

THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF IDEAS IN LOCKE'S
ESSAY

No term or theory in the *Essay* has been more criticized and discussed than the term 'idea' and Locke's theory of ideas. What is an idea? One would expect a clear definition of a term used no less than 3,680 times in the *Essay* alone.¹ Unfortunately, rather than providing clarity, Locke simply apologizes for his frequent use of the word: "I must here in the Entrance," he says, "beg pardon of my Reader, for the frequent use of the Word *Idea*." He points out that it is a term which serves best to stand for "whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks." The term is used to "express whatever is meant by *Phantasm*, *Notion*, *Species*, or whatever it is which the Mind can be employed about in thinking."²

According to Locke, nothing can be more certain than that people do have ideas; this, he says, is intuitive knowledge, for "Every Man being conscious to himself, that he thinks and that which his Mind is employ'd about whilst thinking, being the *Ideas* that are there, 'tis past doubt, that Men have in their Minds several *Ideas*, such as are those expressed by the words *Whiteness*, *Hardness*, *Sweetness*, *Thinking*, *Motion*, *Man*, *Elephant*, *Army*, *Drunkeness*, and others."³ It is questionable whether there is any content to what Locke says here. These passages do not tell us anything about the ontological status of ideas or about their epistemological function. Further, the term "object" is just as ambiguous as the term 'idea'.⁴

Locke is said to use the term 'idea' to designate at least the following: (1) modifications of the mind, (2) mental images or pictures, (3) an act of thinking about something, (4) meanings, (5) mental entities, (6) mental content.⁵ In this paper I show that Locke's metaphysics actually precludes the resolution of any question concerning the ontological status of ideas. The reason such questions cannot be resolved has nothing to do with the ambiguity of the term 'idea', but with Locke's scepticism with regard to substance and essence.

According to the standard interpretation as described and supported by Ryle, "the term 'idea' is used to denote certain supposed entities which exist or occur 'in the mind'." Locke's theory of ideas "supposes that in some sense minds do support these ideas", and further that these ideas are objects for them, i. e., that minds attend to ideas and think about them. It also supposes that minds cannot immediately attend to or think about any other things save 'ideas'. So whenever we think of or are awake to anything, it is to these supposed mind-dependent entities to which we are attending and never directly to any real existence outside of...our mind."⁶ Aside from a few passages, especially 4·4·3, there is little evidence in the *Essay* to suggest that Locke regards ideas as entities that form a screen between the mind and the external world.⁷ 4·4·3 may in fact be read in a way that supports the interpretation that having ideas is simply to be aware of a perceptual act.⁸

Yolton places Locke's doctrine of ideas in the Aristotelian Thomistic tradition: "That tradition was firm in its insistence that being aware, in whatever form, involves mental processes and mental entities: the phantasm and species belong to the mental, not the neural side of awareness." He concludes that Locke took the referent of the term 'idea' to be "any act of awareness or thought." This awareness usually involves having mental images.⁹ Woozley contends that ideas are not entities, but Locke's term for expressing ordinary locutions such as "I have an idea that," or "I have no idea what," that ideas are apprehended meanings. He concludes that Locke uses the term 'idea' to express recognition of meaning.¹⁰

Although Aaron identifies different senses in which Locke uses the word 'idea', he more or less settles for the traditional view that ideas are things which differ in kind from physical objects:

It is almost impossible for Locke to give a coherent and satisfactory account of the relationship between idea and mind. The former is object, the later subject. Yet ideas are 'in the mind'. It has been suggested that this merely means that they are experienced by mind. But it must mean more than this, for the question of existence is involved. Locke opposes such objects to those that are 'without the

mind' and independent of it. The latter exist in a real world of physical objects, but the former exist in the mind only. Consequently, *the mind* itself has a double meaning. It is the knowing, the experiencing, and the willing agent; but it is also the place of ideas. In the first sense mind perceives ideas, in the second it contains them.¹¹

Aaron's view of the ontological status of ideas is derived by inference. He argues that Locke holds an orthodox theory of representative realism in which we are directly acquainted with ideas that represent an otherwise unknown physical world. The practice of inferring the nature of ideas from an epistemological theory that was widely held in Locke's time is typical, but hardly justified. As Hamilton notes, the doctrine of a mediate or representative perception admits of at least two forms, "the simpler, that the immediate or representative object is a mere modification of the percipient mind,—the more complex, that this representative object is something different both from the reality and from the mind."¹² Locke may hold a representative theory, but in order to discern the type of representationalism that he advocates one must be able to determine the ontological status of ideas. The close connection between ontology and epistemology was pointed out by John Norris, one of Locke's first critics.

In a work published five months after Locke published the *Essay*, Norris complains :

But sure by all the Laws of Method in the World, he ought *first* to have Defined what he meant by Ideas, and to have acquainted us with their *Nature*, before he proceeded to account for their Origination. For how can any Proposition be form'd with any certainty concerning an Idea, that it is or is not *Innate*, that it does or does not come in at the Senses, before the meaning of the Word Idea be stated, and the nature of the thing, at least in general, be understood ?.. This therefore ought to have been his *first*, and indeed *main*.

Although Locke's reply to Norris is brief and inadequate, he does recognize the importance of the question. "I am complained of," he says, "for not having 'given an account of or defined the nature of our ideas'. By 'giving an account of the nature of ideas' is not meant that I should make known to men their ideas...By the 'nature of ideas', therefore, is meant here their cause and manner

of production in the mind." Locke goes on to point out that ideas may be "real beings, though not substances, as motion is a real being, though not a substance."¹⁴ By the "nature of ideas" Norris does not mean their causes and manner of production in the mind. Although Locke's reply does not settle the issue, it at least eliminates the possibility that ideas are either spiritual or material *substances*.

Given the traditional categories of substance and accident, it is tempting to infer that ideas must be modifications of the mind. According to this interpretation, ideas are not separate entities or mental content conveyed into the mind through the senses, but are, as Dr. Thomas Brown argues, affections of the mind. Brown contends that there is not a single argument in the *Essay* or in any of Locke's works, that is founded on the substantial reality of ideas as separate and distinct things in the mind. According to Brown, Locke regards the idea neither as a material image in the brain, nor as a mental entity that has an existence apart from the mental energy of which it is the object. He argues that like Arnauld, Locke considers the idea perceived and the percipient act as constituting the same indivisible modification of the conscious mind. Brown's interpretation is certainly not without support. Locke often speaks of the mind in terms of an impressible substance, especially in 4·3·6. For the most part, in 2·33 he uses the term 'idea' in the context of an act of thinking about something e.g., "when the *Idea* of the place occurs to his Mind, it brings (the Impression being once made) that of the Pain and Displeasure with it," (2·33·12). "Let custom from the very Childhood have join'd Figure and Shape to the *Idea* of God, and what Absurdities will that Mind be liable to about the Deity?" (2·33·17) There are also passages in 2·1 that can be read as supporting Brown rather than the traditional interpretation of ideas as separate entities. When Locke asserts that "Every Man being conscious to himself, That he thinks, and that which his Mind is employ'd about whilst thinking, being the *Ideas* that are there," (2·1·1) he can be read as claiming that we are aware of certain mental content, i. e., aware that the mind is in a particular state. In 2·1·2 he says: "Let us ther suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without any *Ideas*; How comes it to be furnished?" One can, as Fraser does, construe this as a metaphorical way of saying "that we are

all born ignorant of everything."¹⁵

The difficulty with Brown's reading, as Hamilton points out, is that of the various opinions Locke expresses about ideas, there is one that he appears to have "formally rejected, and that is the very opinion attributed to him by Dr. Brown."¹⁶ This rejection is found in Locke's *Examination of Malabranche*. The word 'modification', says Locke:

Seems to me to signify nothing more than the word to be explained by it; viz. I see the purple color of a violet, this, says he, is 'sentiment'. I desire to know what 'sentiment', is : that, says he, is a 'modification of the soul.' I take the word, 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 any thing 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; namely, that I have now the idea of purple in it, which I had not some minutes since.¹⁷

In 2.1.3 of the *Essay* Locke explains that "*Our Senses, conversant about particular sensible Objects, do convey into the Mind, several distinct Perceptions of things,*" a passage, like 4.4.3, which seems to confirm Hamilton's interpretation of ideas as separate entities.

It appears that Locke simply expresses contrary opinions on this issue. Some of his remarks confirm Brown's opinion, some confirm Hamilton's. The inconsistencies may indicate that Locke found the traditional ontological categories of substance and modification to be too exclusive and restrictive. Ideas are neither attributes, properties, nor modifications of the mind, nor are they substances. Aaron contends that there is conclusive evidence that Locke did reject the traditional assumption: "To the argument that all entities are either substances or accidents, so that space, which is obviously not substance, must be an accident or a property... Locke replies that it is a very great assumption to assume that substances and accidents are the sole existents whilst we are so uncertain as to the nature of substance."¹⁸ I cannot find this reply in the *Essay*. In the passage that Aaron refers to (2.13.17), Locke does not write that it is a great assumption, but

rather, that he is not certain how to classify space: "If it be demanded", Locke says, "whether this '*Space* void of *Body*, be *Substance* or *Accident*, I shall readily answer, I know not." We are left with the conclusion that ideas may or may not be modifications of the mind.

Locke often speaks of ideas in terms of concepts or meanings. To have an idea is to have the capacity to recognize objects of a given kind. To Stillingfleet, Locke writes that when interpreting any book "first I endeavor to understand the words and phrases of the language I read it in, i.e., to form ideas they stand for. If your lordship means any thing else by forming ideas first, I confess I understand it not."¹⁹ If ideas are entities or objects before the mind, they cannot be confused or inadequate. To talk of clear and obscure, distinct and confused ideas, as Locke does, is to talk of meaning or significance. However, not all ideas share this status. Simple ideas, for example, are not concepts or meanings. Further, meaning is not intrinsic to ideas. It is something more or less arbitrarily imposed on ideas. Although Locke often uses the word 'idea' to signify a concept or meaning, he does not confuse the two with respect to their nature or essence.

To say that ideas are either images, mental content, meanings, concepts, thoughts or notions, does not clarify their ontological status, for we are still in the dark concerning the nature of thoughts, concepts and the like. Are these objects of the understanding mental or material? Are they objects that are perceived or the type of object that may be a vehicle for perceiving things that are not ideas? If they are signs, what kind of a thing is a sign? Greenlee concludes that it should be inescapably evident that the ontological question "allows of no simple answer."²⁰ I do not think Greenlee goes far enough. Not only does the question allow of no *simple* answer, it allows of no answer at all. The interesting question is why Locke does not, or cannot, answer Norris, or for that matter, Stillingfleet, who presents similar objections.

According to Stillingfleet, the term 'idea' is not used throughout the *Essay* as Locke purports, viz, as a common place expression. He complains :

When new terms are made use of by ill men to promote scepticism and infidelity and to overthrow the mysteries of our

faith, we have then reason to enquire into them and examine the foundation and tendency of them... The world has been strangely amused with 'ideas' of late; and we have been told that strange things might be done by the help of 'ideas'; and yet these 'ideas', at last, come to be only common notions of things, which we must make use of in our reasoning. You say in that chapter about the existence of God you thought it most proper to express yourself in the most usual and familiar way, by common words and expressions. I would you had done so quite through your book... You might have enjoyed the satisfaction of your ideas long enough before I had taken notice of them unless I had found them employed about doing mischief.²¹

Are ideas common notions of things? What is a common notion? Locke simply replies that his way of ideas does not lead to scepticism and that it is not new, adding that the Bishop's fears amount to no more than this, "that your Lordship fears 'ideas.'"²² Actually, what Stillingfleet fears is scepticism. In Book III and IV, Locke denies that we have knowledge of the real essence of substance, mental or physical. It is this denial that makes it impossible for him to answer either Norris or Stillingfleet.

Locke claims that the extent of human knowledge is meager; this holds not only for knowledge of substance or essence, but for properties and ideas as well. In 4.3.6 he states :

We have the *Ideas* of *Matter* and *Thinking*, but possibly shall never be able to know, whether any more material Being thinks, or no; it being impossible for us by the contemplation of our own *Ideas*, without revelation, to discover, hether Omnipotency has not given to some Systems of Matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think, or else joined and fixed to Matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial Substance: It being, in respect of our Notions, not much more remote from our Comprehension to conceive, that God can, if he pleases superadd to Matter a Faculty of Thinking, than that he should superadd to it another Substance, with a Faculty of Thinking; since we know not wherein Thinking consists, nor to what sort of Substances the Almighty has been pleased to give that Power.

For Locke, Identity materialism is just as plausible a hypothesis as dualism. He explains that any person who will "give himself leave to consider freely, and look into the dark and intricate part of each Hypothesis, will scarce find his Reason able to determine him fixedly for, or against the Soul's Materiality. Since on which side soever the views it, either as an unextended Substance, or as a thinking extended Matter; the difficulty to conceive either will, whilst either alone in his Thoughts, still drive him to the contrary side."²³ Ideas may be nothing more than properties or modifications of the brain; on the other hand they may be mental entities or modifications of mental substance. Given Locke's scepticism with regard to real essence and his denial of knowledge concerning the nature of the soul, one cannot draw any conclusions concerning the nature of ideas.

The above conclusion might be questioned on the grounds that a property or modification of a substance does not have to share the same ontological status as the substance in question. Whether Locke shares the ontological likeness principle adopted by Descartes is somewhat questionable. According to Descartes, the mind cannot have material properties nor an extended bodies possess spiritual or mental properties; properties of a substance must be like or similar to that substance. Locke expresses scepticism with respect to the nature of substance, but he does not explicitly express scepticism concerning the nature of ideas. Locke may regard the soul as material, yet ideas may still be mental or spiritual entities.

There is some evidence to suggest that Locke rejects the epistemological likeness principle which asserts that the knower and the known must be the same or similar. His criticism of Malebranche's view that ideas are modifications may not be directed to the ontological status of ideas, but to Malebranche's use of this ontology to draw the epistemological conclusion that we do not see material things. Malebranche claims that he does not see the sun or a horse because "being bodies they cannot be united to my mind, and be present to it." The reason "material things cannot be united to our souls after a manner that is necessary to the soul's perceiving them" is simply that physical objects are extended and the soul is not, i. e., there is no proportion or similarity between them.²⁴ Locke regards this as nonsense and claims not to understand the notion of intimate union between substances. According

to Locke, ideas do not resemble the motions of the minute physical particles that cause these ideas. He points out that although we do not understand *how*, causal interaction between unlike things does occur; ideas represent objects without resembling them.

I can find no evidence in Locke's works to indicate that he rejects the ontological likeness principle. If he does adhere to it, the best we can do is to conclude that the mind is *probably*²⁵ mental and ideas likewise mental, either mental content, modifications, mental entities, meaning or recognition. Given his scepticism concerning the nature of ideas and substance, comprehension of the nature of ideas is probably beyond the limits of human knowledge. Hamilton is certainly justified in concluding of Locke: "In employing thus indifferently the language of every hypothesis, may we not suspect that he was anxious to be made responsible for none?"²⁶

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NOTES

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter Nidditch (Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1975). Tabulation by D. Overcash and K. Squadrito.
2. *Essay*, Introduction, pr. 8.
3. *Ibid.*, 2.1.1.
4. The word 'object' has at least a dual significance, *viz.*, spatio temporal entities external to the mind and phenomena immediately present to, or in, the mind. Both ideas and physical objects may be said to be objects of the understanding when a person thinks or perceives. This may help explain Locke's tendency to speak of things as being ideas and of ideas as being in things.
5. See Gilbert Ryle, "John Locke on The Human Understanding," in *Locke and Berkeley : A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by C. B. Martin and D. M. Armstrong (New York : Doubleday, 1968).
6. Ryle, p. 20.
7. In 4.4.3. Locke says : "Tis evident, the Mind knows not Things immediately, but only by the intervention of the *Ideas* it has of them. *Our Knowledge* therefore is *real*, only so far as there is a conformity

- between our *Ideas* and the reality of Things. But what shall be here the Criterion? How shall the Mind, when it perceives nothing but its own *Ideas*, know that they agree with Things themselves?"
8. See Douglas Greenlæ, "Locke's Idea of 'Idea,'" in *Locke On Human Understanding*, edited by I. C. Tipton (Oxford University Press, 1977).
 9. John W. Yolton, *Locke and The Compass of Human Understanding* (Cambridge University Press 1970), pp. 127-29.
 10. A. D. Woozley's edition of Locke's *Essay* (New York : The World Publishing Company, 1969), p. 33.
 11. Richard Aaron, *John Locke* (Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 106.
 12. Sir William Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, edited by H. L. Mansel and John Veitch, in four volumes (London : William Blackwood and Sons, 1861), Vol. II, p. 46.
 13. John Norris, *Cursory Reflections Upon a Book Call'd An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1960). Augustan Reprint Society, University of California Press, publication number 93, 1961, p. 27.
 14. John Locke, *Remarks Upon some of Mr. Norris's Books*, in *The Works of John Locke*, Twelfth edition (London, 1824), vol. IX, p. 248.
 15. Thomas Brown, *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, Vol. IV, (Edinburgh, 1818). Brown's interpretation is critically discussed by William Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, Vol. II, p. 56.
 16. John Locke, *An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God*, in *Works*, Vol. VIII, pr. 39.
 17. Alexander Campbell Fraser's edition of the *Essay*, Vol. I, note 2, p. 121.
 18. Aaron, pp. 159-60.
 19. Mr. Locke's Reply to the Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter, in *Works* Vol. III, p. 341.
 20. Greenlee, p. 47.
 21. Quoted by Locke, Reply to the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Letter, in *Works*, Vol. III, p. 184.
 22. *Ibid.*, pp. 134-35.
 23. *Essay*, 4.3.6.
 24. *Examination of Malebranche*, pt. 52.
 25. *Essay*, 4.3.6.
 26. Hamilton, Vol. II, p. 56.