

ABSTRACT: Our understanding of Locke's theory of ideas is stymied by his reticence about what he means by 'idea'. I attempt to work around the problem by focusing on some neglected questions that take us to the heart of his theory, affording us a better picture of its strengths and weaknesses. I ask not what Locke's ideas are, but what kinds of states or episodes he counts as someone's having an idea, and what is involved in having simple and complex ideas. I argue that he holds that some ideas can be had by sensing, but also in another way, as when we think of things in their absence. He thinks that having a simple idea by sensing is having a sensory experience that is uniform in a certain respect. I consider what this comes to in various cases, and show that Locke is thinking of simplicity as homogeneity rather than partlessness. Finally, I consider the prospects for extending this account of simplicity and complexity to cases in which ideas are had in other ways. I conclude that Locke is likely muddled about simplicity and complexity, whatever his ideas are.

Having Locke's Ideas

Despite all of the attention that Locke's theory of ideas has received, there is much about it that remains murky. Scholars disagree about what his ideas are, how they represent, how they figure in sensation and thought, and what we do when we perform various operations upon them. Much of the blame for this can be laid at Locke's door. Ideas play the starring role in nearly all of his epistemological and metaphysical theorizing, and yet he has remarkably little to say about what he means by 'idea'. The little that he does say is not very helpful. He tells us that he uses 'idea' to express what is meant by the scholastic terms 'phantasm,' 'notion', and 'species' (I.i.8).¹ Yet scholastic philosophers did not use these terms interchangeably,² and they used each of them in more than one sense.³ He tells us that ideas are the immediate objects of perception, thought or understanding (II.viii.8). Yet he does not explain the sense of 'object' he has in mind. When his contemporary, John Norris, complains that he ought to have "Defined what he meant by Ideas,"⁴ Locke responds by saying that each man knows best what his own ideas are, and that no man can explain their causes or their production (*Works X*, 248).

Locke's reticence has not deterred others from trying to say what his ideas are. Some say that they are mental images⁵; others that they are appearances⁶; still others that they are intentional objects⁷ or acts of perception.⁸ Some say that his ideas include more than one kind of thing.⁹ An old, and frequently renewed, charge is that he is muddled in his thinking about ideas, and that he waffles between thinking of them as mental images and thinking of them as something else.¹⁰ That no consensus has emerged about what Locke's ideas are is not surprising. He shows so little interest in the question that it would be surprising if his texts were to yield a decisive answer to it. If we want to better understand his theory of ideas, the best approach may be to stop worrying about what his ideas are, and to move on to more amenable questions. It may be time to abandon the frontal assault, and to look about for secondary routes inside.

In this paper, I explore two of these secondary routes. I think that they converge, and that they lead us to a better picture of the resources and the commitments, the strengths and the weaknesses, of Locke's theory of ideas. The first route involves considering the kinds of states or episodes that he counts as someone's having an idea. This raises the important question of how he thinks about the relation between sensation and other cognitive activities. The second route involves trying to make sense of Locke's compositionism, his view that ideas are simple and complex, and that the complex ones are wholly composed of simple ones. By following these two routes, we learn more about the central claims and concepts of Locke's theory of ideas. We learn that the notion of simplicity that plays the most important role in his theory is a notion of homogeneity rather than partlessness. We learn that he frequently thinks of having a simple idea as a matter of being in a state that exhibits a kind of phenomenal uniformity. We also find reason to think that there is a muddle at the heart of his theory of ideas, no matter what his ideas are. Although Locke sometimes conceives of the simplicity of simple ideas in terms of

phenomenal uniformity, there is good reason to think that he is not consistent about this. The suspicion that Locke waffles between different conceptions of simplicity, complexity and parthood is part of what lay behind the old charge that he muddles different things under the heading of “ideas”.¹¹ My closer look at his compositionism thus leads me to revive something like the old charge, with perhaps an improved prospect of securing a conviction this time around.

In section 1 below, I show that Locke regards sensing as one way of having ideas. I then show that he thinks that the ideas had by sensing can also be had in another way, as they are when we think of things in their absence. In section 2, I take a first look at Locke’s definition of a simple idea as one that “contains in it nothing but *one uniform Appearance*, or Conception in the mind” (II.ii.1). In section 3, I look closer at what he thinks is involved in having simple ideas by sensing external things. I begin with the relatively straightforward case of seeing a color, and reflect on how his conception of simplicity might be extended to other cases of sensing. In section 4, I explore some complications that arise for our understanding of Locke’s compositionism in light of remarks that he makes at II.xv.9. In section 5, I consider whether the notions of simplicity and complexity that Locke seems to have in mind when he thinks about the sensation of external things can be applied to other cases in which he thinks of us as having ideas. I offer several reasons for thinking that it cannot be extended to cover all of those cases.

1. Having Ideas

Locke allows two senses in which one may have an idea: an episodic sense (call it “having_E”) and a dispositional sense (call it “having_D”). In most ordinary and philosophical contexts in which we talk about having ideas or concepts, we are talking about being in certain complex dispositional states. In Locke’s philosophy however, it is the notion of having_E an idea

that is more fundamental. To have_E an idea is to be in a conscious state with a particular content. Locke seems to hold that, strictly speaking, having_E an idea is the only way of having an idea. For he holds that ideas are “nothing but actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them” (II.x.2). However, he does also speak of ideas as laid up in “the Repository of the Memory.” For him, to say that one has_D an idea is to say that one has had_E it before, and that one has the ability to make oneself have_E it again (II.x.1-2; I.iv.20).

Locke holds that every experience – whether it is having a sensation, remembering an event, dreaming, or engaging in abstract thought – involves having_E ideas and being aware of the ideas one has_E. He sometimes uses ‘perceive’ and its cognates to refer to one’s awareness of the ideas one is having_E. He is doing this when he identifies having ideas with perceiving: “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.i.9). This is a peculiar use of ‘perceive’. To “perceive” in this sense is different from what we might call *sensory* perceiving. Sensory perceiving we may think of as including seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, but also the having of bodily sensations – tickles, pains, pangs of hunger, itches and so forth. One distinctive feature of sensory perceptions is that they implicate one or another organ of sense, or at least some particular region or part of the body. Another is that with sensory perception what is perceived is always something physical – a body, or an event that has a body as a constituent.¹² When Locke identifies having ideas with perceiving, he does not mean that every case of having_E an idea is a case of sensory perceiving, but that every case of having_E ideas is a case of being aware of one’s ideas. He is rejecting as incoherent the suggestion that one might have_E an idea and be unaware of it. As he puts the point elsewhere, “to be in the Mind, and, never to be perceived, is all one, as

to say, any thing is, and is not, in the Mind” (I.ii.5).¹³ Since Locke thinks that sensory perceiving involves having_E ideas, it follows that for him sensory perceiving also involves perceiving in the sense of being aware of the ideas one has_E. Locke does sometimes also use ‘perceive’ and its cognates to talk about sensory perceiving (e.g., II.viii.23 and II.xxiii.7), but this does not necessarily mean that he confuses awareness of one’s ideas with sensory perceiving.

Even if he does not confuse “perceiving” the contents of one’s mind and perceiving by the senses, Locke does link thought and sensation in a profound way. He is committed to the view that experiences as different as smelling fried onions and thinking about foreign policy are both, at bottom, to be explained in terms of a subject’s having_E certain ideas. Naturally, he will explain the difference between those particular experiences by saying that they involve having_E quite different ideas. But what about the difference between smelling fried onions and remembering the smell of fried onions? What about the difference between hearing a tune and running through that tune silently in one’s mind? What about the difference between seeing redness and thinking about redness in the course of abstract scientific or philosophical theorizing? To approach these questions, we must get more clarity about Locke’s view of sensation.

It would be natural to suppose that having_E an idea involves more than just being in a certain sensory state, even when the idea in question belongs to the class that Locke calls “ideas of sensation.” It would be natural to suppose that having_E the idea of red is one thing, and undergoing the visual sensation that *gives* one the idea of red is something else, even if one can get the idea of red only by having a sensation of something red, and even if one can be said to have_E the idea of red as soon as one has that sensation. This is not how Locke thinks about having sensations and having ideas of sensation. He does not treat the having_E of ideas as

something that occurs on the cognitive side of a tidy cognitive/sensory divide. For him, an episode of seeing something red is not correlated with, and causally responsible for, one's having_E the idea "red". Instead, it *is* a case of one's having_E the idea "red". To put the point the other way around: having_E the simple idea of red need not involve any cognitive achievement over and above having a visual sensation as of something red. Having sensations is, for Locke, one way of having_E ideas.¹⁴ Many passages suggest this, and there are a few that clinch it.

Locke says that bodies act on our sense organs to produce ideas in us; he says this rather than saying that bodies act on our organs to produce sensations from which we derive ideas.¹⁵ He also sometimes uses 'idea' and 'sensation' indiscriminately to refer the same item. Thus he refers to the power that fire has "to produce in me a new *Idea* or Sensation of warmth or burning" (II.viii.10), and suggests that the "Sensation or *Idea* we name *Whiteness*" may be produced in us by globules striking our eyes (IV.ii.11). He mentions the "*Idea* of White" and later refers to how "that particular Sensation" is produced in us (II.xxi.73). While arguing that the idea of white is "adequate," he identifies it with the sensation of white:

[T]he Sensation of White, in my Mind, being the Effect of that Power, which is in the Paper to produce it, is perfectly *adequate* to that Power; or else that Power would produce a different *Idea*. (II.xxxi.12)

Locke also frequently equates having ideas, having sensations, and having appearances produced in oneself. At II.viii.19, for example, he treats the production of ideas of color in us as equivalent to the production of "appearances on us." At II.xxxii.1, he characterizes ideas as "bare Appearances or Perceptions in our Minds," and he does it again at II.xxxii.3.¹⁶ All of these passages suggest that for Locke having sensations is not what *leads us* to have_E ideas; having sensations is itself one way of having_E ideas.

Most telling are the passages in which Locke speaks of someone as having ideas in cases where it is clear that what is going on is sensory. He allows that newborn infants may enter the world with “faint *Ideas*, of Hunger, and Thirst, and Warmth, and some Pains, which they may *have felt in the Womb*” (I.iv.2). Surely he just means that fetuses may have sensations of hunger, thirst, warmth and pain. Locke also repeatedly identifies being in pain with having_E the idea of pain. At II.viii.13, he talks of God annexing “the *Idea* of Pain to the motion of a piece of Steel dividing our Flesh.” At II.xxi.12, while making the point that it is not always up to us what ideas we have, he says, “A Man on the Rack, is not at *liberty* to lay by the *Idea* of pain, and divert himself with other Contemplations.” At II.xxxi.2, he says that fire is called “painful to the Touch” because it has “the power of producing in us the *Idea* of pain.” These passages show that for Locke, to experience pain is to have_E the idea of pain. By the same reasoning, to see something white is to have_E the idea of white. Having sensations is one way of having_E ideas.

Locke says that ideas “enter by the Senses simple and unmixed,” (II.ii.1), and that all complex ideas are made by the mind.¹⁷ One could take this to mean that it is only simple ideas that are had_E by sensing. That might be Locke’s view. On the other hand, to say that only simple ideas *enter* by the senses is not necessarily to say that only simple ideas are *had_E* by sensing. We must remember that Locke’s talk of ideas “entering” by the senses is metaphor. Some of his scholastic contemporaries take sensation to involve the travel of forms or species from the surfaces of objects to our sense organs, and then on to the corporeal imagination. Locke thinks that what is transmitted to our sense organs is just motion – motion that somehow stimulates the production of ideas in our minds (II.viii.11). With that in mind, what should we say is the difference between an idea “entering” through the senses and an idea being made by us? I suggest that it is this: the ideas that “enter” by the senses are produced by the motions at

our sensory surfaces without any additional activity on our part. When he says that ideas “enter by the Senses simple and unmixed,” Locke is implying that if we were to be wholly passive subjects of sense experiences, these would present us with a flurry of discrete sensible qualities rather than a world of objects belonging to various kinds and standing in various relations. His view is that sensory experience presents us with objects only because we exercise our capacity for compounding. It presents us with objects as belonging to general kinds only because we exercise our capacity for abstraction. It presents us with objects as standing in relations only because we exercise our capacity for comparing. Moreover, we need not think of the exercise of these capacities as something that happens independent of sensory episodes, or after them. We might think of this mental activity as contemporaneous with sense experience, and even as explaining some of the character of that experience.

Locke thinks that to sense pain is to have_E the idea of pain, to see something white is to have_E the idea of whiteness. This does not mean that he thinks one must be in pain to have_E the idea of pain, or that one must be seeing something white to have_E the idea of whiteness. Indeed, it is clear that Locke wants to say that having sensations is but one way of having_E ideas. For he thinks that we are also having_E ideas when we dream, when we remember, when we think about abstractions, and when we think of things in their absence. This brings us back to the difficult question of the relation between sensing and other cognitive activities. Locke broaches that subject when he enters into a consideration of “sensitive knowledge”. At IV.ii.14, he says:

I ask any one, whether he be not invincibly conscious to himself of a different Perception, when he looks on the Sun by day, and thinks on it by night; when he actually tastes Wormwood, or smells a Rose, or only thinks on that Savour, or Odour? We as plainly find the difference there is between any *Idea* revived in our minds by our own Memory,

and actually coming into our Minds by our Senses, as we do between any two distinct *Ideas*.

In the first sentence, he insists that these two cases – (i) sensing an object or property, and (ii) later thinking of that object or property in its absence – involve different perceptions. In the second sentence, he says that we notice the difference between (i) and (ii) as easily as we notice the difference between two distinct ideas. Yet he also implies that (i) and (ii) do not involve distinct ideas; he implies that (ii) involves one’s reviving the very idea perceived in (i). So when Locke says that (i) involves a “different Perception” from (ii), he is not using ‘Perception’ as a synonym for ‘idea’. He is using ‘Perception’ to mean an episode of perceiving, and he is saying that the episodes involved in (i) and (ii) are noticeably different despite the fact that they involve awareness of the same idea.

In his response to the threat of Cartesian skepticism, Locke tells us more about the differences between sensation and other modes of thought. At IV.xi.5, he says that the ideas produced in us by the action of external bodies are forced on us in a way that other ideas are not:

[I]f I turn my Eyes at noon towards the Sun, I cannot avoid the *Ideas*, which the Light, or Sun, then produces in me. So that there is a manifest difference, between the *Ideas* laid up in my Memory; (over which, if they were there only, I should have constantly the same power to dispose of them, and lay them by at pleasure) and those which force themselves upon me, and I cannot avoid having.

Locke reasons – somewhat dubiously – that because my sensory ideas cannot be banished by my willing them away, they must be the product of “the brisk acting of some Objects without me.”

The difference between ideas that are forced upon us and those that are not is a feature extrinsic to the ideas themselves. It is one that could be established only by willing the removal

of one's ideas, and paying attention to whether anything happens. Does Locke think that this is the only difference between what it is like to have_E ideas by sensing and what it is like to have_E them when thinking of things in their absence? He does not seem to. After the passage just quoted, he says:

Besides, there is no body who doth not perceive the difference in himself, between contemplating the Sun, as he hath the *Idea* of it in his Memory, and actually looking upon it: Of which two, his perception is so distinct, that few of his *Ideas* are more distinguishable one from another. (IV.xi.5)

The 'Besides' here suggests that he is making a fresh point. The point seems to be that there is an introspectible difference between sensing the sun and thinking about the sun in its absence. It is unclear just what the nature of the difference is supposed to be. Locke's claim that nobody fails to perceive it suggests that it is an obvious, immediate difference. This suggests that it is not a difference that is discovered by experimentally willing the removal of one's ideas (something that we rarely do).

One difference that Locke thinks there is between seeing the sun and remembering it afterwards is that when the mind revives ideas in memory these ideas have "this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before" (II.x.2). The ideas that are had_E by remembering "are constantly known to be such, as have been formerly imprinted" (II.x.7). Is it possible that he thinks that the annexation of this "additional Perception" is the *only* intrinsic difference between sensing X and thinking of X in its absence? The trouble with this suggestion is that not every case in which one thinks of something without sensing it is a case of remembering or of seeming to remember it. Locke allows that we can think of objects that we have never seen: Caesar, or a golden calf, or an angel. It would be enormously implausible to

say that such thoughts are indistinguishable from first-time sensory perceptions of those objects, and the principle of charity bars us from foisting that view on Locke. In such passages as IV.ii.14 and IV.xi.5, he is drawing our attention not just to the difference between sensing something and remembering it, but to the more general difference between sensing something and merely thinking of it.

Locke thinks that one way to have_E ideas is to undergo a sensory experience. He also thinks that there is another way of having ideas, and that this other way is involved when one remembers or otherwise thinks of something in its absence. Having_E an idea of something in this second way is obviously and introspectibly different from having a sensory experience as of that thing. What is it that these two ways of having_E an idea have in common, and what distinguishes them? Locke may have in mind a particular answer to this question; if so, he does not succeed in articulating it very clearly. Two possibilities suggest themselves.

One possibility is that Locke thinks that what the sensation of X and the mere thought of X have in common is just some of their representational content – just that they are both representings of the same object, property, event or state of affairs, X. If all that it takes for a mental episode to qualify as a case of having_E the idea of X is that it represents X, then Locke may be conceiving of the two episodes – sensing X and thinking about X in its absence – as *very* different indeed. For in general, two contentful items can represent the same thing while being very different in other respects. Think of how different the printed phrase ‘Eiffel Tower’ is from the spoken phrase “Eiffel Tower”; how different each of these is from a picture of the Eiffel Tower; and how different all of them are from the strings of ones and zeros by which means of which they can be stored on a computer’s hard drive. A further complication is that Locke might think of the two episodes – sensing X, and thinking about X – as having *somewhat* different

contents, despite the fact that they are both *of X* and so are both cases of having_E the idea of X. If one is going to speak of sensations as having contents at all, it seems plausible to say that the contents of sensations typically outstrip the contents of linguistic descriptions or even memories: we see more distinguishable shades of color than we have names for, hear more sounds than we can easily describe, and in general receive more sensory information than we can attend to or remember.

There is a second way that Locke might be thinking of the relation between sensing X and thinking about X in its absence. He might be thinking that the two episodes share not only representational content, but phenomenal character as well. He might be supposing that to think about X in its absence is to be in a state that seems, to the person in that state, to be rather like sensing X, though it is not a state one is likely to mistake for sensing X. Many people describe visual imagining as being quasi-sensory in this way. Asked to form a mental picture of something – the Eiffel Tower, or their living room – they say that they can do it, and that when they do it they are in some manner presented with items that seem to have spatial properties and to stand in spatial relations with one another. Even so, most people describe visual imagining as easily distinguishable from genuine visual experience. The familiar experience of running through a tune in one's head would seem to be another such quasi-sensory state.¹⁸ It is something like hearing a tune, but it is not likely to be confused with a genuine auditory experience.

Before we try say more about how Locke conceives of the relation between sensation and other modes of thought, we will do well to consider another component of his theory of ideas, his compositionism.

2. Simplicity Defined

Locke holds that some ideas are simple, that others are complex, and that the complex ones are wholly composed of the simple ones.¹⁹ His compositionality lies at the very heart of his epistemology. The notions of simplicity, complexity and parthood do so much work in Locke's theory that if he fumbles them it almost does not matter what his ideas are. For example, his commitment to empiricism is his commitment to the view that all simple ideas are passively received through sense experience, and that all others are complex ones wholly composed of those simple ones and made by operations performed upon them. If we cannot explicate the notions of simplicity, complexity and parthood that he is relying upon, then we cannot claim to have made sense of his empiricist project. It might still be perfectly clear that he wants to say *that* all the materials of thought are derived from sense experience; but we could not say that he had succeeded in offering an intelligible theory about *how* all the materials of thought are derived from sense experience.

The closest that Locke comes to defining simplicity is in this passage, part of which was quoted earlier:

Though the Qualities that affect our Senses, are, in the 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 by the Senses simple and unmixed. For though the Sight and Touch often take in from the same Object, at the same time, different *Ideas*; as a Man sees at once Motion and Colour; the Hand feels Softness and Warmth in the same piece of Wax: Yet the simple *Ideas* thus united in the same Subject, are as perfectly distinct, as those that come in by different Senses ... And there is nothing can be plainer to a Man, than the clear and distinct Perception he has of those simple *Ideas*; which being each in it

self uncompounded, contains in it nothing but *one uniform Appearance*, or Conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different *Ideas*. (II.ii.1)

Here there are two questions that should be distinguished. One is how we are to understand the contrast between simple (“uncompounded”) ideas and complex ideas. Another is how to understand the contrast between the way that qualities are in objects (“united and blended”) and the way that simple ideas are when they enter the mind (“unmixed”). At present, we are interested in the first question, and should not be diverted by the second. Much of this passage – including the example of the wax, and the bit that I have elided – relates to the second question. The only help we get here in understanding simplicity is Locke’s observation that a simple idea contains “*one uniform Appearance*, or Conception in the mind.”

The first half of that remark suggests that simplicity is phenomenal uniformity; the second half muddies the waters. Is he treating “*Appearance*” and “Conception” as equivalent? He might do so because he thinks that to conceive something is for something to appear to one, in some sense of ‘appear’. On the other hand, the passage could be read as saying that ideas can be simple in either of two ways: by containing a certain sort of appearance, or by containing a certain sort of conception. In that case, he need not be thinking that conceiving always involves something appearing. Let us call this second reading the disjunctive reading of II.ii.1.

On the least unlikely version of the disjunctive reading of II.ii.1, Locke would be saying that the perception of a simple idea is a perception that contains either (i) one uniform appearance, or (ii) one uniform conception.²⁰ This reading faces serious obstacles. First, if we say that a conception is something different from an appearance, then we must say what sort of a thing a conception is. One might take ‘Conception’ to refer either to a mental episode (an instance of conceiving), or to a representation involved in such an episode (what we might call a

concept). Second, we must then explain what it means for a conception to be uniform. It is not obvious what it would mean to call an instance of conceiving uniform, nor what it would mean to call a concept uniform. Third, we must show that whatever notion of uniformity applies to conceptions can also be applied to appearances. Locke's phrase is "*one uniform Appearance, or Conception,*" and surely that single token of '*uniform*' cannot be supposed to mean different things when it modifies '*Appearance*' and when it modifies '*Conception*'. For an appearance to be uniform would seem to be a matter of its presenting some object as having various spatial or temporal parts that have the same visible, auditory, tactile, olfactory or gustatory properties as one another. Concepts and episodes of conceiving would both seem to be poor candidates for being uniform in that sense. This threatens to make a muddle of II.ii.1. Ultimately, I will suggest that Locke *is* muddled in his thinking about simplicity. However, this unhappy conclusion is not forced upon us yet. For we can instead set aside the disjunctive reading of II.ii.1, and take Locke to be treating "*Appearance*" and "*Conception*" as equivalent in that passage. Considerations of charity seem to speak in favor of that. Let us therefore read II.ii.1 as telling us that simple ideas somehow involve uniform appearances in the mind.

One passage that has been taken to suggest an account of simplicity as something other than phenomenal uniformity is III.iv.4, where Locke says that "*The Names of simple Ideas are not capable of any definitions; the Names of all complex Ideas are.*" Vere Chappell suggests that Locke is here proposing a logical or semantic criterion of simplicity.²¹ For an idea to be simple would be, on this reading, for the idea's name to be incapable of definition. However, we need not see Locke as offering a second account of simplicity here. He has reason to think that the names of simple ideas are indefinable even if he consistently thinks of simplicity of ideas in terms of uniformity of appearance. For his account of definition entails that we cannot define the

name of any simple idea, no matter what simplicity is. To define any word, including the name of an idea, is to show its meaning through the use of several other terms none of which is synonymous with the term being defined (III.iv.6). Locke thinks that the meaning of a term is given by the idea associated with it; so terms are non-synonymous just in case they stand for different ideas. He says that the best sort of definition is one that cashes out the meaning of a term by enumerating “those simple *Ideas* that are combined in the signification of the term Defined” (III.iii.10). Presumably he thinks that a second-best sort would be one on which some of the enumerated ideas would be complex ideas capable of further reduction. If S is a simple idea, then the definiens in a definition of ‘S’ would consist of the names of several ideas whose combination would be equivalent to S.²² At III.iv.7, Locke rejects this as incoherent:

I say, that *the Names of Simple Ideas*, and those only, *are incapable of being defined*.

The reason whereof is this, That the several Terms of a Definition, signifying several *Ideas*, they can altogether by no means represent an *Idea*, which has no Composition at all.

He goes on to complain that the failure to recognize that the names of simple ideas are indefinable has produced much of that “eminent trifling in the Schools.”

The fact that Locke takes the names of simple ideas to be undefinable does not show that he means to define simplicity in terms of undefinability. Of course, this does not show that he does not sometimes think of simplicity as definable in terms of undefinability. However, the principle of charity forbids us from saddling him with two different accounts of simplicity if we can avoid it. Let us therefore see how far we can get on the assumption that for him the simplicity of simple ideas is always to be understood in terms of uniformity of appearance. In that case, the complexity of complex ideas must presumably involve diversity of appearance.

What the parthood of ideas comes to is a further difficulty. If we are to make more progress in understanding Locke's compositionism, our best chance is to try to unpack his examples of, and remarks about, simple ideas, complex ideas, and ideas that are parts of other ideas. The approach that naturally recommends itself is to begin with the clearest, most straightforward of his examples; to consider what simplicity, complexity and parthood come to in these cases; and then see to what extent we can generalize those findings to cover the other cases that need covering.

3. Having Ideas by Sensing

Earlier we saw that Locke holds that there are two ways of having_E an idea of X. One is to have a sensation of X, and the other is obviously and introspectibly different from that. It is reasonably clear which episodes count as sensations, how sensations involve appearances, and what it might mean for some of those appearances to be uniform. It is much less obvious what Locke thinks is involved in having_E ideas when we are not sensing. Since we are on firmer ground with sensation, it makes sense to begin there. It also makes sense to begin with simplicity, and to work our way toward complexity and parthood. Locke divides simple ideas of sense into three classes: those that enter by one sense only, those that enter by more than one sense, and those that are "suggested to the mind *by all the ways of Sensation and Reflection*" (II.iii.1). In the first class are ideas of colors, sounds, tastes and smells, and also the ideas of heat, cold and solidity (II.iii.1). In the second class are the ideas of space, extension, figure, rest and motion (II.v). In the third are the ideas of pleasure, pain, power, existence and unity (II.vii.1). Applying the notion of uniformity of appearance seems a more straightforward matter

in relation to ideas in the first class, and it seems particularly straightforward in the case of ideas of colors.

Locke thinks that seeing something red is one way of having_E the simple idea of red. Our color terms mark particularly obvious respects in which sensible things can appear to us as uniform or multiform. A surface that is seen as red is one that seems to possess a kind of uniformity, and it is tempting to speak of the visual experience itself as characterized by a corresponding sort of uniformity. This is true even though the surface is a physically complex thing, and even though its physical complexity is part of what accounts for its redness. Locke thinks that a surface that looks uniformly red is likely to consist of a complex arrangement of corpuscles, but he recognizes that none of that complexity is apparent in one's ordinary, non-microscopic visual sensation of the red surface.

Of course, what is presented in experience can seem to be uniform or multiform in various respects. A visual experience can represent a multiplicity of colors and yet be uniform in the sense of being static, as when one stares at a multicolored painting for a time without interruption. Another sort of multiformity is that involved in what are called binary hues. Binary hues are those that seem to contain two other hues in them, as orange contains red and yellow, and as purple contains red and blue. Locke counts ideas of binary hues as simple ideas. His list of the simple ideas that enter by sight includes not only the ideas of "Light and Colours, as white, red, yellow, [and] blue," but also "their several Degrees or Shades, and Mixtures, as Green, Scarlet, Purple, Sea-green, and the rest" (II.iii.1). That Locke counts ideas of binary hues as simple ideas may reflect a basic fact about the visual sensations of color: the multiformity to which we call attention when we note that two regions are of different colors is typically much more striking than the multiformity to which we call attention when we note that one hue

contains two others. The uniformity of a uniformly orange surface is quite obvious; it is only when our attention is specially directed to it that we notice that this experience also possesses a kind of complexity.

It is not at all clear that Locke does, or should, allow that it is ever possible to have_E just one simple idea without having_E others at the same time. He would presumably not count one as having_E only the simple idea of red if in addition to sensing red one were also hearing noises, or feeling the weight of one's body on the soles of one's feet, or thinking about Aristotle's *Poetics*. He might also not count one as having_E just the simple idea of red if one were having a visual sensation as of a uniformly red region smaller than one's visual field. For in that case, he might say that one is having_E ideas of at least two colors: red, and whatever is the color of the surround. He might say that one is having_E ideas of the *shapes* of both regions as well. Thus he might be understating when he says that "we very seldom make assemblages of Colours, either for Use or Delight, but Figure is taken in also, and has its part in it" (II.xviii.4). What about a subject whose only sensory input is visual, whose whole attention is focused upon what she sees, and whose whole visual field is suffused with the same shade of red? Even if Locke were to concede that such a subject is not having_E the idea of a shape,²³ he still seems committed to saying that the subject is having_E the idea of space.²⁴ So long as we are thinking of subjects who are having_E ideas by having sensations, we cannot hope to grasp the difference between having_E a simple idea and having_E a complex one by reflecting upon the subject's entire experience at one time and her entire experience at another. To understand what it is to have_E a simple idea by having a sensation, we must focus on just one part or aspect of a subject's total sensory state at a moment.

It is fairly easy to see why Locke thinks of the visual experience of a single color as one that involves a uniform appearance. If we are to begin to make sense of his compositionism

however, we must be able to see this as one example of a broader notion of phenomenal uniformity, a notion that is applicable to other kinds of sense experiences. There are a couple of factors that make it easy to say what counts as a uniform appearance so far as visual sensation is concerned. We can specify all of the dimensions along which perceived color varies (hue, saturation, and brightness), and a visual sensation that is uniform with respect to color cannot be diverse or differentiated with respect to the other properties that vision detects. To visually sense shape, motion, or distance, one must sense differences in color.²⁵ So if a visual experience is of something as uniform with respect to color, then it has all of the uniformity a visual experience could have (unless we take into account the multiformity of binary hues). Locke himself has little to say about what counts as having simple ideas by other modalities. Let us briefly consider what might be said on his behalf.

We can identify parameters along which auditory sensations can vary – direction, pitch, timbre and loudness – and it is clear what counts as uniformity and diversity with respect to each of these. Locke does not say just what count as simple ideas of audition, but one can at least see how one might conceive of some auditory experiences as displaying a kind of uniformity analogous to seeing one color. One might say, for instance, that having_E a simple idea by having an auditory sensation is having an experience as of a tone emanating from a stationary source, and with a single pitch, timbre and loudness. Hearing a chord would count as having_E a complex idea by audition.

With touch, things are a bit less clear. It is less easy to say what are all of the parameters along which the objects of tactile sensations can seem to vary. Perhaps location, pressure, and warmth or coldness? Complications arise from the fact that there is a class of sensations that seem to be distinct from tactile sensations properly so-called, but that also seem to bear some

special relation to them. These include pains, itches, tickles, tingles and stinging, and they are a subset of what we have called bodily sensations. There is room for disagreement about what would constitute an exhaustive list of the fundamental types of bodily sensations, and there are also questions about the relations between some bodily sensations and some tactile sensations. Is the difference between a dull ache and a stabbing pain a difference in degree, or in kind? What is the relation between the feeling of warmth that comes from touching something warm and the feeling of warmth that results from having an infected body part? Is the former a tactile sensation and the latter a bodily sensation, even if they feel the same? Is the pain that results from a slap in the face a tactile sensation, or it is a non-tactile bodily sensation that happens to be triggered by the same cause as triggers the momentary sensation of force on one's face? One would need to be able to answer such questions before one could say what exactly counts as a uniform or a multiform tactile sensation.

It is with sensations of flavors and odors that matters really get obscure. One has only to think of the far-fetched vocabularies used to describe wines and perfumes in order to be reminded of the difficulty we have in describing and categorizing these sensations. In the case of gustatory and olfactory experiences, it can be quite difficult to say what counts as the sort of phenomenal uniformity that passes the test for simplicity. If one knew that there were a certain number of basic types of taste experiences, and that all other taste experiences were combinations of these, then one could say that a taste experience was uniform in the relevant sense so long as it was an experience belonging to just one of the basic types. It has long been claimed that there are a certain number of primary flavors that humans can detect. The trouble is that there has been, and continues to be, disagreement about how many primaries there are, and about what they are. Aristotle seems to have held that there were two primary flavors – sweet

and bitter – and that all others result from different ratios of these.²⁶ Linnaeus, writing in the eighteenth century, recognized eleven elementary taste qualities; his contemporary Haller at first recognized twelve, but later made do with six.²⁷ For much of the twentieth century it was widely accepted that there were four primary taste qualities – sweet, sour, salty and bitter – but now many researchers hold that there is a fifth, umami.²⁸

There is even less agreement about the number and identity of basic kinds of odors. Aristotle seems to have recognized six basic odors,²⁹ Linnaeus seven, and Haller three.³⁰ To recognize basic classes of odors is not necessarily to see some odors as primaries out of which all the others are composed, but theories of primary odors did get a serious airing in the twentieth century. In the early years of that century, H. Henning postulated a quality space defined by six odors: flowery, foul, fruity, spicy, burnt and resinous. He presented this graphically by locating each of these primary odors at one corner of a triangular “smell prism”.³¹ Decades later, John Amoore developed two different theories of primary odors. The first was based upon the terms most commonly used by chemists used to describe the odors of newly synthesized compounds, and on chemical similarities among the compounds so described. It postulated seven primary odors. The second was based upon studies of people with disabilities to detect certain odors. According to this theory, there are no less than eight, but probably as many as forty-three, primary odors.³² The project of explaining olfactory qualities as combinations of primary odors has now largely been abandoned.³³

We need not decide whether anything like Locke’s compositionalist account of sense experience is true. We are only trying to make sense of what that account might be. Locke says that simple ideas are those containing “*one uniform Appearance,*” and he takes the idea of red to be such an idea. To see something that is one shade of red is to be presented with an appearance

that is uniform in an obvious respect, so this provides us with some grasp of what he counts as the having_E of a simple idea by seeing. We have been considering whether we can extend this insight, make sense of the view that we have_E simple ideas by other modalities, and make sense of the claim that our total sensory states are built up out of these more basic experiential elements. I think the answer is that we can make sense of these claims, and perhaps even see their appeal, whether not in the end we think that they are true. What is to count as having_E a simple idea of touch, taste or smell is less obvious than what is to count as having_E a simple idea of sight or sound, but we can at least see what it might mean to apply the notion of a uniform appearance to these different kinds of sensations.

4. Simplicity Complicated

Locke's account of simplicity is made more complex by something he says at II.xv.9. Speaking of the ideas of space and duration, he says:

[T]hough they are justly reckoned amongst our *simple Ideas*: Yet none of the distinct *Ideas* we have of either is without all manner of *Composition*, it is the very nature of both of them to consist of *Parts*: But their *Parts* being all of the same kind, and without the mixture of any other *Idea*, hinder them not from having a *Place* amongst simple *Ideas*.

The ideas of space and duration are not simple in the sense of being without proper parts; yet because in each of these cases the proper parts are all tokens of the same idea type, it is nevertheless appropriate to count these ideas as simple ideas. Locke does several times speak of the “simple idea of space” (II.xiii.2, 27; *Works* IV, 392-393). He also calls the ideas of duration, space and number “simple” (II.xvii.22).³⁴ Though we have just been told that the ideas of space and duration have a place amongst simple ideas, Locke closes II.xv.9 with a suggestion about

what “may perhaps be fittest to be considered by us, as the simple *Ideas* of that kind, out of which our complex modes of Space, Extension, and Duration, are made up.” His candidates for the simple ideas out of which the ideas of space and duration are made up are ideas of the smallest periods and places that we can discern. These he calls ideas of moments and of sensible points, respectively.

We have two senses of ‘simple idea’ in play: the one that applies to the ideas of space and duration, and the one that applies to the ideas of moments and sensible points. The ideas of space and duration are simple in the sense of being *homogeneous*: each has proper parts, but all of those parts are tokens of the same type. The ideas of sensible points and moments are simple in the sense of being *partless*, or at least as near as near to that as we can conceive in these cases. Let us say that the former ideas are simple_H, the latter simple_P. We will call ideas complex_H if they have proper parts that are tokens of different types, and complex_P if they have proper parts. Partless ideas would seem to constitute a limiting case of homogenous ideas, since ideas without proper parts cannot have proper parts of different types.³⁵ If that is right, then there is a straightforward sense in which partlessness is a stronger notion than homogeneity: all partless ideas are homogeneous, but not all homogeneous ideas are partless.

A footnote was added to II.xv.9 in the 5th edition of the *Essay*, the last edition to be published at least partly under Locke’s direction. The text of the note seems to have been supplied by Pierre Coste, who translated some of Locke’s works into French and who lived with him at Oates while serving as tutor to the young Francis Masham.³⁶ Coste relates that he communicated to Locke two difficulties raised by Jean Barbeyrec, a law professor and translator of Pufendorf. Barbeyrec complained that it is a mistake to reckon the idea of space among the simple ideas, because this conflicts with the requirement that simple ideas contain “*nothing but*

one uniform Appearance, or Conception in the Mind” (II.ii.1). He also complained that even at II.ii.1 Locke fails to give “an exact Definition of what he understands by the Word *Simple Ideas*.”

Coste reports Locke’s reply to the second complaint first. He describes Locke as saying that his readers should not expect him to precede each subject with a list of definitions, as the scholastics do, but that “with Respect to the Term *Simple Idea*, he has had the good Luck to define that in the Place cited in the Objection; and therefore there is no Reason to supply that Defect.” Next comes the response to Barbeyrec’s worry about the idea of space:

The Question then is to know, Whether the *Idea of Extension* agrees with this Definition? Which will effectually agree to it, if it be understood in the Sense which Mr. *Locke* had principally in his View; for that Composition which he designed to exclude in that Definition, was a Composition of different *Ideas* in the Mind, and not a Composition of the same kind in a Thing whose Essence consists in having Parts of the same kind...So that if the *Idea of Extension* consists in having *Partes extra Partes*, (as the Schools speak,) ’tis always, in the Sense of Mr. *Locke*, a *Simple Idea*; because the *Idea* of having *Partes extra Partes*, cannot be resolved into two other *Ideas*.

If we trust Coste’s report – and there seems to be no reason not to – it tells us two important things about the explanation of simplicity at II.ii.1. It tells us that Locke remained satisfied with that explanation; and it tells us that it was simplicity_H that he meant to be explaining, not simplicity_P. This last point may somewhat be obscured by Locke’s (or Coste’s) language,³⁷ but the implication is straightforward enough. Locke tells us in the text of II.xv.9 that the idea of space has parts, and here in the footnote he is reported as saying that the idea of space is simple in the

sense that he intended to define at II.ii.1. If we trust the report, we must conclude that the simplicity he intended to define at II.ii.1 was not partlessness but homogeneity.

That Locke means to be defining simplicity_H rather than simplicity_P at II.ii.1 is also borne out by the remarks in his response to Barbeyrec about the scholastic formula that the idea of extension is “the *Idea* of having *Partes extra Partes*.” At II.xiii.15, he made it clear that he understands this formula as saying that to be extended is to have extended parts exterior to other extended parts. He derides it, saying that it is no more helpful than to explain what a fibre is by saying that it is something made up of several fibres. Here in the reply to Barbeyrec, his point is that if the idea of space is that of something with extended parts exterior to other extended parts, then it will be an idea with constituent parts that are all tokens of the same idea type. He presumes that if the idea of space is that of something having *partes extra partes*, then it will have constituents that are related to one another and to it as distinct sub-regions are related to one another and to the larger region they compose. Just as a space is homogeneous in the sense of being wholly composed of spaces, so on the scholastic formula the idea of space will be homogeneous in the sense of being wholly composed of ideas of spaces.

A number of additional questions about Locke’s compositionism now come into view. What is the link between uniformity of appearance and homogeneity? What is it for ideas to be partless, and which ideas does Locke think are partless? When he says that experience provides us with simple ideas, and that we make all complex ideas ourselves, which sort of simplicity and complexity does Locke have in mind? Note that both in the text of II.xv.9 and in the footnote Locke’s attitude is that there is no harm done in lumping the ideas of space and duration together with other simple ideas. Thus a constraint on our answers to the above questions should be that the distinction between simplicity_H and simplicity_P does not make much of a difference to

Locke's claims about simple ideas. Yet this raises one more question: How could the distinction between homogeneous ideas and partless ideas be of little consequence? Let us take these one at a time.

Our first question is why Locke takes an idea's containing a uniform appearance to be the criterion for its being homogeneous. The answer to this lies in something we noticed a moment ago about the way that he thinks about the relation between the parts of a space and the parts of the idea of space. In general, Locke seems to take it for granted that there is a certain correspondence between the parts of ideas and the parts of their objects. When it comes to the ideas had_E by sensing, he assumes that they have parts if and only if sense experience presents their objects as having parts. He also assumes that there is a correspondence between the nature of the idea's parts and the nature of the parts that the experience presents the object as having. The idea's parts are all of the same kind just in case sensation presents its object as having parts that are all of the same kind. To think about the relations between ideas and their objects in this way is to think of ideas as like pictures in certain respects. Pictures have parts, and present their objects as having parts. It is only because a picture has certain parts standing in certain relations that it represents its object as having certain parts standing in certain relations, though the picture's parts and their relations need not be the same as the object's parts and theirs.³⁸ A picture represents something as having parts of different colors only by having parts of different colors itself.³⁹ Locke thinks that an idea that contains a uniform appearance is like a picture that portrays a surface of uniform color. Both are complex things whose parts can only be different tokens of the same type. However, to think that ideas are like pictures in these ways is not necessarily to think that ideas *are* pictures.⁴⁰ One who took Locke's ideas to be appearances or

intentional objects could say analogous things about the relations between their parts and the parts of what they represent.

Our next question concerns what it is to have_E a simple_P idea. The best hope of understanding simplicity_P lies in Locke's observation about the ultimate constituents of the ideas of duration and time. He says that the ideas that are "fittest to be considered by us, as the simple *Ideas* of that kind, out of which our complex modes of Space, Extension, and Duration, are made up" are ideas of the smallest regions of space and of shortest spans of time that we can discern (II.xv.9). In most cases in which Locke calls an idea "simple," there is the possibility that he means only that it is simple_H; here we seem to have ideas that are offered as simple_P. Locke displays his usual caution. Rather than confidently declaring that ideas of moments and sensible points are the simples out of which our ideas of space and duration are composed, he offers them as the best candidates for that title.⁴¹ However, they are candidates that suggest a more general account of simplicity_P. If we allow for a sense of 'perceive' broad enough to permit talk of perceiving spans of time, we can say that Locke's candidates for partless ideas are ideas of perceptual minima. The idea one has_E when one sees a uniformly colored patch is simple_H, but not simple_P. When one has_E that complex_P idea by sensing, one does so by having_E its simple_P parts, whose objects are colored points. Analogous things might be said about ideas had_E by other modalities. Having_E a simple_P idea by audition might be hearing a barely discernable sound of a fixed pitch and timbre. Or it might be hearing a sound of a fixed pitch, timbre and loudness, but a sound whose source seems to be very precisely located. Having_E a simple_P idea by touch might involve feeling a barely detectable pressure or heat at a particular point on one's periphery. And so on.

The distinction between simplicity_H and simplicity_P raises questions about how we are to understand some of Locke's general claims about simple and complex ideas. How, for instance, are we to understand the claims that only simple ideas are passively received through experience, and that we make complex ideas from these? This could mean that we passively receive only simple_P ideas, or it could mean that we passively receive only simple_H ideas. On the first reading, what are passively received in sense experience are, I have suggested, ideas of perceptual minima. To say this is to say that even the sensation of a patch of color presupposes mental activity on our part. The idea that one has_E upon seeing an expanse of color will be a complex_P, homogeneous idea that the mind has made from passively received simple_P ideas. On the second reading, seeing a color patch does not require compounding, but seeing a color patch *as* the surface of an object does. For to see something as an object with a colored surface is to have_E a complex_H idea that has the simple_H idea of that color as a part.

Which reading is correct? Not a great deal turns upon the answer. Whether the raw data of sense consist of perceptual minima, or of such things as color patches and loud sounds, the important point is that stitching these together into appearances of objects involves mental activity on our part. Still, there are some considerations favoring the second reading. The fact that it is simplicity_H that Locke bothers to define suggests that this is the notion of simplicity that plays the greater role in his philosophical theorizing, and so the one likelier to figure in his general pronouncements about simple and complex ideas. Another consideration is that when Locke observes that the ideas of space and duration are “justly reckoned amongst our *simple Ideas*” despite having “all manner of *Composition*” (II.xv.9), he implies that there is little harm done in lumping complex_P, homogeneous ideas in with partless ideas and calling them all “simple.” This suggests that the difference between these two sorts of ideas is not of much

importance when it comes to the general claims that Locke wants to make about simple ideas. If this is true then presumably it is true because of what is common to these two kinds of ideas, and what is common to them is that they are all homogeneous. Thus it seems likely that his general claims about simple and complex ideas are claims about simple_H and complex_H ideas.

We have said something about what it is to have_E a simple idea by sensing. Can we also say what it would be to have_E a complex_H idea by sensing? Locke holds that complex ideas include ideas of substances, ideas of mixed modes, and ideas of relations (II.xii.3). Of these, ideas of corporeal substances are the best candidates for being had_E by sensing. Locke's examples of these include the ideas of "a Man, or a Sheep" (II.xii.6), of "Gold, Water, etc." (II.xxiii.3), of "Violet, Apple, etc." (II.xxiv.1). If a simple_H idea is one that contains a uniform appearance, then a complex_H idea is one that contains a multiform appearance. If seeing a uniformly colored surface is having_E a simple idea, then having_E a complex idea by sensing would involve simultaneously seeing two different colors, or seeing a color and hearing a sound, and so on. To have a sense experience of something like an apple *is* typically to undergo a multiform experience. It is to see differently colored surfaces or regions, and perhaps to smell the apple's fragrance, to feel its smoothness, to taste its tartness. Yet even if Locke thinks that having_E a complex idea by sensing involves simultaneously sensing two or more sensible qualities, he cannot think that simultaneously sensing two or more qualities *suffices* for having_E a complex idea. His remark about ideas entering the senses "simple and unmixed" (II.ii.1) leaves open the possibility that we could perceive many sensible qualities without combining them into complex ideas at all. He also wants to allow that we can simultaneously sense two qualities as belonging to different objects, which presumably means that we do not combine them into one complex idea.

What else, besides simultaneously sensing two or more qualities, is involved in having_E a complex idea by sensing? Locke thinks that having_E the complex idea of a corporeal substance means coming to see a number of sensible qualities as appearances of one thing.⁴² This may mean forming certain expectations about those qualities traveling together, and also our being disposed to sort and talk in certain ways rather than others. For Locke, it also involves having_E an idea that has “the confused *Idea* of *something* to which they belong, and in which they subsist,” as one of its constituents (II.xxiii.3). Nevertheless, though this may be an essential ingredient in the compounding of ideas of substances, it will not suffice as a story about compounding in general. Let us grant that part of the difference between (i) having_E a number of simple ideas of sensible qualities by sensing and (ii) having_E the complex idea of a substance by sensing lies in the fact that (ii) involves having_E an idea that has the idea of substratum as a constituent. Even so, this merely postpones the question of what it is for various ideas to be compounded into a complex idea. For the compounding of the idea of substratum together with ideas of sensible qualities is itself something that stands in need of explanation. Furthermore, not all of Locke’s complex ideas are ideas of substances. Ideas of relations and of mixed modes are also complex, and we need to understand what it means for them to be compounded. Unfortunately, Locke’s general remarks about the operation by means of which we turn a number of simple ideas into a complex idea are metaphorical and do not carry us far. He says that we combine simple ideas (II.xii.1), that we put them together (II.xi.6). Yet unless ideas are themselves extended things, compounding cannot literally involve moving ideas about.

Without a satisfactory account of compounding, we cannot say much about the conception of parthood at work in Locke’s theory of ideas. So long as we are focused upon cases in which ideas are had_E by sensing, there is some temptation to see parthood as parasitic

upon apparent spatial relations between the objects of simple and complex ideas. There is a temptation to say that the simple idea of red is a part of the complex idea of an apple because one's sense experience presents a part of the surface of the apple as being red. One could say similar things about ideas of the temperatures and flavors that we detect at objects' surfaces, and even about ideas of the sounds and odors that seem to emanate from those surfaces. However, to ascribe this quasi-spatial conception of parthood to Locke across the board would be to saddle him with an account of parthood has little prospect of explaining what it means for the idea of God to be "made up of the simple *Ideas* we receive from *Reflection*" (II.xxiii.33). Furthermore, other accounts of parthood are compatible with the little that Locke says about simplicity and complexity. One could say that the simple idea of red is a part of one's complex idea of an apple just in case the episode in which one is caused to have_E the idea of the apple also causes one to have_E the idea of red. Or one could say that the simple idea of red is a part of one's complex idea of an apple just in case one believes or judges that the cause of one's having_E the idea of an apple is also the cause of one's having_E the idea of red.

5. Having Ideas in Other Contexts

Locke needs a consistent story about what it is for ideas to be simple and complex, one that applies to ideas however they are had_E. This is not to say that he cannot allow for ideas to be "simple" in different senses. As we have seen, he does speak of ideas as "simple" in two senses. However, Locke is committed to saying that the same simple ideas can be had_E in different ways. It is a deliverance of his empiricism that simple ideas acquired by sensing later figure in episodes of remembering, imagining and calculating. The simple ideas acquired through introspection stock our meditations about God and angels. He also holds that some

simple ideas can be had_E both by sensation and by introspection. These include the ideas of pleasure, pain, power, existence and unity (II.vii.1). If one has_E an idea by sensing and later has_E it another way – while introspecting, or when thinking of something in its absence – then it must continue to be simple or complex in whatever senses it was simple or complex before. Whatever he thinks ideas are, Locke cannot think that the simplicity that characterizes an idea had_E by sensing is an accidental feature of it. An idea that was not simple in whatever sense that idea is simple would be a different idea.

There is a worry about what it means for Locke to say that one has an idea that one previously acquired through sensation. Because he thinks that ideas cease to exist when they cease to be perceived, he cannot think that this is a matter of one's standing in some relation to a particular that entered one's mind years ago and that has persisted since. To have_E an idea that one acquired long ago must be, for him, a matter of having once had_E an idea, having retained the power to make oneself have_E an idea like it later on, and now having_E such an idea in virtue of the exercise of that power. We can put this by saying that at the later time one has_E a token of the same type one had_E earlier. However, there is a difficulty about how to specify the relevant type. On the one hand, Locke will not want to say that my having once had_E a token idea of red leaves me with the power to have_E a token idea of green, though there is a type ("idea of a color") to which both of those tokens belong. On the other hand, he also does not want to say that exact fidelity is required for one to be having an idea one had before by sensing. For he takes there to be a relation between the idea one has_E and the appearance with which one presented, and he does not want to say that one who thinks of red in its absence is confronted with exactly the same appearance as one who senses red.

If Locke is to have one story about what it is for ideas to be simple and complex, then he has got to think that the notion of a uniform appearance has application not only when ideas are had_E by sensing, but whenever they are had_E. To think that other cognitive functions involve uniform and multiform appearances as sensory episodes do is to assimilate these other functions with the sensation of external things. Locke certainly goes some distance in this direction. The difficult question is how far he goes.

Earlier I described two possible views about the relation between having_E an idea by sensing and having_E that same idea when its object is absent. On the first view, what the two episodes have in common is just that they involve much of the same representational content. On the second, they share not just representational content but also phenomenal character. This second way of thinking about the relation between sensation and thought makes thought quasi-sensory: to think of a sensible object in its absence is to be in a state that is something like seeing it, hearing it, smelling it, touching it or tasting it (or some combination of these), and yet not so much like it that the thinking is apt to be confused for a sensory experience. If Locke is to have a consistent account of simplicity and complexity, then his conception of thought must be the second, quasi-sensory one. To have_E a simple idea by sensing is to have a sensation in which something is presented as uniform in one of several respects. The visual experience of a region as being one color is the clearest case, but we can also make sense of simplicity as phenomenal uniformity in cases of auditory, tactile, gustatory and even olfactory sensations. If the simple ideas had_E of things in their absence are to be simple in the same sense as those had_E by sensing, then the having_E of them must involve experiences that are something like seeing uniform expanses of color, hearing single notes, smelling primary odors, etc.

Many would accept that thinking of a shape in its absence is sometimes something like seeing it, and that thinking of a song in a quiet room is sometimes something like hearing it. This is what lies behind our talk of mental images, of seeing things in the mind's eye, of getting a song stuck in one's head. It is less clear that thinking about flavors and odors is like tasting and smelling, or that thinking about tactile sensations is anything like having them. The quasi-sensory account of thought also seems to neglect the difference between merely thinking about physical objects in their absence and imagining them. For it does not seem that I must frame a mental image of Locke every time I have a thought about him. These deficiencies make the quasi-sensory account of thought sound rather primitive. However, the real embarrassment comes when we consider what the quasi-sensory account says about introspection and bodily sensation.

On Locke's view, sensation is just one of two original sources of simple ideas. The other is reflection, "the *Perception of the Operations of our own Minds* within us" (II.i.4). He conceives of reflection as like sensation only directed inwards:

This Source of *Ideas*, every Man has wholly in himself: And though it be not Sense, as having nothing to do with external Objects; yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be call'd internal Sense. (II.i.4)

Among the ideas that Locke calls simple ideas of reflection are "*Remembrance, Discerning, Reasoning, Judging, Knowledge, Faith, etc.*" (II.vi.2). Because he takes reflection to be a kind of "internal Sense," we should expect him to hold there are two ways of having_E the ideas we acquire by reflection, just as there are two ways of having the ideas we acquire by sensation. There will be the way one has_E the idea "knowledge" when one observes oneself knowing, and the way that one has_E it when one thinks of others as knowing, or when one thinks of knowledge

in general. This will be the difference between introspecting and afterwards using the fruits of introspection in thought. What we have so far called the quasi-sensory account of thought might really be but one half of a broader account. On this broader account, thinking about external objects in their absence is quasi-sensory, and thinking about mental states when not introspecting is quasi-introspectory. Yet if introspection is itself being conceived of as much like sensation, this whole account of thought might still be termed a quasi-sensory one.

If 'simple' has the same meaning when Locke speaks of having simple ideas of sensation and of having simple ideas of reflection, then having_E simple ideas of reflection has got to involve awareness of a certain kind of uniform appearance. The problem is that this seems to require acts of introspection to have qualitative aspects that they do not have, or at least that not all of them have. Some volitionists say that willing is a mental activity with a distinct qualitative feel to it.⁴³ Perhaps Locke is such a volitionist, and thinks that when we reflect upon ourselves willing we become aware of a certain kind of appearance. Still, it does not seem at all plausible to say that there is a distinctive appearance shared by all episodes of knowing, or all episodes of discerning, or all episodes of reasoning. If it is implausible to say that introspection reveals episodes of knowing and discerning to have distinctive and uniform appearances – as visual sensations of one color do, and as auditory sensations of one note do – then it is all the more implausible to say that *thinking* about discerning and knowing involves being presented with such appearances. Yet if Locke is to have a consistent account of what it is to have_E simple ideas, then he must say that one becomes aware of a uniform appearance when one thinks about another person's knowledge, or about past episodes of reasoning.

If Locke assimilates all other cognitive functions to the sensation of external objects, then he might be able to tell a single story about what it is to have_E simple and complex ideas, but he

would fail to do justice to an important range of mental phenomena. If he stops short of assimilating all cognitive functions with the sensation of external objects, then he would avoid embarrassing accounts of some cognitive functions, but would not have a consistent way of thinking about the simplicity, complexity and parthood of ideas. Either way, there is a serious problem for his theory of ideas. It does not seem beyond the pale that Locke takes all thoughts of absent physical objects to be quasi-sensory. Yet the suggestion that knowing, discerning, and reasoning have distinctive phenomenologies squares so poorly with ordinary experience as to raise serious doubts about whether he could mean to go that far in assimilating introspection and the sensation of external things. Certainly his observation that reflection is “very like” sensation need not mean anything that strong. Reflection may be very like sense just because both are original sources of simple ideas, both yield knowledge of objective realities, both afford the opportunity for different degrees of attention, and both tell us more about objective reality when we are more attentive.

Perhaps the best evidence that Locke does not consistently adhere to a quasi-sensory conception of thought lies in what he says about what it is like to think of bodily sensations. Bodily sensations pose a serious difficulty for the quasi-sensory account of thought because having bodily sensations and thinking about them are such profoundly different experiences. Locke draws attention to the difference in the course of arguing for the real existence of things outside us:

Add to this, that many of those Ideas are produced in us with pain, which afterwards we remember without the least offence. Thus the pain of Heat or Cold, when the Idea of it is revived in our Minds, gives us no disturbance; which, when felt, was very troublesome, and is again, when actually repeated: which is occasioned by the disorder the external

Object causes in our Bodies, when applied to it: and we remember the pain of *Hunger*, *Thirst*, or the *Head-ach*, without any pain at all; which would either never disturb us, or else constantly do it, as often as we thought of it, were there nothing more but *Ideas* floating in our Minds, and appearances entertaining our Fancies, without the real Existence of Things affecting us from abroad. (IV.xi.6)

Locke draws attention to the fact that the sensation of hunger is a sharply unpleasant one, and the recollection of past hunger is not like that. Another difference that he does not mention is that bodily sensations such as hunger are physically localized in a way that memories of them are not. One may remember the hunger pangs as being in one's belly, but the memory does not seem to be in one's belly.

Locke's marginal summary of IV.xi.6 reads: "*Thirdly, Pleasure or Pain, which accompanies actual Sensation, accompanies not the returning of those Ideas without the external Objects.*" One might read this as saying that the difference between feeling hunger and thinking about hunger is that in the first case the idea of hunger is paired with the idea of pain, and in the second it is not. That will not do, because the point here applies to pains themselves. To remember yesterday's pain is not to experience anything like pain today. If the recollection of past pain dredges up regrets about the past or apprehensions about the future, these are fresh "pains" of a different sort. The memory of yesterday's "*Head-ach*" cannot involve the return of the idea of the headache without the idea of pain, because a headache *is* a certain kind of pain. Locke generally treats hunger as another kind of pain.⁴⁴ In IV.xi.6 Locke is not saying that ideas sometimes had_E in conjunction with the idea of pain are sometimes had without it. He is saying that remembering a bodily sensation is very unlike having one. There is a way of having_E the idea of pain that is intensely unpleasant, and there is another way of having_E it that is not.

Whether Locke's observation about the character of bodily sensations makes for a good argument against skepticism about external objects is doubtful.⁴⁵ However, it does give us reason to think that he does not conceive of the relation between thinking about pain and being in pain as like the relation between seeing in the mind's eye and seeing. It suggests that he does not want to say that thinking about pain involves being confronted with a uniform appearance that is significantly like the one that confronts the person in pain. We can readily understand this, as it is far from clear that thinking about pain involves any kind of appearance, still less a uniform one. Yet if Locke does not hold that someone thinking about pain is presented with a uniform appearance, then he is not always thinking of phenomenal uniformity when he calls ideas simple. To say this is to say that there is a muddle at the heart of his theory of ideas, no matter what his "*Ideas*" are.

¹ References to Locke's *Essay* are given by book, chapter and section in the P.H. Nidditch edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). Unless otherwise indicated, references to other of Locke's works are given by volume and page number in *The Works of John Locke*, 11th ed., (London: Thomas Tegg, 1823).

² This point is made by Vere Chappell, "Locke's Theory of Ideas," in V.C. Chappell, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 35. It was made much earlier by John Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy Asserted* (London: Printed for Roger Clavil at the Peacock, 1697), 3.

³ Bernard Wuellner, *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1966).

⁴ John Norris, *Cursory Reflections upon a Book call'd An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, appended to *Christian Blessedness* (London: Printed for S. Manship at the Black Bull, 1690): 3.

⁵ Michael Ayers, "Are Locke's 'Ideas' Images, Intentional Objects or Natural Signs?" *Locke Newsletter* 17 (1986): 3-36, and *Locke*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1991); Nicholas Jolley, *Locke: His Philosophical Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶ Peter Alexander, *Ideas, Qualities and Corpuscles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Thomas Lennon, "Locke and the Logic of Ideas," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 18 (2001): 155-177, "Through a Glass Darkly: More on Locke's Logic of Ideas," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2004): 322-337, and "Locke on Ideas and Representation," in L. Newman, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 231-257.

⁷ John Mackie, *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); Vere Chappell, “Locke’s Theory of Ideas.”

⁸ John Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance From Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁹ Michael Jacovides, “Locke’s Resemblance Theses.” *Philosophical Review* 108 (1999): 461-496 (see 466).

¹⁰ John Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy Asserted*, 1-23; Gilbert Ryle, “John Locke on the Human Understanding,” reprinted in C. B. Martin and D. M. Armstrong, eds., *Locke and Berkeley: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968): 16-20; Richard Aaron, *John Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937): 88; Roger Woolhouse, *Locke’s Philosophy of Science and Knowledge [Locke’s Philosophy of Science]* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971): 38-45.

¹¹ This is explicit in Roger Woolhouse, *Locke’s Philosophy of Science*, 38ff.

¹² Whether “perceiving” one’s ideas specially involves some part of the body depends in part on whether people are wholly material, which Locke regards as an open question. He is also noncommittal about whether the objects of this special sort of “perceiving” are physical – about whether, for instance, perceiving one’s own ideas involves perceiving episodes in one’s brain.

¹³ For an idea to be in the mind is either for one to have_E it or for one to have_D it. The latter requires that one has previously had_E it. That is why Locke says that an idea’s being in the mind is incompatible with one’s *never* having perceived it.

¹⁴ Here and elsewhere in this paper, when I speak of “having a sensation” I am referring to the undergoing of a sensory experience. I hope to avoid reifying “sensations.” That is to say, I am

not supposing that we should treat “having a sensation” as a matter of standing in some relation (“having”) to a mental particular of some sort (a “sensation”).

¹⁵ See, for example, II.viii.16, 19 and II.xxi.73.

¹⁶ There are more such passages. At II.xxx.2, while arguing for the thesis that all simple ideas are real, he refers to the ideas of whiteness, coldness and pain as “Sensations” and also as “Appearances.” Later in the same chapter, while arguing that simple ideas cannot be false, he says that the truth of these “Appearances, or Perceptions in our Minds” consists only in their being “answerable to the Powers in external objects, to produce by our Senses such Appearances in us” (II.xxxii.16). At IV.ii.1, he speaks of simple ideas as “appearances or sensations,” and refers specifically to “the Sensation or *Idea* we name *Whiteness*.”

¹⁷ See II.xii.1 and *Works* IV, 11. Despite these passages, some commentators portray Locke as holding that some complex ideas are passively received through sensation. For discussion, see Author, forthcoming.

¹⁸ Locke remarks upon this familiar experience when he says that “Sounds also...are modified by the diversity of Notes of different length put together, which make that complex *Idea* call’d a *Tune*, which a Musician may have in his mind, when he hears or makes no Sound at all, by reflecting on the *Ideas* of those Sounds, so put together silently in his own Fancy” (II.xviii.3).

¹⁹ At II.ii.1, he says that “one thing is carefully to be observed, concerning the *Ideas* we have; and that is, That *some* of them are *simple*, and *some complex*.” At II.ii.2, he calls simple ideas “the Materials of all our Knowledge,” and later on he describes them as “the ultimate Materials of all [the Mind’s] Compositions” (II.xii.2). At the end of a chapter devoted to simple ideas of sensation and reflection, he challenges “any one to assign any *simple Idea*, which is not *received from one of those Inlets* before-mentioned, or any *complex Idea* not *made out of those simple*

ones” (II.vii.10). Martha Bolton, “The Taxonomy of Ideas In Locke’s *Essay*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke’s Essay*, ed . L. Newman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 67-100, contends that Locke takes ideas of relations to have “constituents” that are not “compositional parts” (73). She variously describes these constituents as relations among two or more simple ideas, and as comparisons of two or more ideas. However, I find such textual evidence as she offers unconvincing. It consists of passages (II.xi.4; II.xii.1; II.xxv.1) where Locke says that acts of comparing give rise to ideas of relations, not passages in which he says that relations or comparisons are constituents of ideas of relations. Some commentators have suggested that Locke’s account of ideas of relations is hard to square with his compositionism, and some have claimed that late in life he came to realize this and backed away from taking the distinction between simple and complex ideas to be exhaustive. For discussion, see [Author’s paper].

²⁰ On a less likely version of the disjunctive reading, he is saying that the perception of a simple idea is one that contains either (i) one uniform appearance, or (ii) one conception. This reading renders the definition vacuous unless there is a non-circular way of spelling out what it would be for the perception of an idea to contain one conception. If one were to say that each complex idea contains more than one conception because it contains conceptions of the simple ideas that its constituents, then we are simply helping ourselves to the simple/complex distinction rather than explaining it.

²¹ Chappell, “Locke’s Theory of Ideas,” 36.

²² Locke makes it a matter of the definition of ‘definition’ that the definiens must involve more than one idea. We can see why this is so. If the proposed definiens of ‘S’ were ‘S’, this would not constitute a definition at all, since we would not be using non-synonymous terms to show the

meaning of ‘S’. If the proposed definiens were the name of a simple idea other than S – ‘T’, say – then we would not have a definition of ‘S’. For to say that S and T are different ideas is to say that the terms associated with them have different meanings.

²³ Locke might not make this concession. He could insist that she is having_E the idea of the oval shape of her visual field.

²⁴ At II.xiii.2 Locke implies that we get the simple idea of space every time we perceive a distance between two differently colored bodies, and even when we perceive a distance between the parts of one body.

²⁵ I am including black and white as colors. They are achromatic colors – colors with zero hue – and so are colors in a limiting sense, rather as zero is a number in a limiting sense. See C. L. Hardin, *Color for Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), 25.

²⁶ See *On the Soul* 422b10 and *Sense and Sensibilia* 442a13.

²⁷ Edwin Boring, *Sensation and Perception in the History of Experimental Psychology* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1942), 453.

²⁸ This is the taste associated with monosodium glutamate, among other things. The widespread recognition of it as a basic taste quality seems to have come in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Writing in 1972, one researcher could say that “currently there are few who would dissent from the common four-fold classification.” See Frank Geldard, *The Human Senses* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1972), 504. Yet in 2002, the authors of an encyclopedia article speak of taste as “traditionally classified into only five basic taste qualities for humans and higher vertebrates.” See Andrew Spielman, Joseph Brand, and Wentao Yan, “Chemosensory Systems,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Life Sciences*, vol.4, (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, Nature Publishing Group, 2002), 264.

²⁹ See *On the Soul* 421a28-30.

³⁰ Francis Schiller, “A Memoir of Olfaction,” *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 6 (1997): 134.

³¹ Geldard, *The Human Senses*, 455.

³² John Amoore, “Odor Theory and Odor Classification,” in *Fragrance Chemistry*, ed. E. Theimer (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 52-61.

³³ Maurice Chastrette, “Classification of Odors and Structure-Odor Relationships,” in *Olfaction, Taste and Cognition*, ed. C. Rouby et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 105.

³⁴ There are also a couple of other places where he implies that the idea of duration is simple: II.xxiii.33, 34.

³⁵ The alternative would be to say that only ideas with proper parts can possibly count as homogeneous, so that the class of partless ideas and that of homogeneous ideas cannot have any members in common. If these classes were supposed to be mutually exclusive, it would be much harder to make sense of Locke’s attitude that it is “just” and “fit” to lump their members together and to call them all “simple.”

³⁶ Coste explains this in a passage that appears in the second (1729) edition of his translation of the *Essay*. This passage is reproduced at the end of the footnote to II.xv.9 in the Nidditch edition.

³⁷ One possible source of confusion is the claim that the sort of complexity that was supposed to be excluded by the definition of simplicity at II.ii.1 was [A] “a Composition of different *Ideas*” rather than [B] “a Composition of the same kind in a Thing whose Essence consists in having Parts of the same kind.” This suggests that the two notions of complexity at issue include (i) one that pertains to ideas and (ii) one that pertains to things. In fact, the two notions of complexity at

issue are both ones that pertain to ideas, and they both have physical analogues. A physical analogue to [A] would be a body composed of more than one atom; an analogue to [B] would be a region of space composed of smaller regions.

A second possible source of confusion concerns the remark that the definition of simplicity at II.ii.1 was meant to exclude “a Composition of different *Ideas*.” This could be read in two ways: ‘different’ could mean “different tokens of any type” or “tokens of different types.” The fact that Locke is saying both that the idea of space has parts and that it is simple in the sense he intended to define at II.ii.1 shows that ‘different’ must mean “tokens of different types.”

³⁸ In a picture depicting objects at some distance, the parts of the picture will be nearer to one another than their objects are depicted as being. Distance from the viewer is represented by the sizes and locations of parts of the picture that are actually in the same plane.

³⁹ This is not to say that only something multicolored can represent something as multicolored. One could presumably correlate sounds with colors, and use sound to represent the colors of a surface. It is also not to say that something multicolored can represent something multicolored only by having the colors of the thing it represents. A fresh out of the box paint-by-number kit can represent something as having variously colored parts by having closed sub-regions with numbers in them. Even so, to display numerals in closed regions a thing must have at least two colors.

⁴⁰ It is not even necessarily to think that ideas and pictures both have parts in the same sense of ‘parts’. Modes of representations can have structural features in common even if they different sorts of parts are involved. The written transcription of a jazz soloist’s performance represents the parts of that performance and their relations only because the transcription has parts that

stand in certain relations. However, the parts of transcription are spatial parts, whereas the parts of the performance are temporal parts.

⁴¹ Coste suggests some willingness on Locke's part to allow that the idea of extension may be "so peculiar, that it cannot exactly agree with the Definition he has given of those *Simple Ideas*" (II.xv.9, note). Were that the case, he says, Locke "thinks 'tis better to leave it there expos'd to this Difficulty, than to make a new Division in his Favour." Coste does not explain what are the respects in which the idea of extension is so peculiar.

⁴² This point is nicely made by Nicholas Jolley, *Locke: His Philosophical Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47.

⁴³ Carl Ginet, *On Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) claims that there is an intrinsic and extremely familiar "*actish* phenomenal quality" that all mental actions, including those that begin voluntary movements, seem to us to have (11-14).

⁴⁴ At II.xx.18, he calls hunger a mode of pain. He refers several times to the "uneasiness of hunger" (II.xxi.34, 43, 45), and seems to use 'uneasiness' either to refer to pain or to a kind to which pains belong (see II.vii.1-2). At IV.x.2, he speaks of "Hunger, or some other Pain."

⁴⁵ The anti-skeptical argument seems to be this: (1) only "*actual Sensation*" produces experiences of pleasure or pain (IV.xi.6, marginal section heading), and (2) we experience pleasure and pain, hence (3) actual sensation occurs. The conclusion is anti-skeptical if by '*actual Sensation*' Locke means apparently sensory experiences that are triggered by external objects or by organic changes in our own bodies. The trouble is that (1) is an empirical claim, and our grounds for holding it depend upon our being able to identify some apparent sensory experiences as having been triggered by external objects or organic changes in our bodies. Thus

we are justified in holding (1) only if we are already presuming the existence of external objects including our bodies.