

# LOCKE'S VIEW OF THE LIKENESS PRINCIPLE

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Locke is often interpreted as holding that we can know nothing but ideas because of the traditional prejudice, as Ryle describes it, "that minds can only attend to what is part of or attached to their own being."<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, the principle involved here is that the knower and the known must be either the same or similar. Watson points out that the major difficulties with classical Cartesian theory stem from a dualistic system "of mind and matter in which the ontological categories of substance and modification are exhaustive, and which includes epistemological and causal likeness principles. If the representation must be in some way like the object represented, and the cause in some way like the effect, then the Cartesian metaphysical system incorporates an unbridgeable gulf between mind and matter."<sup>2</sup> Berkeley, who accepts the likeness principles, advances the classic criticism of the *Essay* when he says: "But, say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind in an unthinking substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea."<sup>3</sup> The question I address in this paper is the extent to which Locke accepts the principles that there must be essential likeness between a cause and its effect and essential likeness between an idea and its object.

Locke's early critics, e.g., Norris, Sergeant, Lee and Stillingfleet interpret the representationalism of the *Essay* in the context of traditional Cartesian dualism. Norris does not understand how ideas can represent the physical world if they are spiritual: "If ideas are

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<sup>1</sup>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), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>Richard A. Watson, *The Downfall of Cartesianism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), par. 7.

derived from sensible Objects, then they are Material Beings, because Matter can send forth nothing but Matter."<sup>4</sup> He points out that Locke does not clarify the ontological status of ideas. If they are "Real Beings" then "I demand," says Norris, "are they Substances or are they Modifications of Substances?" Norris concludes that Locke will not say that they are modifications: "For besides that a Modification of Substance, there being no manner of likeness between a Substance and a Mode; if an Idea be a Modification only it cannot subsist by itself, but must be the Modification of some Substance or other, whereof also there may be an Idea. . . He will not therefore, I suppose, say that Ideas are *Modifications*. He must then say that they are *Substances*. Are they then Material Substances or Immaterial?"<sup>5</sup> Norris concludes that Locke regards ideas as immaterial substances and that as such they cannot be derived from sensible objects.

Henry Lee contends that the representationalism of the *Essay* "must involve us in an endless Scepticism." Locke's principles "will neither allow us to suppose nor can prove the real Existence of things without us."<sup>6</sup> According to Lee, the term 'idea' can mean nothing but likeness or resemblance: "in its *strict* and *proper* Sense, that only can be call'd an *Idea* which is a visible Representation or Resemblance of the Object; and in some measure at least, *like* that thing of which it is the *Idea*."<sup>7</sup> Locke's ideas do not resemble material things and hence cannot represent the physical object.

Locke appears to reject not only the likeness principle, but the exclusiveness of the ontological categories of substance and accident as well. He points out that only ideas of primary qualities resemble. In 2.8.7 of the *Essay* he says:

To discover the nature of our *Ideas* the better, and to discourse of them intelligibly, it will be convenient to distinguish them, as they are *Ideas* or Perceptions in our Minds; and as they are modifications of matter in the Bodies that cause such Perceptions in us; that so we *may not* think (as perhaps usually is done) that they are exactly the Images and Resemblances of something inherent in the subject; most of those of Sensation being in the Mind no more the likeness of something existing without us, than the Names, that stand for them are the likeness of our *Ideas*, which yet upon hearing, they are apt to excite in us.

<sup>4</sup>John Norris, *Cursory Reflections Upon a Book Call'd An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1978 reprint), p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>6</sup>Henry Lee, *Anti-Scepticism* (New York: Garland, 1978 reprint), preface, c.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, Introduction, p. 1.

In 2.8.15 he makes it clear that "the *Ideas of primary Qualities* of Bodies, are *Resemblances* of them, and their Patterns do really exist in the Bodies themselves; but the *Ideas, produced* in us by these *Secondary Qualities*, have no resemblance of them at all. There is nothing like our *Ideas* existing in the Bodies themselves."<sup>8</sup> Ideas of macroscopic objects do not resemble the motions of the minute physical particles that cause these ideas. Locke points out that although we do not understand *how*, causal interaction between unlike substances and properties of substances does occur. Ideas can represent objects without resembling them.

When speaking of the relation between ideas and physical objects, Locke employs a number of ambiguous terms. Ideas are said to represent, to conform to, to agree with, or to be copies of physical objects or qualities of those objects. Our ideas of substances "carry with them the supposition of some real being, from which they are taken, and to which they are conformable." (3.5.3) Not all ideas represent objects other than themselves. Most complex ideas are simply archetypes of the mind's own making and are not intended to refer to the existence of anything. (4.4.5) With regard to ideas of substances, Locke maintains that we intend such ideas to be representations of substances as substances really are. (2.30.5)

Locke questions the assumption that direct acquaintance with material objects entails essential similarity between mind and matter. Malebranche, for example, is taken to task for his uncritical acceptance of this principle. Locke points out that he does not quite understand the traditional notion of direct acquaintance, immediate contact, or intimate union of ideas with material objects. These expressions, he says, "which carrying with them to my mind no clear ideas, are like to remove but little of my ignorance by their sounds."<sup>9</sup> If to be "directly acquainted with" or in "intimate union with" objects is simply to perceive those objects by the five senses, the expressions are clear enough for Locke to agree that we do have such contact with the material world. For example, in 4.2.11 he says: "But this, I think, I may say, that I cannot (and I would be glad any one would make intelligible that he did) conceive how Bodies without us, can any ways affect our Senses, but by the immediate contact of the sensible Bodies themselves, as in Tasting and Feeling, or the impulse of some insensible Particles coming from them, as in Seeing, Hearing, and Smelling; by the different impulse of which Parts, caused by their different Size, Figure, and Motion, the variety of Sensations is produced in us."

<sup>8</sup>John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter Nidditch (Oxford, 1975).

<sup>9</sup>John Locke, "An Examination of P. Malebranche's Opinion of Seeing All

According to Malebranche it is impossible to see such things as the sun or a horse. They cannot be seen "because being bodies they cannot be united to my mind, and be present to it."<sup>10</sup> Locke regards this as obvious nonsense. The reason Malebranche presents for his claim that "material things cannot be united to our souls after a manner that is necessary to the soul's perceiving them" is that material things are extended and the soul is not, i.e., there is no proportion or similarity between them, which, according to Locke, is not a good reason for the claim at all. There is one thing, he says, "which I confess stumbles me in the very foundation of this [Malebranche's] hypothesis, which stands thus; we cannot perceive [or know] any thing but what is intimately united to the soul," i.e. modifications of the mind only. (par. 7) This indicates that Locke does have trouble accepting the assumption that knower and known must be essentially similar. In addition, he does not seem to be comfortable with the assumption that all entities are either substances or modifications of substances.

According to Sir William Hamilton, Locke rejects the notion that ideas are modifications of the mind. This formal rejection is to be found, he contends, in Locke's *Examination of Malebranche*, par. 39:

This word 'modification' here, that comes in for explication, 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 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. . . . But to examine their doctrine of modification a little farther. Different sentiments (sensations) are different modifications of the mind. The mind or soul that perceives, is one immaterial indivisible substance. Now I see the white and black on this paper, I hear one singing in the next room, I feel the warmth of the fire I sit by, and I taste an apple I am eating, and all this, at the same time. 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 must be) 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

Things in God," in *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1824), Vol. VIII, par. 4.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, par. 52.

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? I was ignorant before how sensation was performed in us, this they call an explanation of it. Must I say now I understand it better? If this be to cure one's ignorance, it is a very slight disease, and the charm of two or three insignificant words will at any time remove it; 'probatum est'.<sup>11</sup>

If ideas are not modifications of the mind, they are certainly not substances either.

Aaron argues that Locke regards the traditional ontological categories of substance and modification as too artificial and too exclusive to be of any use in determining the extent and certainty of knowledge. He argues that there is conclusive evidence that Locke does 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 soul existents whilst we are so uncertain as to the nature of substance."<sup>12</sup> However, in the passage that Aaron refers to there is no such definite reply on Locke's part. Rather than saying that it is a great assumption to divide existents into substances and accidents, Locke simply says that he is not certain how to classify space: "If it be demanded," he says, "whether this *Space*, void of *Body*, be *Substance* or *Accident*, I shall readily answer, I know not." (2.13.16-17) The criticism advanced by Ryle in this regard may be valid; whatever Locke might say to the contrary, he reasons as though ideas are mental modifications, for he does not question the claim that we know ideas, but does find reason to question the claim that we know mind-independent realities.

Passages in the *Essay* and *Examination of Malebranche* indicate that Locke accepts the substance-accident distinction as exhaustive as well as both likeness principles. Speaking of Malebranche, he says: "But yet a little lower he agrees, that an idea "is not a substance' but yet affirms, it is 'a spiritual thing': this 'spiritual thing' therefore must either be a 'spiritual substance,' or a mode of a spiritual substance, or a relation; for besides these I have no conception of any thing." (par. 18) He criticizes Malebranche's hypothesis of seeing all things in God by invoking the likeness principle. "I shall here," he says, "only take notice how inconceivable it is to me, that a

<sup>11</sup>Sir William Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, edited by H.L. Mansel and John Voitch (London: William Blackwood, n.d.), Vol. II, Lect. XXII.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Aaron, *John Locke* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 159-60.

spiritual, i.e. an unextended substance should *represent to the mind* an extended figure, v.g. a triangle of unequal sides, or two triangles of different magnitudes."<sup>13</sup>

In 4.10 of the *Essay*, Locke clearly adheres to the causal likeness principle: "*incogitative Matter and Motion*," he says, "whatever changes it might produce of Figure and Bulk, *could never produce Thought*." (4.10.10) Unthinking particles of matter "however put together, can have nothing thereby added to them, but a new relation of Position, which 'tis impossible should give thought and knowledge to them." (4.10.16) These and similar passages occur in the context of a discussion concerning the nature of God in which Locke concludes: "And whatsoever is first of all Things, must necessarily contain in it, and actually have, at least, all the Perfections that can ever after exist; nor can it ever give to another any perfection that it hath not, either actually in it self, or at least in a higher degree; It necessarily follows, that the first eternal Being cannot be Matter." (4.10.10) From this one might be tempted to conclude that human thought cannot be a physical process. Locke could, however, adhere to the likeness principles and avoid the criticism directed at Malebranche. If the mind and its properties happen to be material, then resemblance to mind-independent physical objects would guarantee the possibility of representation.

Locke does admit the possibility of denying dualism. In 4.3.6 he claims:

We have the *Ideas of Matter and Thinking*, but possibly shall never be able to know, whether any mere material Being thinks, or no; it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own *Ideas*, without revelation, to discover, whether 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.

It is not likely that Locke would choose a monistic solution to Cartesian problems. Spinoza's monism was subject to ridicule from all sides. Bayle sums up the social climate of the age by remarking that Spinoza's hypothesis is "the most monstrous hypothesis. . . the most diametrically opposed to the most evident notions of our mind," it is a hypothesis "that surpasses all the heap of all the extravagances that can be said."<sup>14</sup> The suggestion that God might create thinking

matter is meant, as Yolton points out, to illustrate the limitations of human knowledge. By stressing man's ignorance of the essence of mind and matter, Locke commits himself neither to materialism nor to idealism. He explicitly retains a dualistic position on the grounds of its high probability. (2.27.25; 4.3.6)

Locke's inconsistency with regard to the causal likeness principle may be due to his reluctance to accept Boylean mechanism as a satisfactory explanatory model for mental events. As Margaret Wilson points out, "Locke does not consistently maintain that all a body's properties stand in comprehensible or conceivable relations to its Boylean 'primary qualities,' or can be said to flow from them."<sup>15</sup> He does consistently point out our ignorance of the essence of mind and matter. In 2.23.25 he says:

I allow, it is usual for most People to wonder, how any one should find a difficulty in what they think, they every day observe. Do we not see, will they be ready to say, the parts of Bodies stick firmly together? Is there any thing more common? And what doubt can there be made of it? and the like, I say, concerning *Thinking*, and *voluntary Motion*: Do we not every moment experiment it in our selves; and therefore can it be doubted? The matter of Fact is clear, I confess; but 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.

In spite of his scepticism, Locke's remarks about annexation and superaddition in 4.3.6 are strong enough to lend weight to the conclusion that he finds the causal likeness principle a plausible one. The argument that thought cannot be produced by matter is the foundation for Locke's proof of the existence of God. In 4.3.6 he contends that since motion can produce nothing but motion, the production of pleasure, pain or the idea of a color, or sound must be due to superaddition: In the context of mental events we are, he says, "fain to quit our Reason, go beyond our *Ideas*, and attribute it wholly to the good Pleasure of our Maker. For since we must allow he has annexed Effects to Motion, which we can no way conceive Motion able to produce, what reason have we to conclude, that he could not order them as well to be produced in a Subject we cannot conceive capable of them, as well as in a Subject we cannot conceive the motion of Matter can in any way operate upon?" God superadds thought

Richard Popkin (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 300-301.

<sup>15</sup>Margaret Wilson, "Superadded Properties: The Limits of Mechanism in Locke," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16, 1975, p. 144.

<sup>13</sup>EM, par. 18, Italics mine.

<sup>14</sup>Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, translated by

to body and superadds ideas by annexation to the motion of matter. A spiritual cause produces spiritual effects in human beings. This is clearly adherence to the causal likeness principle.

Ideas that are annexed to matter by God can, however, represent physical objects without resembling such objects. Locke claims that the representation of physical objects will never be adequate. Our ideas may not conform in every respect with the existence of things, for not knowing the real essence on which sensible qualities depend there are, he says, "very few of them, that we can be sure are, or are not inconsistent in Nature, any farther than Experience and sensible Observation reaches." (4.4.12) Nonetheless, this knowledge is sufficient to guide our conduct in this world.

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