michael. *Locke: Epistemology & Ontology*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Chappell, Vere. Locke's Theory of Ideas. In *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, edited by Vere Chappell, 26-55. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Descartes, Rene. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume II*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Forrai, Gabor. Lockean Ideas as Intentional Contents. In *Intentionality: Past and Future*, edited by Forrai Gabor and George Kampis, 37-50. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005.
- Forstrom, Joanna S. *John Locke and Personal Identity: Immortality and Bodily Resurrection in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Philosophy*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010.
- Gassendi, Pierre. *Opera Omnia*. Lyons, 1658.
- Hobbes, Thomas. "Elements of Philosophy." In *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury: Volume I*, edited by Sir William Molesworth. 1839. Reprint, Elibron Series, 2005.

- Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Tom Beauchamp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Jolley, Nicholas. *The Light of the Soul*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- . *Locke: His Philosophical Thought*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Kenny, Anthony. *Descartes: Study of his Philosophy*. New York: Random House, 1968.
- Lennon, Thomas. "Locke and the Logic of Ideas." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* Vol 18, No. 2 (April 2001): 155-177.
- . "Through a Glass Darkly: More on Locke's Logic of Ideas." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2004): 322-337.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.
- . "An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God." In *The Works of John Locke: In Nine Volumes Vol. 8*. London 1824.
- . "Locke's First Reply to John Norris." Richard Acworth. *Locke Newsletter* 2 (1971), 7-11.
- Mackie, J.L.. *Problems From Locke*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.
- Malebranche, Nicholas. *The Search After Truth*. Translated by Thomas M. Lennon. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- McRae, Robert. "'Idea' as a Philosophical Term in the Seventeenth Century." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26 (1965): 175-190.
- Newman, Lex. "Locke on Sensitive Knowledge and the Veil of Perception - Four Misconceptions." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2004): 273-300.
- Norris, John. *Christian Blessedness or, Practical Discourses Upon the Beatitudes of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ with Three other Volumes of Practical Discourses.* London: Bible and Crown, 1724.
- Ott, Walter. "Locke and Signification." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 27 (2002): 449-473.

- Ott, Walter. *Locke's Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Panaccio, Claude. Ockham and Locke on Mental Language. In *The Medieval Heritage in Early Modern Metaphysics and Modal Theory 1400-1700*, edited by Russell L. Friedman and Lauge O. Nielsen, 37-51. The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003.
- Pyle, A.J. *Locke*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
- Reid, Thomas. *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.: Now Fully Collected with Selections from his Unpublished Letters*, Preface, notes and supplementary dissertation by Sir William Hamilton, Bart. Edinburgh: Maclachlan and Stewart, 1846.
- Reid, Thomas. *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, edited by Derek R. Brookes. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.
- Rickless, Samuel C. "Locke on Primary and Secondary Qualities." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* Vol 78, No 3 (1997): 297-319.
- Sergeant, John. *Solid Philosophy Asserted, Against the Fancies of the Ideaists: or, the Method to Science Farther Illustrated*. London, 1967.
- Sheridan, Patricia. *Locke: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010.
- Stewart, Michael Alexander. *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Walmsley, J.C. *John Locke's Natural Philosophy (1632-1671)*. London: King's College, 1998.
- Yaffe, Gideon. "Locke on Ideas of Substance and the Veil of Perception." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2004): 255-272.
- Yolton, John W. "Ideas and Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13 (1975): 145-65.
- . *Perceptual Acquaintance: From Descartes to Reid*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.



———. *Locke: An Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985.