

## ARTICLE

# LOCKE'S IMPLICIT ONTOLOGY OF IDEAS<sup>1</sup>

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The Cartesian philosophy of ideas left unresolved the issue of how ideas were to be reconciled with the traditional ontology of substance and mode. A debate ensued, epitomized most famously by the Malebranche–Arnauld exchanges, but little apparent progress was made. As a result some shifted away from the questions of ontology altogether. By this I do not mean that ontological questions were rejected as unimportant, rather that some philosophers spent their time and effort attempting to solve other problems. Aside from the difficulty of the status of ideas, there were other issues, including how ideas could represent. Perhaps, it was thought, progress could be made here, and we might be able to return to the challenges of ontology after solving other puzzles in idea philosophy.

Such is the motivation I attribute to Locke. While the disagreements over the status of ideas raged, Locke focused his attention on other issues. He did not reject the traditional Cartesian ontology, nor did he deny that ideas have an ontic status. He did, however, bracket those questions off, fearing that they might not have answers knowable by mere human beings. The issue is thus not whether ideas are substances or modes. For Locke, there might not be an answer to that question. In the introduction to the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he is delightfully explicit.

I shall not at present meddle with the Physical Consideration of the Mind; or trouble myself to examine, wherein its Essence consists, or by what Motions of our Spirits, or Alterations of our Bodies, we come to have any Sensation by our Organs, or any *Ideas* in our Understandings; and whether those *Ideas* do in their Formation, any or all of them, depend on Matter, or no. These are Speculations, which, however curious and entertaining, I shall decline, as lying out of my Way, in the Design I am now upon. . . . *We should not then perhaps be so forward, out of an Affection of an universal Knowledge, to raise Questions, and perplex our selves and others with Disputes about Things, to which our Understandings are not suited; and of which we cannot frame in our Minds*

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Nicholas Jolley for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this piece.

*any clear or distinct Perceptions, or whereof (as it has perhaps too often hap-  
pen'd) we have not any Notions at all.*

(I.1.2 and I.1.4)<sup>2</sup>

Locke consciously excludes ontology from his purview, but *not* from any conviction that ideas have no ontic status. Instead, he thinks that the question of the status of ideas might well be unanswerable. As a result he presents a theory of ideas that lends itself to varying interpretations, some of them incompatible. That said, he nevertheless clearly behaves as if ideas have *some* ontic status throughout his works. That is, Locke held that ideas have an ontological ground.

Locke has been championed by recent scholars as an example of how the Early Moderns shunned the old ontology and tried to usher in a new style of philosophy. Here I resist this reading, and correspondingly have two goals. First I will refute the relatively recent contention of some that Locke 'abandons' ontology altogether. John Yolton in particular has championed this line, and I shall focus on his considerable work here. Second, I will defend the stronger claim that Locke remained within the traditional Cartesian ontology. He does treat ideas as if they have an ontic ground. He sometimes acts as if ideas are modes, and at others as if ideas are *like* substances. Exactly how this works will become apparent, but I warn the reader not to think that Locke should be charged with pernicious inconsistency.

In general, even a cursory glance should make it apparent that Locke has good reason to be wary of making any definite pronouncements about the nature of ideas. If they are substances, then in virtue of their so being, their natures are placed outside the realm of human knowledge. Locke tells us that we have no clear understanding of *substratum*, let alone substance, and hence we would have no clear understanding of ideas as well should they be substances. If ideas are modes, then he encounters problems about how they can represent, and how they can perform certain other functions he ascribes to them. The puzzles associated with marrying idea philosophy to the traditional ontology were well known to Locke. He read Malebranche and Arnauld, and was well steeped in the Cartesian tradition before them. Thus he tries to avoid explicitly saying anything with confidence about the ontic nature of ideas. He simply is not sure, and does not have the answers to resolve the issue either way. Hence, he attempts to sidestep what he perceives as a metaphysical quagmire, although perhaps not with the greatest success.

My project here divides into three sections. In the first section I take up John Yolton's thesis that Locke 'de-ontologized' ideas, and demonstrate why his view is not a viable interpretation of Locke. In the second I detail

<sup>2</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (New York, 1975) 43–5. All future references to this work will be abbreviated in the text with the standard citation of book, chapter, and section number.

and discuss the views of Locke's contemporaries, both their own beliefs as well as how they interpreted Locke concerning the status of ideas. We will discover that all those who read and criticized Locke (especially about the *Essay*) took him to be assuming that ideas are either substances or modes, and Locke never bothered to correct or deny these assertions. In fact, there is evidence that he altered some of his positions based on ontic consequences he wished to avoid. In the final part I take up what Locke himself says about ideas, highlighting the generally neglected *Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God*. There Locke is forced to confront explicitly ontological concerns about ideas, and we discover that he does implicitly if inconsistently endorse some ontic foundation for ideas.

### YOLTON'S 'DE-ONTOLOGIZED' LOCKE

At first glance it is not obvious exactly what Yolton wants to argue with respect to Locke. Initially one is led to believe that he merely wants to exonerate Locke from the charge of treating ideas as substances, as some *tertium quid* in perception. Ideas are perceptions, and 'not real beings'.<sup>3</sup> Yet oddly enough Yolton is not arguing that Locke treats ideas as (mental) modes. Instead, we are told that Locke rejected ideas as ontological beings altogether. He 'de-ontologized' them.<sup>4</sup> The following passages are illustrative of Yolton's main thesis:

Had Locke seen sufficiently clearly these implications of his position, he could have written a reply to clarify the difference between his own epistemological analysis and that which used the older metaphysical categories of substance and accident. He so quietly dispensed with the traditional categories on this question that many of his critics did not appreciate the novelty which he was introducing.<sup>5</sup>

In another draft of a reply to Norris, he makes this point emphatically: 'If you once mention ideas you must be presently called to an account *what kind of things you make these same ideas to be* though perhaps you have no design to consider them any further than as the *immediate objects* of perception.' *The point of this last remark is that Locke did not consider ideas to have an ontological status*; he wanted to concentrate upon their rôle in perception and knowledge. Having Malebranche's theory as an example of a theory that gave to ideas an ontological status, Locke had a twofold reaction: he rejected Norris's

<sup>3</sup> See John Yolton, 'Ideas and Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 13 (April 1975) No. 2: 159, John Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance From Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis, 1984), 88–94. Cf. Vere Chappell, 'Locke's Theory of Ideas', in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (New York, 1994) 32.

<sup>4</sup> Yolton, 'Ideas and Knowledge', 158.

<sup>5</sup> John Yolton, *Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Chippenham, 1996, reprint of 1956 edition), 97.

attempts to fit ideas into the standard ontological categories of substance or mode, and he stressed the cognitive, awareness features of ideas. The language of 'having ideas' is identified with being aware, with perceiving.<sup>6</sup>

Exactly what it means to 'de-ontologize' Locke is difficult to untangle. Following Chappell, one might construe Yolton in one of two ways.<sup>7</sup> First, Yolton is fond of pressing the point that ideas are perceptions themselves, indicating that ideas are acts of perception. Usually he does this when drawing parallels between Locke and Arnauld, trying as it were to rub them together and imbue Locke with Arnauld's philosophy by friction.<sup>8</sup> Arnauld tries to invoke Descartes's distinction between ideas taken objectively and formally in order to argue that 'presence to the mind' means a droll form of objective presence only. On that view, an object is present to the mind ('in' it) only when the mind perceives it.

There certainly are a number of passages in the *Essay* and *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion* that superficially support this thesis, and Yolton lists them. The best of these run as follows:

Whatever *Idea* is in the mind, is either an actual perception, or else having been an actual perception, is so in the mind, that by the memory it can be made an actual perception again.

(I.4.20)

For our *Ideas*, being nothing but bare Appearances or Perceptions in our Minds, cannot properly and simply in themselves be said to be *true* or *false*, no more than a single Name of any thing, can be said to be *true* or *false*.

(II.32.1)

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.

(II.1.9)

There are more, but these passages are representative.<sup>9</sup> The difficulty here is that these selections do not support Yolton's claim that ideas are identified with acts of perception. Locke, as with all of his contemporaries, held that there could be no cognitive activity, whether thinking or perceiving, without an object. Since Locke uses 'thinking' and 'perceiving' virtually interchangeably in the *Essay*, this maxim applies to all instances of perception. As a result, it is easy to be misled by ambiguities in the use of perception talk. 'Perception' can refer *both* to the act *and* the object(s) of perceiving. Thus, when

<sup>6</sup> Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance*, 94. For comments on John Norris, see 'Locke's First Reply to John Norris' Richard Acworth ed. *The Locke Newsletter* 2, (1971): 7–11.

<sup>7</sup> Chappell, 'Locke's Theory of Ideas', 32–3.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance*, 89–90.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. (II.1.3), (II.1.5), (II.1.23), (II.10.2), and see Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance* 90.

Locke indicates, as he does in the above passages, that ideas are perceptions, he means nothing more than that ideas are the objects of perceptions. To confirm this, note that when Locke refers to the act sense of perception he speaks of 'having ideas', as in the last of the quoted passages above. The contrast between II.32.1 and II.1.9 is telling. In the former we are told that ideas are 'appearances', which is object talk. The qualifier 'or Perceptions' is thus best read as 'or objects of perception'. His official definitions consistently indicate that ideas are objects of perception, as at II.8.8: 'Whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call Idea' (II.8.8).<sup>10</sup> When Locke wants to describe perception itself, a fairly clear line is drawn between the acts and the ideas which are the objects of those acts. 'Perception, as it is the first faculty of the Mind, exercised about our *Ideas*' (II.9.1). Note that perception is not an idea, it is *about* an idea. Given the widespread nature of examples like these, it is unlikely that Locke identified the act of perception with an idea. At the very least Yolton requires a systematic analysis to uncover the ambiguity in the use of the word 'perception' (and similar terms like 'sensation'). In fact none of the cases Yolton provides to buttress his thesis survive this test; all of them either can be read, or are even best read, as taking 'perception' to mean an *object* of perception.

Independently of this line, Yolton offers another reading for what Locke intends by the term 'idea'. Just as frequently we are told that ideas are the 'contents' of perceptual acts. His favorite version of this line is that ideas are simply 'conscious mental contents'.<sup>11</sup> In short, Yolton takes ideas to be intentional objects that lack any ontic ground, as evinced by his puzzling language of ideas not being 'entities'.<sup>12</sup> The trick is to now parlay that into an account which makes these intentional objects '*purely*' epistemological beings without any ontic status whatsoever. I confess that I find such a view conceptually incoherent. It is nonsensical to hold that ideas, at least as used by any of the Early Moderns, have no ontic ground at all (about *what* are we speaking, then?). What remains is to demonstrate that Locke did not hold this view.

The first thing we should note is that Locke's language generally does not cohere well with the view that ideas are intentional objects. He asserts, for instance, that ideas can either resemble or fail to resemble their external objects. What then, is being compared? Similarly, knowledge is garnered through the comparison of ideas. '*Knowledge* then seems to me to be nothing but *the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas*' (IV.1.2). By this he means that our ideas are in genuine relations with one another, and it is these relations that the

<sup>10</sup> Cf. (I.1.8).

<sup>11</sup> Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance*, 101–2.

<sup>12</sup> Ayers and Chappell agree with my interpretation here. Michael Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology* (New York, 1991) Vol. I, 56–9, and Chappell, 'Locke's Theory of Ideas', 33.

mind perceives. 'First, The one is of *such Truths laid up in the Memory, as whenever they occur to the Mind, it actually perceives the Relation is between those Ideas*' (IV.1.9).<sup>13</sup> If the mind perceives the relation without the intervention of yet a third idea, Locke calls this 'intuitive knowledge'. If ideas are merely conscious mental contents, then *what is it* that one compares or contrasts? Ungrounded content is not enough, since it has to fill the role of *relata*, which falls within the category of ontology.

Perhaps more importantly, Locke claims that all ideas are *particular*. 'Every Man's Reasoning and Knowledge, is only about the *Ideas* existing in his own Mind, which are truly, every one of them, particular Existences' (IV.17.8). What could it mean to say (using Yolton's definition of 'idea') that 'content' is particular? I should think that content can be detailed or abstract, and particular in the sense that some ideas are particular and others universal or general. But if so, then this makes his claim that all ideas are particular, nonsense. And here he describes ideas as 'existences', talk hardly conducive to the view that they are merely conscious contents. Locke writes as if ideas have an ontic ground; he simply does not know what that ground happens to be. Consider the following passage, which I think indicates Locke's leanings on this issue:

For all the Enquiries that we can make, concerning any of our *Ideas*, all that we know, or can affirm concerning any of them, is, That it is, or is not the same with some other; that it does, or does not always co-exist with some other *Idea* in the same Subject; that it has this or that Relation to some other *Idea*; or that it has a real existence without the Mind.

(IV.1.7)

Ideas 'co-exist' and become *relata* not only in relation to other ideas, but also to external objects. Even here, however, a supporter of Yolton will not likely be convinced. Maybe Locke used relational talk in the absence of a better language, or spoke loosely to convey his point.

Perhaps so, but there is one locution Locke uses that makes my point forcibly. If Yolton is correct, then when Locke speaks of ideas being 'in the mind', he cannot mean that ideas are ontically in the mind. Ideas must only be 'cognitively' in the mind. Yet when we examine what Locke says, he cannot be endorsing the merely cognitive sense of 'in the mind'. Two elements make this clear. First, Locke maintains a causal story of how ideas come to the mind, and second, he insists that ideas are *signs* of external objects. Consider the first point. The corpuscularian hypothesis extends all the way to the mind.

There are some Ideas, *which have admittance only through one Sense . . .* And if these Organs, or the Nerves which are the Conduits, to convey them from

<sup>13</sup> Cf. (IV.1.8).

without to their Audience in the Brain, the mind's Presence-room (as I may so call it) are any of them so disordered, as not to perform their Functions, they have no Postern to be admitted by; no other way to bring themselves into view, and be perceived by the Understanding.

(II.3.1)

And elsewhere Locke is less metaphorical:

First, *Our Senses*, conversant about particular sensible Objects, do *Convey into the Mind*, several distinct *Perceptions* of things, according to those various ways, wherein those Objects do affect them: And thus we come by those *Ideas*, we have of *Yellow, White, Heat, Cold, Soft, Hard, Bitter, Sweet*, and all those which we call sensible qualities, which when I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean, they from external Objects convey into the mind what produces there those *Perceptions*.

(II.1.3)

The traditional 'presence principle' is the one advanced by Malebranche. What is known is literally present or somehow united to the mind. Locke rejects the traditional scholastic (spiritualist) interpretation of Aristotle, derived from the wax impression example in *De Anima*, where we receive the impressions of sensory objects immaterially (cognitively) rather than literally (physically or literally). Locke's story is entirely literal, especially when it comes to sensation. '[T]he Sensation of Heat and Cold, be nothing but the increase or diminution of the motion of the minute Parts of our Bodies, caused by the Corpuscles of other Body' (II.8.21). This corroborates his analysis in the *Examination of P. Malebranche*, where he indicates that external objects literally affect the mind, suggesting that Locke found it difficult to free himself from the venerable Malebranchian interpretation of the presence principle. The reason Locke has the causal thesis is to guarantee local presence to the mind.

What seals my case here is the second point. Ideas are signs. And why must this be so? '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*' (IV.21.4). As Ayers notes, this passage must invoke ontic presence to the mind, otherwise the argument simply does not work.<sup>14</sup> A sign must be in the mind, and these signs (as ideas) are the elements of mental propositions as words are of verbal sentences. Yolton requires that ideas be intrinsically representative, yet Locke does not think this. They become representative when used as signs when present

<sup>14</sup> Michael Ayers, 'Are Locke's "Ideas" Images, Intentional Objects or Natural Signs?' in *Essays on Early Modern Philosophers: John Locke – Theory of Knowledge*, Vere Chappell, ed. (New York, 1992) Vol. 8, 176–7.

to the mind, and not before. Thus immediate cognitive presence seems to require 'local' (on a physical model) presence for Locke.

Yolton might respond by claiming that ideas *qua* signs are in fact intrinsically representative. This cannot be the case, since the representative power of ideas stems from their causal origin. How is it that this particular idea represents the redness of that (external) ball? Because the ball and I are so constituted that the ball *caused* me to be affected in a certain way. The idea represents the redness in virtue of the causal relationship between the ball and myself. Locke is explicit:

*[S]imple Ideas are not fictions of our Fancies, but the natural and regular productions of Things without us, really operating on us; and so carry with them all the conformity which is intended . . . For they represent to us Things under those appearances which they are fitted to produce in us. . . . Thus the Idea of Whiteness, or Bitterness, as it is in the Mind, exactly answering all the real conformity it can, or ought to have, with Things without us.*

(IV.4.4)

There is no evidence that Locke thinks of ideas as intrinsically representational. We already know that the mind can 'have' ideas in the memory of which it takes no notice. Are we to suppose that such ideas nonetheless represent their objects to the mind? Certainly not, until the mind by its own actions conjures up those ideas again, and even there the mind recreates the impression of the idea (quality) on the mind. Thus, even in memory an implicit causal story is preserved. Ideas 'in the mind' must be present ontically according to Locke, and hence ideas cannot be *merely* intentional objects; ideas are all ontically grounded.

It is true that Locke professes ignorance as to what ideas are beyond that they are perceptions.<sup>15</sup> Yet this claim does not support Yolton's thesis. Ignorance of the underlying ground is not a profession that none exists. Interestingly, aside from Locke's commonplace assertions that he either wants to avoid or has no understanding of the metaphysics of ideas, he never actually *says* ideas are not ontically grounded. Given the preponderance of evidence which suggests that he must think they are, Yolton's interesting thesis must be false.

## THE MODERN CONTEXT

Before we turn to scrutinize Locke himself, it is worthwhile to briefly examine what his near contemporaries had to say, not only in their own positive work, but also in reaction to the *Essay* itself. Few disagreed about

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance*, 94, remembering that this is an object reading of 'perception'.



the epistemological role ideas play. Locke's definition of an idea as an object of the mind is echoed in various loosely similar forms, and he was not the first to use it.<sup>16</sup> The representative function of ideas was widely accepted, although *how* ideas represent naturally caused disagreement. The status of ideas remained a main issue. An anonymous writer in 1705, commenting not only on Locke, but on Malebranche and others, notes:

By an Idea, I mean the Representation of something in the Mind. (This Definition I think, all sides are agreed in thus far, but whether this Representation be only a Modification of the Mind, or be a Distinct Being, or Substance United to the Mind, is a Question.)

These are the only Two Hypotheses that carry any show of Probability along with them, the *latter* you will find Currently set forth by Mr. [Malebranche] in his *Search After Truth*. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Thus the representative function of ideas is not in serious dispute, and even the disputants themselves recognized this. Neither Arnauld nor Malebranche, for instance, denied the important epistemological role of ideas. They quarreled about whether such functions could be carried out by ideas construed as either modes or substances. In short, the tangles highlighted during Locke's time concerned reconciling the generally accepted representative functions of ideas with their ontological status, where the choices were limited to only two. Ideas were either substances or modes. It was in this philosophical atmosphere that Locke was raised.

Not only was the thinking of the era fixed by the boundaries of the traditional ontology, all the interpreters of Locke read him as bound by this metaphysic as well. This is not to say there is no room for maneuver. Perhaps one of the more interesting things about reading the commentaries of his near contemporaries on the *Essay* is how divergent their interpretations of his theory of ideas can be. There is of course the now famous general invective against Locke's use of the word 'idea', especially the general complaint made by Edward Stillingfleet, the Bishop of Worcester.<sup>18</sup> The focus here, however, will be on ontology. I want briefly to consider a

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Peter Browne, who calls ideas 'any Representation or Likeness of the Object being transmitted from thence to the Imagination, and lodged there for the View and Observation of the pure Intellect'. Peter Browne, *The Procedure, Extent, and Limits of Human Understanding* (London, 1728; reprint New York, 1976), 58. See also Henry Lee, *Anti-Scepticism: or, Notes Upon each Chapter of Mr. Lock's Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1702; reprint New York, 1984), 2. Lee narrows the representative function of ideas to visual images, but the basic thought is the same.

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous, 'A Philosophick Essay Concerning Ideas, According to Dr. *Sherlock's* Principles'. (1705; Augustinian Reprints, no. 270, 1996), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Edward Stillingfleet, *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1697), 273. 'But none are so bold in attacking the *Mysteries of the Christian Faith*; as the Smatterers in *Ideas*, and new Terms of Philosophy, without any true Understanding of them. For these *Ideas* are become but another sort of Canting with such men'.

few critics and defenders of Locke and note how they interpret his theory of ideas. All of them read Locke as adopting the traditional ontology, although they understandably vary as to whether he thinks of them as substances or modes. A clear consensus emerges: no one thought Locke was seeking to deny the traditional ontology. Furthermore, in Locke's replies to his critics, he never suggests this either.

Commentaries on the *Essay* give little explicit attention to the question of the ontological status of Locke's ideas, a striking feature when compared with the volume of responses the work provoked. Nonetheless, there are a number of clues which signal to the careful reader that Locke's commentators read him as adhering to the traditional ontology. Stillingfleet, perhaps Locke's most important adversary, never explicitly raises the issue of what ideas are. Most of their dispute about ideas concerns purely epistemological questions, such as whether Locke's idea-philosophy can generate certainty about anything, especially that there are substances. Stillingfleet attacks Locke for grounding human knowledge and certainty on the observed relation between ideas. In particular, he faults Locke for supposing that our ideas of substances are nothing more than congeries of simple ideas. At that point, he reveals what he otherwise assumes all along, that he takes ideas to be genuine substantial things. 'A general *Abstracted Idea of Substance* is no *real Substance*, nor a *true Idea* of one, if *particular Substances* be nothing but a *Complication of simple Ideas*.'<sup>19</sup> That he means to take ideas as substances is clear by the distinction he draws between an abstract idea *as a substance* ('A general . . . idea . . . is no substance . . . if particular substances are nothing but a complication of simple ideas', and he completes this thought as a *Modus Tollens*.), and the idea *of substance*.<sup>20</sup> Stillingfleet goes on to explain that the etymology of the word 'idea' derives from the Greek for 'seeing', and connects with the concept of an unchanging and uniform appearance.

[A]nd so the natural Sense of it is *something Visible*; from thence it came to signify the *Impression* made in us from our Senses; and thence it was carried to the *general Notion* of a thing, and from thence by Metaphysical and abstracted speculations to the *Original Exemplars* of particular Essences, which were *Simple and Uniform* and not liable to those Changes which visible Objects are subject to.<sup>21</sup>

Stillingfleet's etymology stems from Plato and classical Roman authors who use *visum* (that which is seen) to mean 'a true Idea'. At no point does

<sup>19</sup> Edward Stillingfleet, 'The Bishop of Worcester's Answer to Mr. Locke's Letter, Concerning Some Passages Relating to his Essay of *Humane Understanding*' (London, 1697) 27.

<sup>20</sup> Obviously the lesson drawn from this passage is a weak one, given that Stillingfleet's purpose here does not relate directly to the ontology of ideas. Nonetheless, my point remains that when unreflectively discussing ideas the default view is to treat ideas as ontically grounded.

<sup>21</sup> Stillingfleet, 'Answer', 32.

Stillingfleet ever suggest that there is disagreement about the nature of ideas. The instant issue for him was whether ideas as used by Locke could ward off pernicious skepticism.

Stillingfleet was not the only commentator to invoke the etymology of 'idea' when explicating Locke. Henry Lee asserts that the word in Greek means 'that which is a visible representation or resemblance of the object'.<sup>22</sup> Ideas, we are told, are thus properly only images. Lee is kind enough to forge out on his own and advance a theory of his own, arguing that ideas must be individual substances, but he interprets Locke as clearly defining a simple idea as 'a mode; a single quality or property, or accident'.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Lee first faults Locke not for holding the wrong view about ideas, but for being 'obscurantist'. Why, Lee muses, would anyone use the term 'idea' if one only meant a kind of mode? He gives us no answer, but finds it beyond doubt that Locke thought of ideas as modes of the mind.

Ultimately Lee decides ideas must be substances on the following grounds. We perceive ideas, but perception itself (the act thereof) cannot be the idea, since there is no resemblance between an act (of the mind) and an external object. As a result, ideas cannot be modes.<sup>24</sup> Ideas are thus substantial images conveyed to the mind via the sense organs. The implicit premise here is of course that ideas must be either substances or modes. Most of Locke's contemporaries seemed to think he straightforwardly endorsed ideas as modes. The anonymous author quoted earlier in this section also attributes a mode-view of ideas to Locke, something of which that author approves.<sup>25</sup>

Of his critics, Locke ignored most, especially with regard to ontological issues. He took most seriously those attacks relating to religion and skepticism, another reminder of his epistemological priorities when he wrote the *Essay*. There is at least one important exception, however. John Norris, a supporter of Malebranche, wrote a brief tract criticizing Locke in May 1690, a scant five months after the *Essay* appeared. Norris's commentary is predictable. He starts by complaining that Locke should have defined 'idea' before searching for its origin, but proceeds to provide some interesting analysis. He attacks Locke's doctrine that the memory is a storehouse of ideas (II.10.2), claiming that substances cannot be 'stored' in the mind.<sup>26</sup> Although Locke did not publicly respond to Norris, the *Essay* was amended at this point in the second and subsequent editions. Norris spends a fair bit of time arguing that ideas cannot be modes and hence must be immaterial

<sup>22</sup> Lee, *Anti-Scepticism*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Lee, *Anti-Scepticism*, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, *Anti-Scepticism*, 57–8.

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous, 'A Philosophick Essay', 8.

<sup>26</sup> John Norris, *Cursory Reflections upon a Book Call'd An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Gilbert D. McEwen (London, 1690; reprint Augustan Reprint Society, no. 93, Los Angeles, 1961) 9.

substances, but Locke simply ignores this. The changes Locke makes appear to commit him to an adjectival view of ideas (*i.e.* treating them as modes). Ideas are 'nothing, but actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them' (II.10.2). Locke's changes are apparently intended to shift his position away from substantializing ideas, and he does this by making them adjectival on minds.

Of those who wrote about Locke's underlying metaphysics, I have found none who read Locke in any way other than within the bounds of the traditional ontology. Although this in itself does not constitute evidence that Locke thought of ideas within that tradition, it is at least suggestive that he was nonetheless so constrained. He certainly made no attempts to clarify his position, the absence of which is odd if he genuinely intended to reject the substance/mode ontology. I should remind the reader that I am *not* arguing Locke *ought* to have adopted the traditional ontology; I am merely noting that in fact, explicitly or no, he did. The difficulties which arise stem from the incompatibility of the way of ideas and the traditional ontology, but those problems, simply because they exist, do not in and of themselves constitute evidence that Locke abandoned the ontology.

## LOCKE AND IDEAS

Locke says nearly everything about ideas except what we really want to know. Much has been made of the alleged many senses in which Locke uses the term 'idea', from his own era to the present. Gilbert Ryle even accuses Locke of using the word in one sense such that, had it been the only sense, his philosophy would have been 'a labored anatomy of utter nonentities'.<sup>27</sup> There has been no shortage of scholars who remark in various ways how Locke had to have had multiple conceptions of 'idea' when writing the *Essay*.<sup>28</sup> Yet even so, none of this entails that Locke was *confused* about ideas, or even how he used the word. I grant that Locke used different conceptions of the term, and for divergent purposes, but I deny that an overarching sense was missing. Locke introduces us to the word 'idea' early in the *Essay*.

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.

(I.1.8)

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert Ryle, 'John Locke on the Human Understanding', in D. M. Armstrong and C. B. Martin, eds. *Locke and Berkeley: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Notre Dame, 1968) 17.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Douglass Greenlee, 'Locke's Idea of 'Idea''. in I. C. Tipton, ed. *Locke on Human Understanding* (New York, 1977) esp. 47.

Again, not too far into the work, Locke gives us another definition. 'Whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought or Understanding, that I call *Idea*' (II.8.8). From these minimal definitions we know several things. First, ideas are *mental* entities that exist 'in' the mind (to be specific, in the understanding). Second, ideas are the objects of mental activities, including thinking, understanding, and perceiving. Finally, ideas are *immediate* objects. The first and third invoke what I shall call the 'Presence Principle'. Ideas must be 'present to' the mind, or 'in' the mind in order to be properly perceived. Putting the three points together, ideas are that which are in immediate contact with the mind when any form of mental activity occurs. As it stands, we perhaps ought not to be surprised that some think 'idea' has no one clear sense; the definition is amazingly broad. He uses it to describe images, concepts, and even qualities. Yet for each of these, as in all other cases, they are all objects in contact with the mind. As a result, one might more accurately say that Locke uses the term 'idea' as a genus that covers a wealth of species. In so doing we might fault him for not being as detailed as we might like, but that hardly constitutes confusion or vagueness.

The fact that Locke makes explicit reference to terms that would generally *not* be thought synonyms is important. John Sergeant uses the term 'notion' to mean 'the nature of the objects represented', by which he intends the meaning, and contrasts it explicitly with 'idea', which he thinks means a similitude or image.<sup>29</sup> 'Phantasm' was widely used to mean 'image', being applied to the imaginative faculty of the mind. And 'species', of course, is a reference to the scholastic doctrine of intentional species. On the surface, none of them are synonyms. This I take as good evidence that Locke did not have one narrow conception of idea in mind. Instead, he had a number, all of which loosely fit underneath the umbrella of 'objects present to the mind' when it thinks. If this speculation is correct, then perhaps we would not be well served to suppose that all ideas must have the same ontological ground. We already have a precedent. Malebranche separates sensation from pure intellect, so it is not unreasonable to suppose Locke might have done something similar. In fact Locke paid little attention to what might ontically ground his ideas, however used, but that is no bar to our doing so in his place. His professed agnosticism about metaphysical issues leaves open the possibility that different kinds of ideas have varying ontic grounds. Thus, even if one understanding of ideas dominates his thinking, we should not automatically expect that there will be only one underlying ontological ground for all ideas.

Locke's discussions in the *Essay* contain little about his *explicit* views on the metaphysical nature of ideas. Given that he warned us that he would not be confronting such issues, this should be expected. Nonetheless, all of

<sup>29</sup> John Sergeant, *The Method to Science* (London, 1696), 2–3.

Locke's works are replete with references to, reliances upon, and implicit appeals to the traditional substance/mode ontology. The soul, for instance, is clearly treated as a simple substance, and he provides extended discussions of our ideas of substances and modes. Naturally one might have cause to doubt Locke about the soul, since he clearly thinks it metaphysically possible that God could superadd thought to material bodies (IV.3.6). Yet even in his discussion of the possibility of thinking bodies, two things come through as clear. First, Locke never denies that thinking (and ideas) are attributes that inhere in substance, and second, his language clearly preserves the substance/mode ontology. There can be little doubt that Locke was thoroughly steeped in the traditional ontology, and even if Locke believes that there is in principle a barrier to our knowing the nature of substance, such a view does not entail his believing that ideas *have* no ontic status, as either substance or accident (mode). Earlier commentators seem more cognizant of this point than recent ones. James Gibson, for instance, makes a point of noting the influence of the background ontology on Locke's writings:

Locke had himself inherited the current scheme of thought, for which the categories of substance and quality expressed in an exhaustive manner the ultimate nature of reality, and he never thought of questioning either its general validity or its applicability to the subject of experience.<sup>30</sup>

It is difficult to avoid noting the influence of the traditional ontology even in a work as self-confessedly opposed to discussing metaphysical issues as the *Essay*. Yet to indicate that Locke's thought was conditioned by the background metaphysic does not constitute proof that Locke thought ideas had any particular ontic status. In fact, Locke tried to be agnostic about exactly that claim, with varying degrees of success. Locke repeatedly challenges his opponents to generate a clear distinct idea of substance. He famously does this with respect to space:

If it be demanded (as usually it is) whether this *Space* void of *Body*, be *Substance* or *Accident*, I shall readily answer, I know not: nor shall be ashamed to own my Ignorance, till they that ask, shew me a clear distinct *Idea* of *Substance*.  
(II.2.17)

The inability of others (or himself) to conjure up a clear idea of substance is not an admission that ideas are not substances. Instead, it is an admission that he cannot say whether they are, and he refuses to pass judgement until someone can make it clear to him exactly what that entails. We do not, of course, find many open pronouncements about the status of ideas. We do,

<sup>30</sup> James Gibson, *Locke's Theory of Knowledge and its Historical Relations*. (New York, 1931), 28.

however, find numerous remarks that betray leanings in different directions.

One clue we might fasten upon is how he treats ideas in connection to relations. If ideas are clearly objects in two-place relations, there is reason to suppose he is thinking of ideas in a substance-like manner. Likewise, should Locke treat ideas as on the model of predicates modifying subjects (as monadic predicates), then that would constitute some evidence that he considers ideas as modes. There are a number of places where Locke would appear to treat ideas substantially. We have already briefly touched on one. In discussing memory, Locke reports that it is a 'Store-house of our *Ideas*' (II.10.2). More compellingly, he tell us that:

The Mind very often sets it self on work in search of some hidden *Idea*, and turns, as it were, the Eye of the Soul upon it; though sometimes too they start up in our Minds of their own accord, and offer themselves to the Understanding; and very often are rouzed and tumbled out of their dark Cells, into open Day-light, by some turbulent and tempestuous Passion; our Affections bringing *Ideas* to our Memory, which had otherwise lain quiet and unregarded.

(II.10.7)

This passage reads as if there is a two-place relation between the mind and any of its ideas. They are 'rouzed' from slumber, where they otherwise reside 'unregarded.' Locke's language suggests that ideas in the memory are called up by certain actions of the mind, in turn indicating that ideas exist in some sense without the attention of the mind. Some might object that this would be odd indeed, since he commits himself to the transparency of the mind, such that it has no ideas of which it is not aware. '[I]t seeming to me near a Contradiction, to say, that there are Truths imprinted on the Soul, which it perceives or understands not' (I.2.5). Yet Locke's view is *not* that the mind must *be* aware of any ideas it has, rather he claims that the mind must be *or have been* aware of them. That is, Locke makes an exception for memory. 'For what is not either actually in view, *or in the memory*, is in the mind no way at all' (I.4.20, my emphasis). So there can be ideas (in some sense yet to be determined) in the mind without actually being 'in its view'.

We should be quick to recall, however, that the sense in which ideas can be in the mind without being 'in view' shifts firmly away from substantializing ideas. Locke deleted the 'storehouse' metaphor, replacing it with the following:

But our *Ideas* being nothing, but actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them, this *laying up* of our *Ideas* in the Repository of the Memory, signifies no more but this, that the Mind has a Power, in many cases, to revive Perceptions, which it has once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before. And in this Sense it is, that our *Ideas* are said to be in our Memories, when indeed, they are actually no where, but only there is an ability in the Mind, when it will, to revive

them again; and as it were paint them anew on it self, though some with more, some with less difficulty; some more lively, and others more obscurely.

(II.10.2)

But what are we to make of this passage, where Locke clearly seems to be indicating that ideas cannot exist independently of minds?<sup>31</sup> Locke apparently believes here that ideas cannot exist absent from a mind. And why would he believe this? The most plausible explanation would be that ideas are modifications, states, or properties of the mind. Other scholars have come to similar conclusions.<sup>32</sup>

One worry about attributing this view to Locke is that it seems to deny a distinction between the act of perception and its object. As we have seen in our discussion of Yolton, Locke often uses the word 'perception' to mean 'object of perception'. For the moment, however, it is enough to notice that this worry is unfounded. Locke provides a nice explanation which might help to clarify the situation. Ideas are the final states that result from an activity of the soul. Thus, Locke writes: '[T]he perception of *Ideas* being (as I conceive) to the Soul, what motion is to the Body, not its Essence, but one of its Operations' (II.1.9). When a body is moved, the final state resulting from that action is the object, as it were, of that act. Similarly, an idea is the end result (or 'object') of a mental activity. The act of perception and its object are kept distinct, yet the idea-object is nonetheless a modification of the mind.

Is all of this clear evidence that ideas are modes for Locke? No, although I cannot imagine what else he could have in mind at this point. At no place does Locke explicitly deny that ideas are substantial, and he never even hints that we know nothing other than our own mental states.<sup>33</sup> Aside from those numerous passages where Locke sounds like he treats ideas substantially, he also complicates matters by apparently endorsing a substance view when attacking adjectival theories of ideas elsewhere.

The only place Locke explicitly takes up the issue of the ontological status of ideas comes in his lengthy commentary on Malebranche's *Search After the Truth*. Here Locke directly takes up the metaphysical issues Malebranche raises about ideas. Without doubt the *Examination* is the most significant work of Locke's we have to consider, despite the prominence of the *Essay*. Locke directly addresses the ontological problems Malebranche raises, and although not published until after his death, it was apparently

<sup>31</sup> I read 'Perceptions' in the first sentence of the passage as meaning 'objects of perception'.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Bennett, in private conversation, and also in his unpublished notes, kindly lent to me, (1995) 8.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Samuel Alexander, *Locke* (London, 1908) 30–1.



written in between the first and third editions of the *Essay*.<sup>34</sup> Locke's directness is refreshing and illuminating.

Malebranche divides the objects of mental activity into two groups: sentiments (sensations) and ideas. Sentiments correspond to Locke's ideas of sense, and the latter to Locke's ideas as they figure in intellectual thought. Locke claims to be baffled by Malebranche's claim that sentiments are modifications of the mind.

The 'sentiment', says [Malebranche], in the next words, 'is a modification of our soul'. This word *modification* here, that comes in for explication, seems to me to signify nothing more than the word to be explained by it; v.g. I see the purple color of a violet . . . I take the word ['modification'], and desire to see what I can conceive by it concerning my soul; and here, I confess, I can conceive nothing more, but that I have the idea of purple in my mind, which I had not before, without being able to apprehend anything the mind does or suffers in this, besides barely having the idea of purple; and so the good word *modification* signifies nothing to me more than I knew before.<sup>35</sup>

On the surface this is classic Locke. By a 'modification' Malebranche asks Locke to conceive of something about a substance (namely his mind), and this he refuses to do. Yet his claim that the word 'modification' means nothing to him is disingenuous. Locke proceeds to argue against the modification view in a way that reveals he understands the position well enough. Ideas cannot be modes, he claims, because it would require that a unified substance (the soul) be modified in incompatible ways.

Now I ask, take *modification* for what you please, can the same unextended indivisible substance have different, nay, inconsistent and opposite (as these of white and black) modifications at the same time? Or must we suppose distinct parts in an indivisible substance, one for black, another for white, and another for red ideas, and so of the rest of those infinite sensations which we have in sorts and degrees; all which we can distinctly perceive, and so are distinct ideas, some whereof are opposite, as heat and cold, which yet a man may feel at the same time?<sup>36</sup>

This, I think, reveals that Locke's initial trepidation with Malebranche's use of the word 'modification' is due to the claims it makes on his knowledge of

<sup>34</sup> Locke writes to Molyneux in March of 1693, indicating that is thinking of adding a chapter to the next (second) edition of the *Essay*. Later, in April of 1695 he reports to Molyneux that his critique of Malebranche is a treatise in itself, but he decided not to include it in the third edition because he wished to avoid controversy and had 'affection' for Malebranche. Cf. *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. by E. S. DeBeer, Vol IV and V, (New York, 1979), letters 1620 (March 28, 1693) and 1887 (April 26, 1695).

<sup>35</sup> *Locke's Philosophical Works*, ed. J. A. St. John, *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God* (London, 1912) Vol. 2, 438.

<sup>36</sup> Locke, *Examination*, 439.

substances. Locke shows that he understands modification to mean an alteration, state, or property of a substance. He balks at the notion that he thus has to know what this modification means in terms of the underlying metaphysic. Thus, he can still turn and criticize this view, whatever it actually entails in terms of the underlying substance, without having to claim any understanding about the substance itself which is modified. All he knows is the represented content of the idea, be it a mode or not.

Naturally Locke's criticism here fails. The basic claim is that the soul cannot simultaneously be modified by the idea of white and the idea of black. So far as I can tell, the only rationale for this claim is that he thinks that the soul 'having' the idea of white, i.e. being so modified, *literally* qualifies the soul. Hence, seeing white entails that the soul is white. On that thinking, the soul cannot simultaneously perceive white and black because the soul itself (which is a unity) cannot simultaneously *be* white and black. Malebranche, of course, is not committed to any such view. To perceive white might just mean that people who are so perceiving are in a particular state, and likewise with every other sensation. There is no requirement that the modifications be mutually exclusive, and indeed they cannot be. The argument here will be of interest later, since it appears to merge idea and quality. If an idea impresses upon the mind in such a way as literally to qualify it, then ideas arguably just are qualities.

Importantly, we have no explicit evidence that Locke changes his views here. If that is correct, then we have reason to think that Locke's considered view is that ideas cannot be modes. In attacking Malebranchian sentiments, he outlines the alternatives used by Malebranche:

If by *sentiment*, which is the word he uses in French, he means the act of sensation, or the operation of the soul in perceiving; and by *pure idea*, the immediate object of that perception, which is the definition of ideas he gives us here in the first chapter, there is some foundation for it, taking ideas for real beings or substances.<sup>37</sup>

This passage is particularly telling, since his description of pure ideas, 'the immediate object of that perception', exactly resembles his official definition of 'idea' in the *Essay* (II.8.8)! Here, we are told, to treat ideas as immediate objects of perception is to take them as real beings or substances. Now Locke attacks the position that *Malebranche* can say all ideas are substances on the grounds that it would mean that all sensations are perceived in God. *This is not a rejection of the view that ideas are substances*; it is a rejection of Malebranche's doctrine of Vision in God. In fact, he concludes this paragraph with some wonder as to why everything isn't properly a (pure) idea, given that 'by this word idea he understands here nothing else

<sup>37</sup> Locke, *Examination*, 437.

but what is the immediate or nearest object of the mind when it perceives anything'.<sup>38</sup> This is, of course, in reference to Malebranche's work, but given that Locke describes ideas in the same way in the *Essay* there is reason to suppose he thinks that ideas as immediate objects are substance-like.<sup>39</sup> Here, in the one spot where Locke says anything explicit about ideas, they rather resemble substances.

But our puzzle deepens. There are no other *conclusive* indications that Locke thought of ideas as substances. If ideas were like substances, we ought to expect at least two things. First, we should expect that he treat any act of perception as a two-place relation in which one of the relata is an idea (which is not to suggest that substances are the only things which can stand in relations). Second, we should expect that Locke give some service to the notion of substance by minimally acting as if ideas are somehow independent beings.

Now Locke does write as if perception is relational. In one place, for instance, we are told that ideas continually parade before the mind, and that the mind only considers some of them. 'At other times, it barely observes the train of *Ideas*, that succeed in the Understanding, without directing, and pursuing any of them: And at other times, it lets them pass almost quite unregarded, as faint shadows, that make no Impression' (II.19.3). Here the perceptual relation between the mind and its ideas is decidedly two-place. Such passages abound in the *Essay*. I will go so far as to say that I think they dominate his discussions of ideas. Some might object, citing Locke's examples of pleasure and pain. This example is supposedly the clearest case where Locke treats ideas as monadic predicates (aside from the memory and retention passage already examined). Yet even here Locke does not indicate that our *idea* of pain is itself a mode, even if pain itself is a modification of the mind. 'By Pleasure and Pain, I must be understood to mean of Body or Mind . . . though in truth, they be only different Constitutions of the Mind, sometimes occasioned by disorder in the Body, sometimes by Thoughts of the Mind' (II.20.2). I find it surprising that if ideas are modes, in particular our idea of pain, Locke does not clearly write as if our idea of pain just is a modification of the mind. Yet he does not. He distinguishes between pain and our idea of pain while maintaining only that the former is a mode of the mind. The key is that we must reflect on our experience – how the soul is modified – to fashion the idea.

For to define [pleasure and pain] by the Presence of Good or Evil, is no otherwise to make them known to us, than by making us reflect on what we feel in our selves, upon the several and various Operations of Good and Evil upon our Minds, as they are differently applied to, or considered by us.

(II.20.1)

<sup>38</sup> Locke, *Examination*, 438.

<sup>39</sup> This does not imply that Locke thought of ideas as abstract concepts existing in a Platonic heaven. Rather, ideas just are (behave like) thing-like independent entities.

Consider an example. If I were being harmed by an evil cause, say someone burning my arm with a brand, then my body is being damaged ('disordered'). It is not until I reflect on that disorder (and its effects in the mind) that I am said to feel pain. Now this fits Locke's analysis because he alleges that the mind cannot fail to receive impressions conveyed by the senses. The outcome is perhaps odd; namely that we can be in pain without having the idea of pain, but I submit that Locke might have had just this result in mind.

In order to make this clear, we need to examine the widely held conviction that Locke did not think ideas could exist absent a mind.<sup>40</sup> Consider one passage often taken as evidence that ideas cannot exist 'outside' the mind:

Want of Sensation in this case [when there is an impression on the sense organ but no notice is taken of it] is not through any defect in the Organ, or that the Man's Ears are less affected, than at other times, when he does hear: but that which uses to produce the *Idea*, though conveyed in by the usual Organ, not being taken notice of in the Understanding, and so imprinting no *Idea* on the Mind, there follows no *Sensation*. So that where-ever there is *Sense*, or *Perception*, there some *Idea* is actually produced, and present in the *Understanding*.  
(II.9.4)

The part seized upon here is not the last sentence emphasized by Locke, but the one before it. No idea is formed unless taken notice of by the mind. His final conclusion does not indicate that there can be no ideas absent a mind perceiving it, it only asserts the reverse. Every instance of perception involves an idea. Perhaps there is some reason for this omission. Locke tells us that the mind in the perception of simple (sensory) ideas is utterly passive: 'But as the Mind is wholly Passive in the reception of all its simple *Ideas* . . .' (II.12.1). Hearing a basic sound as in the above-mentioned passage is listed as an example of a simple idea. Furthermore, in addition to being passive, the mind *cannot refuse* to admit a simple idea.

For the Objects of our Senses, do, many of them, obtrude their particular *Ideas* upon our minds, whether we will or no . . . These *simple Ideas*, when offered to the mind, the *Understanding* can no more refuse to have, nor alter, when they are imprinted, nor blot them out, and make new ones in it self, than a mirror can refuse, alter, or obliterate the Images or *Ideas*, which, the Objects set before it, do therein produce.  
(II.1.25)

Note that Locke states that the objects of the senses intrude on the *mind*, and not just the sensory organs. Thus Locke tells us on the one hand that

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Vere Chappell, 'Locke's Theory of Ideas', in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (New York, 1994) 28.

the mind can refuse entrance to certain sensory ideas (by inattention or otherwise), while on the other he tells us that the mind cannot.

I submit that Locke's position here is not necessarily contradictory. The mind cannot refuse the impressions conveyed by the senses. By this Locke intends that the mind cannot refuse to be modified by qualities which affect the senses. When the senses function properly, the causal powers of external objects extend, via the senses, to the mind. The impressions conveyed to the mind are not themselves ideas, but qualities. Confusion arises because in the earlier passage Locke has an *intellectual* interpretation of ideas in mind. I should be clear here. By 'intellectual' I do not mean to imply anything about whether ideas are images, I only intend that such ideas are not qualities nor immediately sensory. In short, Locke conflates qualities and ideas, especially when it comes to the underlying metaphysical issues. This point has already been made in the literature by Jonathan Bennett, whose presentation is compelling if not entirely charitable.<sup>41</sup> Minimally we can agree that Locke does conflate idea and quality, even if this is due to carelessness rather than deep confusion. My analysis here both lends and derives support from this thesis. Once we clear up Locke's running together of qualities and ideas, we can see that perception usually involves a two-place relation between the mind and the ideas it considers. We should thus take heed of Locke's own warning about his use of the word 'idea':

Whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call *Idea*; and the Power to produce any *Idea* in our mind, I call *Quality* of the Subject wherein that power is. Thus a Snow-ball having the power to produce in us the *Ideas* of *White*, *Cold*, and *Round*, the Powers 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 sometimes, as in the things themselves, I would be understood to mean those *Qualities* in the Objects which produce them in us.

(II.8.8)

He even tells us that he sometimes slips and calls qualities ideas. Worse yet, as Bennett notes, Locke makes the conflation in the very passage where he warns us that instances of it might occur.<sup>42</sup> When he says of the snowball that 'the Power to produce those *Ideas* in us, as *they* are in the Snow-ball,' 'they' refers to ideas and not to powers. Locke frequently blurs ideas into qualities, as others would after him.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Bennett, *Locke Berkeley Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford, 1971) 25–30.

<sup>42</sup> Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. II.21.1: 'The Mind being every day informed, by the Senses, of the alteration of those simple *Ideas*, it observes in things without' and 'For we cannot observe any alteration to be made in, or operation upon any thing, but by the observable change of its sensible *Ideas*; nor conceive any alteration to be made, but by conceiving a Change of some its *Ideas*.' In these passages, as elsewhere, 'idea' is best taken as meaning 'quality'.

And what of the passage about memory and retention where Locke says that ideas are really nothing when not perceived by the mind? A careful rereading will satisfy us that he has a quality-sense of idea in mind. I will reproduce the passage for convenience.

But our *Ideas* being nothing, but actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them, this *laying up* of our *Ideas* in the Repository of the Memory, signifies no more but this, that the Mind has a Power, in many cases, to revive Perceptions, which it has once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before. And in this Sense it is, that our *Ideas* are said to be in our Memories, when indeed, they are actually no where, *but only there is an ability in the Mind, when it will, to revive them again; and as it were paint them anew on it self*, though some with more, some with less difficulty; some more lively, and others more obscurely.

(II.10.2, last emphasis mine)

Note the last italicized phrase. The mind ‘paints’ ideas on itself anew. The metaphor is imagistic, and strongly reminiscent of qualities. From his critique of Malebranche we know that Locke is inclined to take the qualification of minds literally. As a consequence, Locke is here telling us that the mind has the power to invoke states of itself which recreate the affection of a sensory quality. In this sense, ideas (= quality instances) do not exist absent perception of the mind. Here perception again means ‘the object of perception’. Qualities modifying the mind are actual objects of mental activity. I am emboldened by the fact that this is the *only* passage where Locke says anything remotely like this, and it is easily explained in terms of the idea/quality conflation.

Additional evidence for this may be found elsewhere. Locke tells us that consciousness is ‘the perception of what passes in a Man’s own mind’ (II.1.19). Given that he admits that we can be influenced (materially affected by external objects) while asleep (while the mind might not be thinking), it follows that the mind can be affected without consciousness, or intellectual perception.<sup>44</sup> This is plausible, since something must presumably cause the mind to start functioning consciously when we awaken. So sensory qualities affect the mind even when we sleep. Another piece of evidence comes from Locke’s adherence to the transparency thesis, which holds that the mind must be aware of any idea in its possession. ‘For to imprint any thing on the Mind without the Mind’s perceiving it, seems to me hardly intelligible’ (I.2.5). This contradicts his claim that the mind does not have to take notice of ideas conveyed to it, unless he intends that it is possible to perceive something of which one takes no notice. The only sense I can give to that suggestion is that Locke thinks the affection of the mind by qualities constitutes a form of perception. And so it does. The

<sup>44</sup> (cf. II.1.21)

mind 'perceives' whenever it has an object upon which it acts. Since the impression of qualities on the mind always results in mental activity (the mind being modified), the mind always perceives in a minimal sense what is imprinted upon it. Hence the distinction between having ideas and 'taking notice' of them. We cannot fail to perceive a sensory idea, but we need not take notice of it, which involves an intellectualized species of idea.

The end result is that because Locke conflates qualities with ideas, it is not surprising that he writes as if perception is relational between minds and distinct objects. He often thinks of qualities as ideas and as external features of the world, and so in perception there is a two-place relation between the mind and the idea 'in' the object. Yet we cannot thus conclude that ideas are substances. At best we can conclude that when Locke speaks of ideas in the quality sense, he merely treats them as rather *like* substances. What if we were to remove the conflation? I have no good sense of what Locke would say if confronted with this problem, and I am content to conclude that a substance interpretation of ideas grounds his thinking about ideas in these cases. That still leaves a fundamental ambiguity in his thinking about ideas. When he speaks of ideas as qualities *external to us*, they at least *behave* like substances and fit well with his attack on Malebranchian modes. At other times, however, he thinks of the effect (mechanistically) of qualities on our bodies and minds, and in those few cases ideas appear to be modes (as in the memory passage). Locke has no clear underlying ontology, but either way his thinking betrays a clear commitment to the traditional categories.

But what of the second element in Locke's thinking we expected to find? If Locke implicitly holds that ideas are like substances in some cases, there should be some evidence that ideas are independent of minds. In so far as he thinks of ideas as qualities, they do exist independent of minds as derivative on the mind-independent primary qualities of external objects. Consider those passages where Locke most clearly conflates qualities with ideas. 'The Mind being every day informed, by the Senses, of the alteration of those simple *Ideas*, it observes in things without.' Better yet: 'For we cannot observe any alteration to be made in, or operation upon any thing, but by the observable change of its sensible *Ideas*; nor conceive any alteration to be made, but by conceiving a Change of some *its Ideas*' (II.21.1). The ideas, which are 'out there' in the objects, are independent of the mind. In so far as we consider ideas of primary qualities, where he conflates those qualities with ideas they would be obviously mind-independent. When Locke merges idea with quality, he treats them both as *relata* in two-place relations and as independent of the mind.

I am heartened by the fact that there are no clear cases where Locke denies independence. He is careful to assert that perception always requires an idea while conspicuously omitting the claim that all ideas must be perceived. That 'innovation' was Berkeley's, not Locke's. It is also possible that Locke simply ignored these problems, leaving them for someone else to

grapple with as best she might. I do not believe Locke thought hard about these complications, which in small part helps to explain why the quality idea conflation runs so deep.

We have yet, of course, to explain how quality-ideas sometimes can be modes of the mind when Locke attacked Malebranche for holding a similar view. Locke takes care to emphasize that ideas of secondary qualities, when received by the mind, do not resemble external objects. In effect, Locke here adopts the solution I provided for Malebranche above. That is, he recognizes that the mind need not be literally red when perceiving red. Thus, it is possible for the mind to receive contrary impressions simultaneously. I also take this as some evidence that Locke was thinking within the confines of the traditional ontology.

Is it worth reminding ourselves of Locke's agnosticism about the nature of ideas. When John Norris attacked him for not discussing the nature of ideas, Locke replies, '[A]nd as to that, I answer, no man can tell; for which I not only appeal to experience, which were enough, but shall add this reason, viz. because no man can give any account of any alteration made in any simple substance whatsoever.'<sup>45</sup> This results in one passage some have cited as evidence that Locke rejected the notion that ideas are substances.<sup>46</sup> Locke, continuing to respond to Norris, writes:

Ideas may be real beings, though not substances; as motion is a real being, though not a substance; and it seems probable that, in us, ideas depend on, and are some way or other the effect of motion; since they are so fleeting, it being, as I have elsewhere observed, so hard and almost impossible to keep in our minds the same unvaried idea long together, unless when the object that produces it is present to the senses . . . To excuse therefore the ignorance I have owned of what our ideas are, any further than as they are perceptions we experiment in ourselves; and the dull, unphilosophical way I have taken of examining their production, only so far as experience and observation lead me, wherein my dim sight went not beyond *sensation* and *reflection*.<sup>47</sup>

Locke does not deny that ideas are substances in this passage. He denies that he knows. They *may* be real beings without being substances, and at any rate he tells us that all he commits himself to is the claim that they are clearly dependent on external causes through motion (which still allows ideas to be substance-like). This last claim reflects his mechanistic corpuscularianism, and reinforces the point that external qualities causally affect the mind. The passage does not speak against the traditional ontology,

<sup>45</sup> John Locke, 'Remarks upon Some of Mr. Norris's Books', in *The Philosophical Works of John Locke*, J. A. St. John, ed. (London, 1912) Vol. 2, 460. The reply to Norris was appended to his *Examination of Malebranche* and apparently written in 1693 (between the first and second editions of the *Essay*), although not published until after Locke's death.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Lennon, *The Battle of the Gods and Giants* (Princeton, 1993) 246.

<sup>47</sup> Locke, 'Remarks,' 469.



although it raises the possibility of another interpretation. Thomas Lennon argues, partially on the basis of this text, that Locke's ideas are *material* particles (which is somewhat odd, since this seems to imply that ideas are substantial).<sup>48</sup> The plausibility of this thesis lies outside the purview of this work, and thus I content myself with the knowledge that Lennon's thesis still has Locke adopting the traditional ontology.

Now, finally, we have an ontic ground for Locke's theory of ideas. Ideas, in the broad sense of his official definition, are *both* substances and modes. That is, he sometimes acts as if they are modes, and at others as if they are like substances. We can interpret this in one of two ways. First, we might think that there are various kinds of ideas, some of which are modes, some of which are substances. Alternatively, we might conclude that Locke is simply unreflectively inconsistent. This comes as a result of his broad and free-ranging conception of ideas, his consciously ignoring the metaphysical consequences of his theorizing, and the conflation of qualities with ideas. We can also explain why his contemporaries, although all placing him within the substance/mode ontology, nevertheless interpreted him in various ways. Since they were not clear about the conflation and most commentators committed it themselves, any of a number of plausible readings can come from the texts.

I want now to stop briefly and make a quick aside. The difficulties Locke encounters with ideas and the traditional ontology are not so much due to failures of the categories of substance and mode as they are with problems internal to theorizing about ideas. It is only when we try to graft the idea philosophy onto an ontology that these difficulties become transparent. I merely want to plant the notion that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the root of the problem might not lie with the ontology but with the epistemology of ideas.<sup>49</sup>

Thus far I hope minimally to have established that it is reasonable to suppose that Locke assumed the substance/mode ontology in his thinking about ideas. One lesson seems clear from a careful study of Locke and his theory of ideas. Even when one brackets questions about ontology, the problems which arise from the poor fit between idea philosophy and certain ontologies intrude into the epistemology. Locke obviously makes ideas mental entities in the tradition of the later Descartes and his Cartesian followers, yet he too wishes to account for our knowledge of a non-mental world. His core problem is essentially the same one as faced Descartes, Arnauld, Malebranche, and others. What kind of thing can represent a physical world to a non-physical mind? How does this epistemological role

<sup>48</sup> Lennon, *Battle*, esp. 247–8.

<sup>49</sup> The common view is that the traditional substance/mode ontology was 'at fault', so to speak, for the difficulties encountered by the early moderns starting with Descartes. As modern epistemologies became more sophisticated, the inadequacies of the underlying ontology were exposed. Cf. Richard Watson, *The Breakdown of Cartesian Metaphysics*.

function given the nature of the mind and body? As with Descartes, the difficulty is pressing not only because Locke maintains that resemblance sometimes figures into the process (as with primary qualities), but also because he conceives of perception as causal a process.

I hope to have established here that although Locke did not advance early modern thinking about the ontic nature of ideas, he did not 'abandon' or 'de-ontologize' it either. Instead, he provides an interesting bridge between Malebranche and Berkeley. By this I mean more than just the famous debates between Locke and Berkeley on abstraction. Locke's work additionally constitutes a preservation of the core conceptual scheme associated with the Cartesian philosophy of ideas. Ideas are mental, tightly related to the mind (present to it), represent the external world, and understanding them in their entirety is the key to unlocking the secrets of the mind.

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