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RE-INTERPRETATION OF LOCKE'S THEORY OF IDEAS

In 4.1.1 of the *Essay*, Locke argues that "Since the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident that our knowledge is only conversant about them".[1] The traditional interpretation of this and similar passages is a representative realism which, because it precludes direct perception of the physical world, leads to scepticism. That Locke himself recognizes and dismisses the problems associated with representative realism has led several scholars to reinterpret his work in a way which avoids the difficulties of traditional interpretations. Professor Hall has recently expressed dissatisfaction with such re-interpretations : "partly because some passages seem to me to suggest the contrtary, and partly because I am uneasy with the terms of the discussion."[2] Recent support for the traditional interpretation is based on the argument (Ayers) that the term 'idea' is employed uniformly in accordance with the theory of knowleldge Locke holds. In this paper I argue that Locke does not present either a consistent theory of knowledge or a consistent doctrine of ideas; given his varied remarks or views both interpretations remain plausible.

Locke's early critics (Norris, Sergeant, Lee, Stillingfleet) interpret the representationalism of the *Essay* in the framework of cartesian dualism. This framework posits the existence of two unlike substances, mind and matter, the modes or qualities of each substance being mutually exclusive. Since physical objects are not in the mind, must be represented to us by mental images or ideas caused by these objects.Rather than criticizing this view, Locke simply poses the question: "Our knowledge, therefore, is real only so far as there is a conformity between our Ideas and the reality of things. But what shall here be the criterion? How shall the mind, when it perceives nothing but

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its own ideas, know that they agree with things themselves?"(4.4.3) Locke's critics conclude that they cannot. Lee, for example, argues that Locke's philosophy "must involve us in an endless scepticism", for his principles "will neither allow us to suppose nor can prove the real existence of things without us".[3]

In the introduction to the *Essay* Locke apologizes for his frequent use of the word 'idea'. He explains that it is a term which serves best to stand for "whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks". The term is used to express "whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species, or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking". (1.1.8) That such ideas exist he finds past doubt; this, he says, is intuitive knowledge, for "every man being conscious to himself, that he thinks and that which his mind is employ'd about whilst thinking, being the *ideas* that are there, 'tis past doubt, that men have in their minds several *ideas*, such as are those expressed by the words whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, man, elephant, army, drunkenness, and others". (2.1.1) Many of Locke's contemporaries express surprise and indignation over his careless use of a technical term. Surely, says Norris, "by all the laws of method in the world, he ought *first* to have defined what he meant by ideas, and to have acquainted us with their nature", for how can anyone discuss the origin of ideas "before the meaning of the word idea be stated, and the nature of the thing, at least in general, be understood?" Stillingfleet was equally baffled, proclaiming that Locke uses a new term, one which leads to religious, moral, and scientific scepticism.[4]

Hall points out that such complaints have continued unabated. Aaron, for example, contends that Locke "has included far too much within the connotation of this one term", e.g., sense-data, images, memories, concepts, mental acts. Like Locke's early critics, Aaron concludes that Locke holds a traditional view of ideas and knowledge. Aaron asks: "if Locke felt even vaguely that the theory was inherently defective, why did he accept it?" He concludes that "the only possible answer" is that Locke must have "felt there was no alternative". He notes that the theory was held almost universally at the time, and held by opposing schools of thought.[5]

Textual support for construing ideas as images or entities that form a screen between the mind and the external world is generally

based on passages stressing *mediation*. In 4.4.3 Locke states that "it is evident the mind knows not things immediately, but only by the intervention of the ideas it has of them". He frequently speaks of contemplating, knowing, and perceiving ideas rather than things. In 2.1.25 he says "as the bodies that surround us do diversely affect our organs, the mind is forced to receive the impressions; and cannot avoid the perception of those ideas that are annexed to them". Locke makes it clear that ideas somehow function in a representative capacity. In 4.21.4 he asserts that "since the things that the mind contemplates are none of them, besides the mind itself, present to the understanding, it is necessary that something else, as a sign or representation of the thing it considers, should be present to it; and these signs or representations are ideas". Locke seems to be committed to a belief in the existence of mental entities or objects, entities which function as pictures or images of a world we have no direct acquaintance with.

Michael Ayers argues that Locke's use of the term 'idea' is not ambiguous: "To show that his usage is not ambiguous it would be enough to show that it is employed uniformly in accordance with the theory he holds". Locke, he contends, holds an imagist theory, his doctrine of abstraction "is above all an imagist theory of the perception or intuition of universal truth" very much "like those of Hobbes and Berkeley". According to Ayers, an abstract idea is not, as Peter Alexander claims, a definition, but rather, "a particular perception or image 'partially considered'".[6] According to Locke, the immediate object of all our "reasoning and knowledge, is nothing but particulars". (4.17.8) Ayers therefore contends that even the ideas of existence, power, cause, and unity involve images of particulars that one would subsume under such categories.

Yolton, Woozley, Soles, and others have taken the position that Locke does not regard ideas as images. According to Yolton, Locke uses the term 'idea' to indicate that perceptual awareness is mental. Woozley contends that Locke uses the term to express recognition of meaning (concepts). Soles argues that the need to emphasize immediate private aspects of consciousness is the "original motivation for the terminology of ideas". To avoid reification of ideas it is not difficult, he says, to rewrite Locke's claims; "thus, to say that our perception of the external world is mediated by the perception of ideas is to say that a necessary element in the perception of physical objects is the occur-

rence of mental states of a certain sort". For Soles, to say that we immediately perceive our own ideas is to say that we have "immediate and incorrigible knowledge of our own mental states.... thus with regard to the ideas of perception or sensation, the idiom need mean nothing more than 'is having a sensory/perceptual experience of a certain sort". According to Soles, having an idea of pain and the sensation of pain are equivalent. In other cases 'has an idea' "means something like 'understands' or 'believes".[7]

Common to re-interpretations is the notion that Locke's view represents a common-sense theory of knowledge. Yolton, for example, contends: "it is important, in the light of Thomas Reid's contrast between philosophical and the ordinary account of perception and ideas, to find Locke placing himself on the side of the 'un-philosophical' ".[8] This entails reading ideas not as images or entities, but, in the tradition of Arnauld, as modifications of the mind. In this context the current debate has not changed in essentials since the interpretations of Brown and Hamilton. According to Hamilton, representative perception admits of "a subdivision into two forms, —a simple and a more complex. The simpler, that the immediate or representative object is a mere modification of the percipient mind, —the more complex, that this representative object is something different both from the reality and from the mind".[9]

Brown contends that there is not a single argument in any of Locke's works that is founded on the substantial reality of ideas as separate and distinct things in the mind. According to Brown, Locke regards the idea neither as a material image nor as a mental entity that has an existence apart from the mental energy of which it is the object. Like Arnauld, Locke considers the idea perceived and the percipient act as constituting the same modification of the conscious mind. Hamilton argues that of all the opinions Locke expresses about ideas, he formally rejects that attributed to him by Brown. Ayers also finds this the most difficult interpretation to prove. The formal rejection is supposedly found in Lock's *Examination of Malebranche.* Locke explains that "the good word 'modification' signifies nothing to me more than I knew before; namely, that I have now" an idea "which I had not some minutes ago".[10] Hamilton concludes that for Locke ideas are separate entities. I think this conclusion should remain suspect. Locke's criticism of Malebranche does not seem to be a rejection of the view that ideas are

modifications, but a rejection of the view that the knower and known must be the same or similar. Because physical objects are extended and the soul is not, Malebranche contends that one cannot perceive the sun. Locke argues that ideas need not resemble their causes. His criticism may in fact be read as a criticism of the view that ideas are separate entities which must be similar to those of a spiritual being.

Locke rarely uses the word 'image' when describing the process of perception. Ayers suggests that the most probable reason for Locke avoiding the term is that it was used in too many ways. This, however, would hold equally true of the word 'idea'. Locke was presented with numerous opportunities to explain his use of the term, to be precise with regard to the ontological status of ideas, and to explain their representative function in knowledge. Unfortunately, he did not take advantage of the criticisms of his contemporaries. In most contexts other than that of treating memory, Locke appears to use the term, as Yolton contends, simply to stress the mental features necessary for cognition. That this does not square with several passages treating ideas as pictures or images, leads one to suspect that Locke does not have a consistent theory.

Yolton correctly notes that Locke often speaks of observing or perceiving external objects and not ideas. Knowledge of the existence of physical objects is not based on the mere apprehension of the connections between ideas, but rather, on the *reception* of ideas from causes external to the mind. Locke insists that it is only by *direct* contact with objects that we can claim to know of their existence, when, for example, "we immediately by our senses perceive in fire its heat and color". (2.23.7) In 4.2.14 he tells us that we receive ideas of objects only when we perceive them, i.e., only upon the "actual entrance of ideas from external objects". He clearly points out that the object of sensation is the external thing of which we have an idea. It is, he says, "*the actual receiving* of ideas from without that gives us notice of the existence of other things, and makes us know, that something does exist at that time without us". (4.11.2) Locke seems to be arguing that this is not an ordinary inference from an idea perceived to an object not perceived. As Yolten points out, "in stressing the mental features of knowing and perceiving, Locke did not mean to make knowledge of body impossible"[11]

In 4.2.14 Locke brings up the question of inference in the context of distinguishing ideas of memory, dreams, and the external world. "I ask anyone", he says, "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... 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". The inference to the physical object is unlike most scientific inferences which proceed from that which is seen to an unseen cause, and more like an inference related to time-lag in perception. It no more follows that we do not see the real sun because it takes light time to travel to our senses, than it does that we do not see the real sun because we have an idea of the sun in our mind. If by perceiving the real sun one means the real essence or insensible particles, then for Locke, we do not perceive the sun. However, as Yolton points out, if we mean the gross object in our perceptual field, then we do see the real sun and not just an image of this sun.[12]

That Locke does present a theory of direct realism in the *Essay* seems incontrovertible. He speaks as a direct realist in several passages in all Books, for example, in 2.23.7 of the distance between sensible objects that we perceive, in 3.6.24 he speaks of distinguishing objects by their sensible qualities, in 3.6.28 and 30 of men observing qualities joined and existing together in nature, in 3.11.19-21 of leading sensible qualities, e.g., shape and our perception of such qualities, in 3.10.32 he speaks of "he that, in a new-descovered country, shall see several sorts of animals and vegetables, unknown to him before, in 3.6.9 of those sensiible qualities which we observe in substances, in 3.8.1 of our eyes discovering ordinary objects, in 3.6.7-8 of chemists examining bodies and qualities, in 4.13.2 of seeing colors, feeling cold; in this passage Locks says: "There is another thing in a man's power that is, though he turns his eyes sometimes towards an object, yet he may chuse whether he will curiously survey it, and with an intent application, endeavour to observe accurately all that is visible in it."

That this re-interpretation can remain suspect is not surprising. Hall and Ayers point out that it is not difficult to catalog a number of passages in which Locke speaks as a traditional representative realist. Treating ideas as pictures or images that are perceived occurs most notably, says Hall, in 2.10 "Of Retention"; e.g., section 1, "keeping

the idea ....for some time actually in view..... is called contemplation"; aslo,section 5, "the pictures drawn in our minds, are laid in fading colours," or section 7, "viewing again the ideas, that are lodg'd in the memory . . . the appearance of those dormant pictures." In 2.29.8 Locke explicitly tells us that ideas are "as it were the picture of things". Locke's discussion of complex ideas as putting simple ideas together suggests to Hall the construction of mental imagery. There are also a number of other passages in which Locke regards the object of perception and knowledge as the idea and not the external thing, e.g., 2.1.25 where he speaks about perceiving ideas annexed to impressions in the mind 4.21.4 a discussion of contemplating signs (ideas); a discussion of scepticism in 4.4.3 which arises because the mind "knows not things immediately".

The traditional interpretation and the re-interpretation would be somewhat compatible if ideas are simply regarded as images in the sense that (Yolton) "seeing a physical object is to have visual images which are caused by particles".[13] However, if these visual images are entities and these entities are *in the mind*, Locke cannot be a direct realist. Hall argues that if ideas are images, they seem to be entities of a kind, "even if they are obviously not 'real beings'".[14] By 'real beings' I assume that Hall is referring to physical beings. Locke himself does not object to calling ideas "real beings" insofar as they are not assumed to be extended; in reply to Norris he claims that "ideas may be 'real beings,' though not substances, as motion is a real being, though not a substance''.[15] Unfortunately, the terms 'object,' 'real beings,' and 'entity' are just as vague as the terms 'idea' or 'modification'. Describing ideas as modifications does not clarify anything, for as Locke notes in answer to Malebranche, the word 'modification' "seems to me to signify nothing more than the word to be explained by it".[16] From the passages quoted by Hall there is nothing to suggest that ideas are entities in the strong sense necessary to support traditional interpretaions.

Hall suggests that the supposed ambiguity in Locke's use of 'idea' may not be important. Possibly, he says, "*thought* is an ambiguous term, but do philosophers complain about this? After all, term can always be restricted, or different senses distinguished, and we do not always feel that the unrestricted or undistinguished term is a problem."[17] Although this may be true in a general context, given the historical outcry over Locke's use of the term 'idea', Hall is being overly

generous to Locke. If one is concerned about the ontological status of thought, it will not do for a philosopher to dismiss the question. Is thought a by-product of brain processes or is it spiritual in nature? Are thoughts entities, real beings? If the reader can take it any way one wishes, or find both views expressed in one work, it would seem incumbent on a philosopher to settle the question. In a different sense, questions concerning the nature of ideas may not be important to Locke's conclusions about knowledge. Because there is textual support for both the traditional interpretation *and* re-interpretation, I am inclined, as Hall, to think that Locke did not see the importance or relevancy of this type of dispute to his over-all thory of knowledge. Locke is hard-pressed with scepticism in the context of either interpretation. As Ayers suggests, ideas may be images,yet not entities which preclude observation of objects.

Re-interpretations may establish that Locke's view does not result in scepticism with regard to the *existence* of physical objects. Locke does not seem particularly worried about questions of existence, but rather, with questions concerning the correspondence of ideas to the *real nature* of objects either observed or assumed to exist. If we do perceive physical objects, the correspondence or resemblance relation is still in doubt. As Ayers indicates, in this context "we may say, the objects of comparison are simply the thing as we conceive it, and the thing as it is in reality''. This may, as he contends, be an innocuous tautology: "that we can only think and reason about things as they are represented in our thought or as we conceive of them".[18] Nonetheless, this use of the word 'idea' seems to be primary and is the central focus of Book III and Book IV of the *Essay*. Woozley's re-interpretation focuses on this use of idea as an intellectual concept or meaning, Alexander as a definition. There cannot be conformity between ideas and the reality of things, ideas cannot "agree with things themselves" if by things and reality we mean "real essence."

Knowledge of bodies is limited to abstract ideas of nominal essences, conceps or definitions of things. I think that Ayers is mistaken in his claim that Locke would not quite understand the "alien notion of 'conceptualization'".[19] Locke draws a distinction between mere sensation and perception. The latter involves a considerable amount of mental acticity, the former does not. The ideas we receive by sensation, he says, "are often in grown people altered" by acts of judgement

"without our taking notice of it". (2.9.8) Perception is seeing an object in accordance with a somewhat arbitrary abstract idea; it is "seeing as", or conceptualization of sense data. In Book III, Locke makes it clear that our descriptions of a particular substance are possible only because we possess general indentifying concepts, i.e., to recognize a group of qualities *as* a definite thing presupposes possessing the concept or abstract idea of this object. This essence or idea may at times exemplify itself as an image with meaning, or, simply as a definition.

Whether one accepts the traditional interpretation or the re-interpretation, there is not much of a practical difference with regard to knowledge of bodies. Locke argues that our ideas of substances are all inadequate, i.e., whether images or not, whether entities or modifications, they can be nothing but partial or incomplete representations of their intended objects. The degrees of inadequancy in our ideas entails a corresponding doubt with respect to their realiy, for complex ideas of bodies are "no further real than as they are combinations of simple ideas" of qualities that are actually united and coexist in nature. (2.30.5) For the most part, Locke is concerned with the general propositions of science and not with the extramental reference of ideas. "Nor let it be wondered", he says, "that I place the certainity of our kowledge in the consideration of our ideas, with so little care and regard . . . to the real existence of things: since most of those discourses which take up the thoughts and engage the disputes of those who pretend to make it their business to inquire after truth and certainty, will, I presume, upon examination, be found to be *general propositions*, and notions in which existence is not at all concerned". (4.4.8)

In order to have general knowledge of substances at least three conditions must be satisfied: (1) we must know what changes the primary qualities of one body regularly produce in the primary qualities of another body, (2) we must know what primary qualities of any body produce certain sensations and ideas in us, and (3) we must have faculties acute enough to perceive the real essence of bodies and frame our abstract ideas of them accordingly. (4.6.14) Locke is pessimistic about these conditions ever being fulfilled by any finite intelligence. All general knowledge, he says, "lies only in our own thoughts, and consists barely in the contemplation of our own abstract ideas". (4.6.13) Since our classifications (abstract ideas) vary according to education and other variables, it is not surprising to find Locke expressing scepticism concerning the reality of knowledge.

Perhaps Ayers gives Locke too much credit when he contends: "our best conclusion would therefore seem to be that there is an unresolved tension in Locke's conception of the relation between idea and object".[20] Hall is equally generous in his conclusion that "in deciding not to differentiate between a sense-datum and an image, but to treat both as mental objects allowing us to deal with parts of the world whether present or absent, and to designate them all by the single term *idea*, Locke may have obtained a convenient outlook for himself, even if it has generally baffled his commentators".[21] That we should not expect to find a consistent theory of knowledge or doctrine of ideas in the *Essay* is consistent with Locke's preparation of the work. In the *Epistle to the Reader* Locke explains: "Some hasty and undigested thoughts, on a subject I had never before considered, which I set down against our next meeting, gave the first entrance into this discourse, which having been thus begun by chance, was continued by intreaty; written by incoherent parcels; and, after long intervals of neglect, resum'd again, as my humour or occasions permitted".

Criticisms concerning consistency and ambiguity are summarily dismissed by Locke as a failure of critics to understand the nature of his work; e.g. Locke retorts: "If any, careful that none of their good thoughts should be lost, have publish'd their censures of my *Essay*, with this honour done to it, that they will not suffer it to be an *Essay*, I leave it to the publick to value the obligation they have to their critical pens, and shall not waste my reader's time, in so idle or ill natur'd an employment of mine, as to lessen the satisfaction any one has in himself, or gives to others in so hasty a confutation of what I have written".[22] Rosalie Colie appropriately notes that this is "undercutting with a vengeance: in one sentence to suggest that the work of critics who did not recognize the experimental character of an essay was negligible, because the nature of essays is to be carelessly written, stretches fairness to the breaking point".[23] Although Locke made slight efforts to explain his understanding of the term 'idea', he remained comfortable in its "convenient" ambiguity, an attitude which he deplores in the works of others. In the *Epistle* he complains that "neither the inveterateness of the mischief, nor the prevalency of the fashion, shall be an excuse for those, who will not take care about the meaning of their own words, and will not suffer the significancy of thier expressions to be enquired into".

I conclude that the complaints against Locke are in fact justified. As Hamilton put it: "Locke is of all philosophers the most figurative, ambiguous, vacillating, various, and even contradictory".[24]

Philosophy Department
Purdue University - Fort Wayne
2101 Coliseum Boulevard East
Fo. Wayne, Indiana 46805
(U.S.A)

KATHY SQUADRITO

NOTES

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understnding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). I have followed Hall in decapitalization and deitalicization of the *Essay*.

2 Ronald Hall, "'idea' in Locke's Works", *The Locke Newsletter*, no. 21, 1990, p. 15.

3. Henry Lee, *Anti-Scepticism* (New York: Garland, 1978 Reprint), Preface, c.

4. In *The Works of John Locke*, the twelth edition (London, 1824), Vol. III.

5. Richard Aaron, *John Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 194; pp.102-104.

6. Michael Ayers, "Are Locke's 'Ideas' Image, Intentionl Objects or Natural Signs?", *The Locke Newsletter*, no. 17, 1986, pp. 12-13.

7. D. E. Soles, "Locke on Ideas, Words and Knowledge", *Revue International de Philosophy*, Vol. 42, 1988, pp. 156-157.

8. John Yolton, "Locke and Malebranche: Two Concepts of Ideas", in *John Locke Symposium*, edited by Reinhard Brandt (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), p. 218.

9. Sir William Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, edited by H. L. Mansel and John Voitch (London: William Blackwood, n.d.) Vol. II, pp. 45-56.

10. John Locke, "An Examination of P. Mahebranche's Opinion of Seeing All Things in God", in *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1824), Vol. VIII, k par. 39.

11. John Yolton, *Locke and The Compass of Human Understanding* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 128.

12. *Compass*, p. 129.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Hall, p. 16.

15. John Locke, "Remarks Upon some of Mr. Norris's Books", in *The Works of John Locke* (London, 1824), Vol. IX, p. 248.

16. *Exmination of Malebranche*, par. 39.

17. Hall, p.20.

18. Ayers, p. 18.

19. Ayers, p. 24.

20. Ayers, p. 31.

21. Hall, p. 23.

22. Locke, Epistle to the Reader.

23. Rosalie Colie, "The Essayist in his *Essay*", in *John Locke: Problems And Perspectives: A Collection of New Essays*, edited by John W. Yolton (Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.249.

24. Hamilton, p.55.