

ARE LOCKE'S SIMPLE IDEAS ABSTRACT?

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Locke begins Book II of the *Essay* with the contention that the mind is furnished with ideas by degrees; "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."¹ This claim is followed by the statement "if it be demanded . . . when a man begins to have any ideas . . . the true answer is, when he has any sensation." Ideas in the understanding are said to be coeval with sensation "which is such an impression or motion, made in some part of the body, as produces some perception in the understanding (2.1.23). Locke traces the origin of knowledge to simple ideas of sensation and reflection. Complex ideas are said to be derived from simple ideas by the mind's activity of comparing, combining, abstracting and separating. According to traditional interpretations of Locke, the only given in sensation is that which the mind passively receives, viz., simple ideas.

Hall, Alexander and Kruger have recently argued that Locke may not believe "that we ever perceive simple ideas at all."² Kruger contends that all simple ideas are abstract and abstract ideas are universals made by us, Hall that complex ideas are given and that simple ideas are concepts (universals), not perceptions. According to Hall, simple ideas are arrived

¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2.1.9. Subsequent references in text. I have followed the current practice of decapitalization and deitalicization of the *Essay*.

² Roland Hall, "Locke and Sensory Experience—Another Look At Simple Ideas of Sensation," *The Locke Newsletter*, No. 18, 1987. Peter Alexander, *Ideas, Qualities and Corpuscles: Locke and Boyle on the External World* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985); Lorenz Kruger, "The Concept of Experience in John Locke," in R. Brandt, *John Locke: Symposium Wolfenbüttel*, 1979. New York, 1981. Subsequent references in text are to these works.

at by abstraction from the complex ideas received through the senses (16). Alexander claims that Locke views simple ideas as the products of the analysis of naturally occurring complex ideas and that "those complex ideas are not products of our construction out of simple ideas that 'occur naturally' as clear and distinct" (192). In this paper I argue that this reinterpretation of Locke's view cannot be correct.

Locke gives several examples of simple ideas, the first cataloged as those received from one sense only: ideas of white, yellow, heat, cold, hard, soft. The second, ideas received from several senses include ideas of extension, figure, solidity, mobility, number and existence. He explains that "though the qualities that affect our senses are, in things themselves, so united and blended, that there is no separation, no distance between them; yet 'tis plain, the ideas they produce in the mind, enter the senses simple and unmixed" (2.2.1). Since it is often difficult to determine whether Locke's language is literal, metaphorical, or figurative, his use of the terms unity, whole, mixed-unmixed, distinct, combined-uncombined, serve to complicate the issue.

The contention that Locke regards complex ideas or universals as given in experience may seem to be supported by passages that occur, for example, in 2.2.1, 2.12.1, 2.7.7, 2.16.1, 2.11.6-7. Locke states that "as simple ideas are observed to exist in several combinations united together; so the mind has a power to consider several of them united together, as one idea; and that not only as they are united in external objects, but as it self has joined them" (2.12.1). Alexander points out that we cannot see an object without at the same time seeing some color and some shape or extension. These ideas are mixed, he says, "in the sense that they occur together in that visual experience; they are 'unmixed' because they result from different causal chains and because they can be qualitatively distinguished" (108). Locke explains that simple ideas united in the same subject "are as perfectly distinct, as those that come in by different senses. The coldness and hardness, which a man feels in a piece of ice, being as distinct ideas in the mind, as the smell and whiteness of a lily; or as the taste of sugar, and smell of a rose." He goes on to argue that the perception of simple ideas, each itself uncompounded, contains "but one uniform appearance or conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different ideas" (2.2.1). Hall contends that these simple ideas of taste, smell, coldness and hardness are not particulars, not the initial experiences of perceivers "nor the ultimates of logical analysis," but really the "workmanship of the mind." The distinctness of simple

ideas "is not given in experience, but is in fact the result of a process of abstraction" (14-15).

This interpretation runs counter to Locke's major claims concerning complex and abstract ideas as well as his consistent maxim that the mind is passive in the reception of simple ideas. In 2.1.25 Locke distinguishes ideas from impressions: "As the bodies that surround us, do diversely affect our organs, the mind is forced to receive the impressions; and cannot avoid the perception of those ideas that are annexed to them." The ideas so annexed are supposedly simple ideas. That they cannot be complex or abstract seems to follow from the argument that the mind in the reception of such impressions is passive; "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," he says, "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 of ideas, which, the objects set before it, do therein produce." If the mind is forced to receive such impressions it "cannot avoid the perception of those ideas that are annexed to them" (2.1.25). Simple ideas cannot be known or understood by definition. The term 'white' designates a simple idea that one can know only by perceiving an instance of white. Locke explains that "no definition of light, or redness, is more fitted, or able to produce either of those ideas in us, than the sound light, or red, by itself"; and therefore:

He that has not before received into his mind, by the proper inlet, the simple idea which any word stands for, can never come to know the signification of that word, by any other words, or sounds.... The only way is, by applying to his senses the proper object; and so producing that idea in him, for which he has learn'd the name already (3.4.11).

Locke is very explicit that complex ideas are not given in our initial experience of the world, that the mind is very active in constructing these ideas and that they are produced not by impressions, but by the mental activity of combining and abstracting. Complex ideas are the workmanship of the understanding, they are made or constructed by exertion, the power the understanding has to compound simple ideas. In 2.12.1 Locke states that "all complex ideas are made" by "combining several simple ideas into one compound one." He does not say some

complex ideas, but all. Abstract ideas are also constructed by focusing on the similarities between complex ideas and designating a name to this set of ideas. Abstract ideas are not universals in the ordinary philosophical sense of the term, but particular nominal essences or species that are made by the mind; they are not given in initial experience (3.6.11). "General and universal," says Locke, "being not to the real existence of things"; they are simply "inventions and creatures of the understanding, made for its own use" (3 3.1 1).

Michael Losonsky is probably correct when he argues that Locke's use of terms such as 'making,' 'workmanship,' 'puts together' is not merely metaphorical, that he is being "quite literal when he writes that human beings make complex and general ideas." Locke is taken to be deliberate in his view that all complex ideas are made "because he goes on to make the very same claim for general ideas as well as ideas of relations."³ Losonsky points out that the view that we literally make many of our ideas was not uncommon in the seventeenth century. Locke consistently contrasts all simple ideas with all complex and abstract or general ideas. With respect to the possibility of words imprinting ideas in the mind, unlike simple ideas, he asserts: "The case is quite otherwise in complex ideas": In such collections of ideas "definitions . . . may make us understand the names of things, which never came within the reach of our senses (2.4.12).

Alexander and Hall regard Locke's use of the term 'all' in "all complex ideas are made" as problematical. Alexander asserts: "I think that what Locke means is simply that such complex ideas as are made by the mind are all made in this way (by combining, etc.)" (112). This would not then exclude some complex ideas which "just occur" or that are given. Hall claims that 2.11.6 is simply an explanation of composition and need not mean that all complex ideas must be composed by the mind. The passage in question does not use the term 'all'; Locke states that composition is an operation whereby the mind "puts together several of those simple" ideas "it has received from sensation and reflection, and combines them into complex ones." Hall further argues that Locke's claim in 1.12.1 that "all complex ideas are made" by combining is not decisive. "Perhaps," he suggests, "Locke, who is writing here about 'the acts of

³ Michael Losonsky, "Locke On the Making Of Complex Ideas," *The Locke Newsletter*, no. 20, 1989, pp. 36-37. Subsequent references in text.

the mind, wherein it exerts its power over its simple ideas,' merely means that this is the way in which all complex ideas that are made, not given, are made" (26).

Since Locke nowhere says that complex ideas are given, this type of interpretation must rest on his assertions in 2.12.1 and other passages that "simple ideas are observed to exist in several combinations united together." In 2.7.7 and 2.16.1 Locke points out that simple ideas are not experienced in isolation, but experienced together with ideas such as existence and unity. Of the idea of unity or one, Locke says: "Every object our senses are employed about; every idea in our understandings; every thought of our minds brings this idea along with it." Hall regards such passages as sufficient to establish that complex ideas "are commonly given, since 'unity' is all that the mind does when combining simple ideas to make complex ones" (26). Given that the bulk of the Essay has Locke speaking of simple ideas as distinct and separate, these passages are not conclusive. Locke's discussion of animal awareness indicates that on a physiological level all perceptions are discrete units which are received in a passive manner. Perception, Locke says, is "in some degree in all sorts of animals, though in some, possibly, the avenues, provided by nature for the reception of sensations are, and the perception, they are received with," obscure and dull. The lowest level of perception is attributed to oysters--"there is some small perception whereby they are distinguished from perfect insensibility" (2.9.12-13).

The activities of the mind in comparing, compounding and abstracting are said to be unique to humans and occur sometime after birth. Locke conjectures that the fetus may receive the simple ideas of hunger and warmth. Animals may have a great variety of simple ideas, but cannot abstract or compound them. Locke contends: "If it may be doubted, whether beasts compound and enlarge their ideas . . . to any degree: this, I think, I may be positive in, that the power of abstracting is not at all in them; and that the having of general ideas, is that which puts a perfect distinction betwixt man and brutes; and is an excellency which the faculties of brutes do by no means attain to" (2.11.10).

It may appear that Locke attributes complex ideas to dogs. In 2.11.7 he says that they take in and retain together "several combinations of simple ideas, as possibly the shape, smell, and voice of his master," and these "make up the complex idea a dog has of him." However, Locke goes on to make it clear that this combination is not a complex idea at all but "rather are so many distinct marks whereby he knows him." I do

not, he says, "think they do of themselves ever compound them, and make complex ideas." These ideas or marks are simple and received in a passive manner, so that even when "we think they have complex ideas, 'tis only one simple one that directs them in the knowledge of several things, which possibly they distinguish less by their sight, than we imagine." The case would be somewhat similar in humans at an early age; Locke believes that they both reason, but that it is only in "particular ideas just as they are received from their senses" (2.11.11). In humans these discrete marks or simple ideas are by degrees enlarged and combined; Locke tells us that he is simply giving a history of the first beginnings of human knowledge.

Just as Locke speaks of combinations of ideas with regard to dogs, those combinations with respect to humans need not be equated with complex ideas. Unlike Hall's interpretation, the unity mentioned with respect to simple ideas may be read as distinct ideas which are temporally contiguous. That complex ideas are given would be a plausible claim only if we equate "several combinations united together" with complex ideas, but as Losonsky points out, this is not exactly what Locke wanted to say, for "the many simple ideas given in our immediate experience are not united or connected in any way. What we are confronted with is only an aggregate of distinct ideas" (40). With regard to mixed modes Locke says that "men have put together such a collection into one complex idea" (2.5.3). If this statement is not a tautology then Losonsky is probably correct and it follows that connections between ideas are provided by mental activity only. Unlike Kant, Locke does not provide a clue as to how these connections are made. In fact, he may believe it impossible, since the real essence of mind and body is not known, to ever know this. In 2.23.25 he states that although we experience thinking and voluntary motion "when we would a little nearer look into it-, and consider how it is done, there, I think, we are at a loss, both in the one, and the other; and can as little understand how the parts of body cohere, as how we our selves perceive, or move."

Hall believes that Locke may have held the traditional view imparted to him, but should not have because it is false. Locke's "bad psychology" is taken to run counter to our initial experience of complexity or as James puts it, "a blooming, buzzing confusion." On the other hand, Heyd contends that Locke was not doing psychology, but epistemology, O'Connor that Locke was not attempting to describe the actual process by which knowledge originates and develops in human minds, but

rather "trying to give a rational reconstruction of the process of knowing."⁴ Although Locke himself expresses an unwillingness to "meddle with the physical considerations of the mind," I think Hall is correct in reading some of the *Essay* as genetic psychology; as he points out, a strict philosophical reading may be at odds with Locke's extensive discussion of the earliest experience of children.⁵ Locke, however, is not committed by his psychological musings concerning passivity and simple ideas to the thesis that early experience is not complex in the sense of containing a wide variety of simple ideas. Hyde, for example, argues that "if anything, Locke concurs with James in his assessment of the child's phenomenology" (p.23). Locke states that children when they first come into the world "are surrounded with a world of new things, which, by a constant solicitation of their senses, draw the mind constantly to them, forward to take notice of new, and apt to be delighted with the variety of changing objects" (2.1.8). This is probably not the type of complexity that Hall believes sufficient for an adequate account, hence his reinterpretation. He does point out, however, that current neurobiology supports Locke's position that we have an input of simple elements. Churchland, for example, summarizes this position and explains that "cells in different areas of the cortex appear to be specialized to respond to distinct dimensions of the physical stimulus. Cells in some areas are maximally responsive to movement, others to lines in specific orientations, others to Nonspecific faces, others to colors . . . in other words, perceptual features seem arranged by topic and dispensed hither and tither around the visual cortex."⁶ The conjecture is that there is a neuronal means for connecting distinct properties. For Hall this does not imply that Locke's psychological account is accurate.

Hall claims that his reinterpretation of, or adjustment to, Locke's account of ideas does not undercut the central tenets of the *Essay*; "the *Essay* perhaps contains all the materials for a correct scheme of perception and thinking, but the bad psychology has to be rejected. The good psychology is there in reverse. Simple ideas are not initially used to make complex ideas, but are made out of them" (16). Would this ad-

⁴ Thomas Heyd, "Locke's Simple Ideas, The Blooming, Buzzing Confusion, And Quasi Photographic Perception," *The Locke Newsletter*, no. 20, 1989; D.J. O'Connor, *John Locke* (New York: Dover, 1967). References to Heyd are to this work in text.

⁵ See, for example, *Essay*, 2.1.6-8, 2.1.21-22, 2.9.5-7.

⁶ Quoted by Hall, p. 28.

justment, if adequate today, reflect Lockean epistemology? Hall believes it does; that we perceive simple ideas "need not be a thesis of empiricism . . . all that such empiricism need claim is that 'the materials of all our knowledge,' whatever they are, must be ultimately derived from experience" (12). Hall may be correct in claiming that this does not entail "dismissing Lockian epistemology altogether," but it certainly entails rejecting a substantial portion of it. Most of the *Essay* is based upon establishing a real connection between the causes of sensation and impressions and hence simple ideas in the mind or brain. It does matter for Locke what the materials of our knowledge are.

Without a perceptual account including simple ideas the *Essay* would suffer the same consequent skepticism as Descartes' philosophy. If the materials of knowledge are universals or complex ideas, Locke would not grant that our knowledge can be shown to be based on experience. "Simple ideas," he says, "can only be got by experience, from those objects, which are proper to produce in us those perceptions" (3.4.14). Complex and abstract ideas may not be based on experience or sense perception at all and are more or less arbitrarily put together. Locke states: "the names of simple ideas, substances, and mixed modes, have also this difference; that those of mixed modes stand for ideas perfectly arbitrary: those of substances, are not perfectly so; but refer to a pattern, though with some latitude; and those of simple ideas are perfectly taken from the existence of things, and are not arbitrary at all" (3.5.17). Scepticism with regard to knowledge is based on the fact that complex ideas are made and may not correspond to reality. Abstract ideas are put together in an arbitrary fashion to suit the needs of the classifier; whether this is the scientist or nonscientist, these ideas may not correspond to the real world at all. Locke says that the complex ideas of substances for which men use the same names "will be very various; and so the significations of those names, very uncertain" (3.9.13). Although he contends that abstract ideas have some foundation in reality, they are nonetheless not sufficient for knowledge and may be "imaginary" or "fantastical."

Complex ideas of the world are said to be real only in so far as they are such combinations of simple ideas that represent qualities which are "really united, and coexist in things without us" (2.30.1 & 5). Locke states: "the reality lying in that steady correspondence, they have with the distinct constitutions of real beings. But whether they answer to those constitutions, as to causes or patterns, it matters not; it suffices that they are

constantly produced by them." Thus, simple ideas are all "real and true; because they answer and agree to those powers of things, which produce them in our minds" (2.30.2). The idea of whiteness or bitterness, as it is in the mind, exactly answers the power which is in a body to produce it. This account is given with the explicit intention of averting skepticism. Descartes' skepticism of the senses is predicated on his contention that ideas of colors, tastes, etc., are complex and consequently may be false. As Ayers succinctly states the case: "The real disagreement here between Locke and the Cartesians concerned the role of the causal relation between the idea and object. For Locke this relation constitutes the basic representative relation: it determines what the idea represents but does not enter into the content of the idea in such a way as to make the idea complex. The simple appearance is taken by the mind as the sign of its unknown cause, but the mind has no choice in the matter since that is what a natural sign signifies."⁷

Locke points out that although our knowledge of the world is meager, it is sufficient for practical concerns. "I hope to make it evident," he says, "that this way of certainty, by the knowledge of our own ideas, goes a little farther than bare imagination," and that it is "of things as they really are, and not of dreams and fancies" (4.4.1-2). If we never perceive simple ideas this claim would lose its plausibility. Reversing the schema of ideas and rejecting the psychology and science of the *Essay* would leave Lockean empiricism without a foundation.

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⁷ Michael Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 40.