

# Ideas and Qualities in Locke's *Essay*

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## 1: 'Idea' and 'quality': a clean ambiguity?

Throughout his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke frequently wrote 'idea' where one might have expected 'quality'. Here is an example:

Power being the source from whence all action proceeds, the substances wherein these powers are, when they exert this power into act, are called causes; and the substances which thereupon are produced, or the simple ideas which are introduced into any subject by the exerting of that power, are called effects. The efficacy whereby the new substance or idea is produced is called, in the subject exerting that power, action; but in the subject wherein any simple idea is changed or produced it is called passion.<sup>1</sup>

Reproducing this passage in his *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz tried to rescue Locke from himself. In his hands, 'simple ideas' became 'simple ideas [that is, the objects of simple ideas]', and each occurrence of 'idea' became 'idea [quality]'.<sup>2</sup> A dozen pages later, his spokesman

confronts Locke's spokesman about this matter: 'I notice, sir, that you frequently understand by 'idea' the objective reality of the idea, i.e. the quality which it represents.' Leibniz evidently saw this as an oddity, but did not try to explain it.

Locke scholars have not attended much to this pervasive aspect of the *Essay*, presumably seeing it as minor, easily explained, and jejune. That would be true if the phenomenon consisted only in this: *Locke often uses the word 'idea' as though it means 'quality'*. That seems to be how Leibniz saw it, namely as a clean, simple, regrettable ambiguity in a word. Similarly Aaron: 'Locke sometimes speaks loosely; for instance, he talks of ideas as if they were qualities in physical things, so that in having ideas we are in immediate contact with the external world.'<sup>3</sup> Ayers too: 'Locke's use of "idea" for quality in the object as well as for immediate object of experience is well known. His saying that some "ideas" are "conveyed in by the senses as they are found in exterior things" means, alas, no more than that we have knowledge and acquire concepts of such properties from observation of

<sup>1</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford University Press, 1975), II.xxii.11; 294:1. That is: Book II, Chapter xxii, Section 11; starting at p. 294, line 1 of the Nidditch edition. All references to the *Essay* in this paper will be given in that format.

<sup>2</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.216.

<sup>3</sup> Richard I. Aaron, *John Locke*, third edition (Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 103.

the physical world.<sup>1</sup>

Locke himself thought he had a mere ambiguity, in which 'idea' in one of its meanings abbreviates various phrases that include 'idea' in its other meaning. Listen to him announcing the double use of 'idea':

Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself. . . that I call *idea*; and the power to produce any idea in our mind I call *quality* of the subject wherein that power is. Thus a snowball having the power to produce in us the ideas of white, cold and round, the powers to produce those ideas in us, as they are in the snowball, I call *qualities*; and as they are sensations or perceptions in our understandings I call them *ideas*; which ideas if I speak of sometimes as in the things themselves, I would be understood to mean those qualities in the objects which produce them in us.<sup>2</sup>

So: our minds contain ideas, and external objects have powers to cause ideas in our minds; and if Locke sometimes speaks of ideas as being in the object he will be using 'ideas' to refer to

- powers to cause ideas,
- qualities that cause ideas,
- qualities by virtue of which the object causes ideas,

or the like. The word 'ideas' occurs in each of those phrases; so in replacing each by 'idea' alone, Locke is merely pruning; the ambiguity in "idea' is a handy device for cutting short stories shorter.

This official account of Locke's procedure does fit many parts of the text, such as this: 'We cannot observe any alteration to be made in. . . any thing but by the observable change of its sensible ideas, nor conceive any alteration to be made but by conceiving a change of some of its ideas' (II.xxi.1; 233:29). We can naturally and plausibly unpack that in obedience to Locke's earlier instructions: when he speaks of 'a change of some of its ideas' we can take him to mean 'a change of some of its powers to cause ideas in us' or '. . . some of the qualities by virtue of which it causes ideas in us', and all is well. Other passages can also be decoded according to Locke's instructions. They do not all invite such treatment as warmly as that one does, but we might suppose that once Locke acquired the habit of using this short-hand he tended to use 'idea' to mean 'quality' even when not especially thinking of qualities as causes of ideas.

Confronted with a clean ambiguity, we need only to note it and move on without fuss. However, the 'ambiguity' description of our present phenomenon is quite wrong: we are confronted with an aspect not merely of Locke's terminology but of his thought. When the 'ambiguity' distraction has been swept away, this 'well known' but little understood feature of Locke's writing will turn out to be major, challenging, and instructive.

Two bits of evidence should satisfy us that the 'ambiguity' description cannot be right, even before we have a replacement for it. **(i)** In at least one place where ideas are verbally run together with qualities, any attempt to explain

<sup>1</sup> M. R. Ayers, 'The Ideas of Power and Substance in Locke's Philosophy', first published in 1975 and reprinted in I. C. Tipton (ed.), *Locke on Human Understanding: Selected Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> II.viii.8; 134:17. In Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford University Press, 1971), I use the phrase 'Locke's double use of "idea"' to refer to his using the term for two kinds of mental item—sensory and intellectual. That is marginal in this paper, where the 'double use' phrase designates what is central, namely Locke's use of 'idea' to refer not only to mental items (whether sensory or intellectual) but also to qualities of non-mental things.

the passage in terms of ambiguity leads to ludicrous results; and this seems important because it occurs in the very passage where Locke announces that his double use of 'idea' is a mere ambiguity! (ii) In many places where Locke verbally runs ideas together with qualities, he does it through a peculiar use not of 'idea' but rather of 'quality'—or anyway of its near neighbors 'power' and 'mode'. Whatever those passages offer us, it is not a double use of 'idea'; yet it must have something to do with the double use of 'idea'. For those two reasons—to which I shall give a section apiece—Locke's official account of his use of 'idea' should not be accepted.

## 2: The pronouns in the snowball passage

In the 'snowball' passage where Locke purports to describe his use of 'idea', we find this: 'The powers to produce those ideas in us, as they are in the snowball, I call *qualities*; and as they are sensations or perceptions in our understandings I call them *ideas*.' Notice the repetitive 'as they are. . . , and as they are', and ask yourself: What one set of items could Locke soberly mean as the referents of both occurrences of 'they'? Clearly there is none. This passage employs two tokens of the pronoun 'they' in a manner that makes sense only if one refers to qualities and the other to ideas. The standard account explains this odd procedure by saying that the two tokens of 'they' hook into a single ambiguous noun, and that each picks up a different one of its meanings.

That is an impossible story. Try it out with a plainly ambiguous word; to keep close to our topic, take a word which in its secondary meaning is short-hand for a phrase that uses the word in its primary meaning. Nurses sometimes refer to patients through the sites of their diseases, for example

using 'prostate' to mean 'man who is receiving treatment for a prostate condition'. Now, imagine a nurse saying: 'My whole morning has been occupied with *prostates*. First I assisted at operations in which two of *them* were removed, and then I had to spend nearly an hour trying to help another of *them* out of a panic attack.' (The italics aid in finding the relevant words; they do not indicate the nurse's intonation contours.) In this remark, the two pronouns hook into the one ambiguous word 'prostates', one taking it in one of its meanings and the other in the other. What a ludicrous performance! Nobody would say such a thing except as a joke but it is no worse than Locke's repeated 'they' would be if it involved a clean ambiguity in the noun with which 'they' is connected.

When I first pointed this out, Peter Alexander rose up against me.<sup>1</sup> Presumably sensing that his own treatment of the snowball passage did not remove the difficulty that I had exposed, he shifted into the moral mode saying that in the light of his treatment 'it should seem to any well-meaning interpreter that the criticisms of the snowball passage made by some commentators are no more than quibbles'. Consider the terms 'well-meaning' and 'quibble'. Some scholars demand that we *mean well* in our dealings with Locke, on a limited and domesticated view of what that consists in. We should politely find Locke's writings sensible, consistent, commendable; we should not be harshly demanding; we should become comfortable with the text and with its author. Strawson evidently had that attitude in mind when he described Kant as being 'islanded. . . partly by oceans of the wrong kind of respect'.<sup>2</sup> To exhibit the right kind of respect we must interrogate Locke's text fiercely

<sup>1</sup> Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 28; Peter Alexander, *Ideas, Qualities and Corpuscles: Locke and Boyle on the External World* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), at pp. 114–17.

<sup>2</sup> P. F. Strawson, 'Bennett on Kant's Analytic', *Philosophical Review* 77 (1968), pp. 332–39, at p. 332.

and closely, trust him to have meant every word of it, worry away at discrepancies and anomalies, cleanse our minds of smooth, soothing approximations and impressions. When we have become acutely uncomfortable with his text, we can start to learn from it—from what it gets right and what it gets wrong. This approach does Locke more honor than one dominated by the desire to show that he did not make bad mistakes and to expose his sharpest critics as ill-meaning quibblers.

In the snowball passage, Locke conducts himself in a way that would be comic if it resulted from mere ambiguity. We should take this seriously, trying to discover what is really going on here, rather than sweeping it under the rug so as to keep ourselves at ease.

### 3: The reverse-switch difficulty

If the linked uses of 'they' could without absurdity be explained by the ambiguity of some word, it would not be 'idea'. The subject of the sentence is not 'ideas' but 'powers' ('the powers to produce those ideas in us') and that must be the anchor for the repeated use of 'they'. (The subject phrase contains both of the crucial words—'powers to produce those ideas'. Might we link the first token of 'they' with 'powers' and the second with 'ideas'? No! That would put the sentence on a par with this: 'The predators of those mammals, as they are in the skies we call them eagles, and as they are victims scurrying into burrows we call them rabbits.')

In the immediately preceding sentence, Locke has said that the powers under discussion are qualities; so it would be nearer the mark to say that *Locke is here using 'quality' to refer to ideas* than to say that he is using 'idea' to refer to qualities. This point takes us beyond the snowball passage

into dozens of other parts of the *Essay*. Locke frequently has idea/quality switches that cannot be uses of 'idea' as short-hand for 'quality (that causes the idea)' because, rather than using 'idea' to mean 'quality', they use relatives of 'quality' to mean 'idea'.

This happens vividly and prolifically when Locke writes about 'modes'.

He introduces this term as part of a trio—mode, substance, relation—which he announces as three categories of 'complex ideas' (II.xii.3; 164:29). We must suppose, though, that he really means them to be categories of items of which we have ideas, not that they are ideas themselves. Specifically, they are the categories *quality*, *thing*, *relation*. Writing of substances, Locke always makes it clear that these are not ideas but objects of ideas, consistently referring to our ideas *of* them, as here: 'The ideas of substances are such combinations of simple ideas as are taken to represent distinct particular things subsisting by themselves etc.' (II.xii.6; 165:24) He sometimes alludes in similar fashion to ideas of modes, implying that modes are not themselves ideas.<sup>1</sup> In many places, however, instead of writing that ideas of modes are such combinations of simple ideas as etc., Locke writes things like this: 'Modes I call such complex ideas which, however compounded, contain not in them the supposition of subsisting by themselves etc.'<sup>2</sup> In short, whereas Locke always distinguishes substance from ideas of substances, he frequently collapses 'ideas of modes' into 'modes'. Rather than using 'idea' to mean 'quality (causing the idea)', he virtually uses 'quality' to mean 'idea (of the quality)'.

Sometimes Locke thinks of modes not as universal qualities but rather as instances of them, and in particular as

<sup>1</sup> See for example II.xxii.9; 291:34 and II.xxxi.14; 383:35 and III.v.5; 430:5.

<sup>2</sup> II.xii.4; 165:1. For other examples, see xii.5; 165:14 and xiii.6; 169:10 and xviii.5–6; 224:28 and xxii.15; 290:8 and III.xi.15; 516:1.

events: 'The greatest part of mixed modes, being actions which perish in their birth, are not capable of a lasting duration, as substances, which are the actors' (III.vi.42; 465:18). Often, however, he takes modes to be universal qualities, as when he illustrates mixed modes with the examples 'justice' and 'gratitude' (III.v.12; 435:34). The difference between qualities and their instances, to which I shall return in Sections 8 and 9 below, has little effect on my present point that Locke's tendency to use 'idea' to mean 'quality' is mirrored by tendency to use a quality-related word as though it stood for a kind of idea

When Locke writes 'Modes I call such complex ideas. . .', might he mean 'Modes I call such complex qualities. . .', using 'idea' in its 'quality' sense? Then the passage would not refute, but would rather illustrate, the official story that 'idea' sometimes means 'quality'. That cannot be right, however, for if it were Locke would be saying: 'Modes are such complex qualities as contain not in them the supposition of subsisting by themselves.' He cannot have meant to write about what suppositions are contained in qualities, because for him 'suppositions' are always propositional items contained in thoughts or ideas. He does say that the essences of species of substances 'carry with them' a certain 'supposition', but that happens in a context dominated by his view that the essences of the species of things 'are nothing but the abstract ideas in the mind'.<sup>1</sup>

No-one should object: 'Granted, Locke sometimes says "mode" meaning "idea of mode", but why all the fuss? This is just more short-hand, with no deep significance.' It would be lax and unphilosophical to settle for this without asking why

Locke often shortens 'idea of mode' to 'mode' but almost never abbreviates 'idea of substance' to 'substance', or smelling significance in the supposed fact that as well as condensing a mental-item phrase into a quality word he also abbreviates a quality phrase into mental-item word.

#### 4: Conflation

What we have here is a substantive conflation—a fact not merely about Locke's use of certain words but about his thoughts regarding ideas and qualities. He tended to ignore the differences between these, and to talk about both at once. This apparently strikes some people as a scandalous thing to say. An earlier version of it (Bennett, *op. cit.*) incited Ayers to accuse me of attributing to Locke a 'ridiculous mish-mash' and implying that he had 'flitted crazily from topic to topic even in mid-sentence'.<sup>2</sup> That might have been justified if I had attributed to Locke a clean ambiguity in his use of 'idea'—flitting crazily from surgical patients to prostate glands, so to speak—but a diagnosis of substantive conflation is quite different. Not that Ayers liked that any better. At one point he wrote: 'The solution that [Bennett] proposes is that Locke has conflated two different philosophical problems: i.e. Locke is crudely confused.'<sup>3</sup> The connective 'i.e.' implies that nothing but crude confusion could lead a philosopher to conflate distinct problems. In this paper I shall argue against that.

(In his recent book, Ayers drops the clean ambiguity diagnosis, though without saying clearly what he puts in its place, or confronting the implied charge of crude confusion. He reports that Locke 'was prepared to see the idea as the quality existing in the mind';<sup>1</sup> and this, though sketchy, at

<sup>1</sup> III.v.2,1; 429:14, 428:29.

<sup>2</sup> Ayers, *op. cit.*, pp. 86n, 104.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Ayers, *Locke* (London: Routledge, 1991), vol. 1, p. 59.

least speaks of how Locke 'sees' or thinks about things and not merely about what he means by a word. This is progress. However, Ayers does not get the conflation properly into focus, apparently because he is engaged in it himself. In his book he several times uses 'idea' in the double way. He suggests that 'we could say that the abstract idea is the relevant *aspect* of the representative particular, so that it is unsurprising that Locke talked of finding abstract ideas "in" perceived things'.<sup>2</sup> An aspect of a thing is a property or quality of it, so here we find Ayers himself moving silently from ideas as mental particulars to ideas as qualities. Again, shortly after quoting without comment a passage in which Locke writes of 'all simple ideas, all sensible qualities', Ayers proceeds to follow suit. He explains a remark of Locke's about 'such collections of simple *ideas* as we have observed to be united together' by telling us what it is 'for *qualities* to "exist together"'.<sup>3</sup> In pointing this out I do not accuse Ayers of a mish-mash, of flitting from topic to topic, or of being crudely confused. I do conjecture, though, that he is caught up in the same conflation that I am attributing to Locke and offering to explain.)

In making my first assault on this topic, I was not clear in my mind about what sort of conflation was involved. Now I can do better. Conflations, I now see, can be hard to avoid. A dense network of isomorphisms between two related areas of our conceptual scheme can create a magnetic field, pulling the philosopher across from one towards the other so that he ends up unwittingly thinking about both at once. One may be shielded against this by being conceptually numb, so that the isomorphisms don't register on one's mind. Or one may be protected in a different way: we can be helped to identify and then avoid a tempting conflation by studying

the work of someone who has been thoroughly, powerfully, intelligently guilty of it.

That is not the least of the services that Locke can do for us, if we will attend in detail to what he wrote. In Sections 5–7 below I shall explain the isomorphisms that underlie the conflation of ideas and qualities.

How could Locke's substantive conflation (supposing it exists) relate to his announced view that he merely uses 'idea' sometimes as short-hand for 'power to cause an idea'? Here is one credible story about that: he began with the short-hand, but it ran away with him because of the pull exerted by the isomorphisms. Here is a second: the isomorphisms created the conflation in his mind; this affected many of his uses of 'idea', 'quality', 'mode' etc., and he noticed some of these, wrongly thought they all took the form of using 'idea' to mean 'quality', and optimistically offered to explain them all as short-hand. There may be yet others. I have no view about which is right.

### 5: Ideas and qualities are abstract

Lockean 'ideas', considered as items 'in' or 'before' the mind, are sometimes sensory inputs from the outer world or simulacra of these in imagination or memory, and are sometimes intellectual items—*thoughts* out of which propositions can be constructed. Either way, they can be, Locke says, 'abstract'; that is, they can be less than fully saturated with detail. Throughout this paper I use 'abstract' in that good Lockean sense, not in any of the contemporary senses involving eternity, necessary existence, causal impotence, absence from space-time, and so on.

Obviously thoughts can be abstract: no-one would dispute that I can think about the fact that she smiled at me,

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 249; emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 161; emphases added.

without having any thought all about the details of how she smiled. When Berkeley denied that ideas can be abstract, he thought of them as sensory rather than as intellectual, but even then he erred; I can picture her in my mind's eye as smiling without picturing her as smiling in any specific manner.

Now ideas share their ability to be abstract with qualities and not with concrete substances. My thought of her as smiling *abstracts from* the concrete reality of her face, but it *exactly matches* one quality of her face, namely its smilingness. In this respect, qualities crucially resemble ideas, as Locke understands the latter, which probably goes far to explain his tendency to conflate the two.

In maintaining this, I assume that Locke did regard abstractness as an intrinsic feature of ideas that have it. That is, he took an abstract idea to be a special kind of idea rather than an ordinary idea used in a special way. I mention this only because Ayers has recently denied that this was Locke's position (the first person to do so, I believe). According to Ayers, Locke's abstract idea, rather than being incomplete or unsaturated, is an ordinary perception or image, 'partially considered' and given a certain function in thought. That would give Locke a difficulty which Ayers does not mention and which I shall not expound now.<sup>1</sup> That aside, Ayers supports his view only by citing II.xiii.13, the sole place in the *Essay* where 'partial consideration' occurs. Ayers does not say why he thinks that Locke is here explaining abstract ideas; the passage is in the middle of a fourteen-page stretch in which 'abstract' does not occur once. In contrast, in one of the many places where Locke discusses abstract ideas by

name, he describes them as 'partial ideas', not as partial considerations of complete ones.

## 6: Ideas and qualities are directly known

When Locke uses 'idea' to refer to mental items, he is often thinking of them as sensory, i.e. as something in the nature of sense-data. One can be tempted to assimilate these to qualities. When Locke writes: 'We cannot observe any alteration to be made in. . . any thing but by the observable change of its sensible ideas', he could be saying either **(a)** that we observe things to alter only by noting changes in our sensory states, or **(b)** that we observe things to alter only by observing their qualities.

Each interpretation has Locke denying something that he certainly does deny—that we have direct knowledge of **(a)** an extramental reality, or of **(b)** the substratum that supports the qualities of the observed thing. I have discussed elsewhere the rich isomorphism between **(a)** the notion of a postulated but intrinsically unknowable 'real thing' associated with immediately known ideas and **(b)** the notion of a postulated but intrinsically unknowable 'substratum' associated with immediately known qualities; and I have shown that some writers have failed clearly to separate these two strands in Locke's thought. For example, one reports Berkeley as rejecting Locke's 'second, shadowy world, alleged to lie somehow behind or beneath the things that we touch and see. . .'.<sup>2</sup> The prepositions **(a)** 'behind' and **(b)** 'beneath' nicely reflect the conflation that I have been talking about.

Berkeley led twentieth century writers into this conflation, of which he is himself guilty. Locke confidently believed

<sup>1</sup> It is explained a little in Jonathan Bennett, 'Understanding Locke's *Essay*', a review of Michael Ayers's *Locke*, in the *Times Literary Supplement* 4642 (March 20, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> G. J. Warnock, *Berkeley* (Penguin Books: London, 1953), p. 110. For a fuller treatment of this matter, see Jonathan Bennett, 'Substratum', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* (1987), pp. 197–215.

in material things that are ontologically and conceptually independent of our ideas; he also unhappily acknowledged that we must have an idea or pseudo-idea of 'substance in general', a *thing* thought, to give meaning to our most general noun, 'thing'. These utterly distinct parts of his system, either of which could have existed without the other, were run together by Berkeley in his attack on Locke's doctrine of 'material substance', which was really a fiction of Berkeley's. He did not distinguish 'Things are collections of their qualities' from 'Things are collections of our ideas of them'; he thought that rejecting Locke's *thing* thought was tantamount to accepting idealism. Of course Berkeley's idealism does imply that the qualities of perceptible things are ideas; so that he can fairly make Hylas, near to capitulation late in the Third Dialogue, speak of annexing to a certain word 'a collection of sensible qualities subsisting only in the mind'. But Berkeley runs ideas and qualities together in the course of arguing for idealism. He clears his throat to do so as early as Section 1 of the main part of the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, and by Section 7 he is in full swing, saying: 'The sensible qualities are colour, figure, motion, smell, taste, and such like, that is, the ideas perceived by sense.' He offers this not as a consequence of idealism, but as part of the case for it—'for the fuller proof of the thesis that 'there is not any other substance than spirit'. The absence of mind-independent material things is a conclusion, not a premise; so the assumption that qualities are mind-dependent, because they are ideas, must come from somewhere else. It cannot have come from the abstraction point, because Berkeley denied that ideas can be abstract.<sup>1</sup> In his case the conflation seems to arise almost entirely from the pull of the isomorphism between

the issue about unknowable substratum substance and the one about unknowable material things.

Locke did not identify the issue about real extra-mental things with the issue about the *thing* thought, as Berkeley did. Obviously assuming them to be unlike and unrelated, he discussed them in separate places and in different terminologies. Still, he too seems to have felt the pull of the isomorphism between those two issues. This shows in certain overlaps of phraseology between what Locke says about thing/idea and what he says about substance/quality. For example, he speaks of each in the language of pulling together or centering. In connection with 'real things' that somehow pull our ideas together: 'We cannot. . . doubt that such collections of simple ideas as we have observed by our senses to be united together do really exist together. . . . If I saw such a collection of simple ideas as is wont to be called *man* existing together one minute since. . . etc.' (IV.xi.9; 635:18,23) In the context of substratum, considered as what holds together the qualities of a thing: 'The complex ideas that our names of the species of substances properly stand for are collections of such qualities as have been observed to coexist in an unknown substratum which we call substance.' (IV.vi.7; 582:13) This area offers many temptations to let distinct topics commingle.

### 7: Three further sources

Sometimes Locke's 'ideas', considered as mental items, are intellectual rather than sensory—thoughts or conceptualizings rather than sense-data or sensings. Here too there are strong pulls towards conflating them with qualities.

(1) Platonist philosophers say that reality contains universal things—properties or qualities—and that what makes

<sup>1</sup> This denial is of course inconsistent with the thesis that ideas are qualities. When Berkeley contends that ideas cannot be abstract, he manifestly thinks of them as concrete particulars, fully saturated with detail.



two items co-describable is their having some universal thing in common. Locke disagrees: 'All things that exist are only particulars' (III.iii.6; 410:34), and 'Universality belongs not to things themselves, which are all of them particular in their existence' (III.iii.11; 414:8). This should mean that he will not include properties or qualities in his inventory of the basic contents of reality, but in fact he uses 'quality' etc. lavishly throughout the *Essay*. In defence of that he might say that his anti-universalism does not forbid him to use 'quality' but does commit him to its being dispensable. If he tried to eliminate it, he would have to lean heavily on his theory that the principal role classically assigned to qualities—namely helping to explain how many particulars can fall under a single description—is really played by ideas. That theory has the following as a consequence:

Words are general. . . when used for signs of general ideas. . . and ideas are general when they are set up as the representatives of many particular things. But universality belongs not to things themselves, which are all of them particular in their existence. . . When therefore we quit particulars, the generals that rest are only creatures of our own making, their general nature being nothing but the capacity they are put into by the understanding of signifying or representing many particulars. (414:5)

So Locke has the co-classifying work of qualities being done by ideas, though he still avails himself liberally of the word 'quality' and of its near equivalent 'mode'. It would not be surprising if he tended to assume that each occurrence of 'quality' could be dispensed with in favor of 'idea'. In the event, he does not stay faithful to his anti-universalism; but

it is visibly there as a strand in his thought.

(2) According to Locke, the mental content (the 'idea') that someone associates with a classificatory word determines what he means by it: *my idea of squareness* delimits what I mean by 'square'. One can also plausibly suppose that the meaning of any such word is determined solely by the qualities a thing must have for that word to be applicable to it: *the property of squareness* delimits what I mean by 'square'. Consider this passage, for example:

Such. . . appearances in the mind. . . the understanding lays up (with names commonly annexed to them) as the standards to rank real existences into sorts as they agree with these patterns, and to denominate them accordingly. Thus the same colour being observed today in chalk or snow which the mind yesterday received from milk, it considers that appearance alone, makes it a representative of all of that kind; and having given it the name *whiteness*, it by that sound signifies the same quality wheresoever to be imagined or met with.<sup>1</sup>

In that passage, the first 'appearances' are what 'ideas' are officially supposed to be, namely something 'in the mind'; but further down, the phrase 'that appearance alone' refers to a quality, a color observed in milk yesterday and snow today. This belongs to the conflation that is my topic in this paper. Those who deny that Locke committed it, and who want to handle the evidence in terms of clean ambiguity, must say that not only 'idea' but also 'appearance' is ambiguous and that in the above passage Locke flits from one meaning to the other. I don't say that, of course. I contend that throughout the passage he conflates mental particulars with qualities.

<sup>1</sup> II.xi.9; 159:18. Locke sometimes, alas, mis-expressed his theory about secondary qualities by saying that they are in the mind; but that is not at work here. He would have been as willing to say all this in terms of (say) the squareness of a field and a house rather than the whiteness of milk and snow. For evidence, see III.iii.19; 419:35.

(3) Necessary truths can plausibly be thought to rest upon truths about properties. *Absolutely necessarily, whatever is square has four sides*: what makes this true about square things is a truth about their common property, squareness. But Locke officially holds that necessary truths have their source in relations among ideas, with these being understood as mental. This yields a third reason why he might tend to slide between thoughts about ideas and thoughts about qualities.

We can see it at work all through IV.vi.10, where Locke discusses *a priori* knowledge of necessary truth with help from these phrases:

- co-existing qualities [which] we unite into one complex idea
- other qualities not contained in our complex idea
- the relation of two ideas that may exist separately
- the necessary connexion and co-existence of several distinct ideas in the same subject
- an imperfect collection of those apparent qualities our senses can discover
- ideas of whose connexion and necessary co-existence we can have certain and undoubted knowledge
- Our specific names of substances standing for any collections of such ideas
- a necessary connexion between malleableness and the colour or weight of gold

The task of sorting all this out in detail has defeated me. It seems fair to conclude, however, that Locke's thoughts about *a priori* knowledge of necessary truths provide some impetus for the idea/quality conflation. (A splendid example seemed to be supplied by what Locke says about what demonstration involves. Usually it is an 'intervening idea' (IV.ii.7; 533:33) or 'intermediate ideas' (IV.xvii.4; 672:31), but just once I thought I found him saying 'there is need of some intervening

qualities' (IV.iii.3). Although several 19th and 20th century editions have him saying this, the Nidditch text (539:19) is right: Locke wrote 'quantities', not 'qualities'.)

Locke's thoughts about modal knowledge focus partly on nominal essences, which offer rich opportunities for the conflation of ideas with qualities. Here are some of the phrases:

- A figure including a space between three lines is the . . . nominal essence of a triangle; it being . . . the abstract idea to which the general name is annexed. (III.iii.18; 418:31)
- its essence, which is nothing but that abstract idea to which the name is annexed (III.vi.2; 439:18)
- voluntary motion, with sense and reason, joined to a body of a certain shape [may] be the complex idea to which I and others annex the name man. . . (III.vi.3; 439:33)
- supposing the nominal essence of gold to be a body of such a peculiar colour and weight, with malleability and fusibility. . . (III.vi.6; 442:20)
- qualities. . . of which our complex ideas. . . are made up. . . (IV.vi.12; 588:3)
- the colour, weight, and other simple ideas of that nominal essence of gold. . . (IV.vi.9; 583:14)
- two different abstract ideas consisting not exactly of the same collection of qualities. . . (III.vi.35; 461:35)

If we ask 'Does Locke think that a nominal essence is a bundle of ideas or a bundle of qualities?' we would be hard put to it to answer on the basis of those fragments. So it is throughout the work.

## 8: Sense-perception as the transfer of tropes

In Section 9 I shall examine another way of looking at this whole matter. To do that, I must first sketch a little history

and philosophy. Both concern a kind of item which has been labelled 'individual accident' or 'accidental individual' or—more recently, by Donald C. Williams—'trope'.<sup>1</sup> A trope is a case or instance of a property: my house is a concrete particular which has whiteness and other properties; whiteness is an abstract universal which my house and other particulars have; and *the whiteness of my house* is a trope, an abstract particular. Unlike my house, there is nothing to it but whiteness; unlike whiteness, it pertains only to my house.

Whether or not we should admit tropes into our ontology, I agree with Williams, Campbell and others that we frequently do. Tropes appear in our scheme of things in the role of particular events: by far the most plausible metaphysic of events is the one assumed by Locke and Leibniz and latterly revived by Kim and others, namely that a particular event is a trope.<sup>2</sup>

According to some medieval philosophers, what happens in sense-perception is that tropes go from the object to the percipient. In this context tropes are often called '(sensible) species'. A certain family of theories, whose main progenitor was Roger Bacon, accounted for vision in terms of such 'species':

A visible object generates or 'multiplies' species of light and color in the adjacent, transparent medium. These species, which Bacon also calls 'virtues' or powers, 'forms', 'images', 'similitudes', 'phantasms', and

'intentions', generate further species in the medium continuous to them, which results in a continuous multiplication of species along rays proceeding in all unobstructed directions from all points on the object's surface. These visible species convey the object's accidents through the intervening medium, which serves as their substance, to the eye of the viewer, upon which they are, loosely speaking, 'impressed'.<sup>3</sup>

This runs two theories in a single harness. In one, what is transmitted to me when I see a ball is a 'form', an instance of roundness, a trope; in the other it is a 'similitude', something round. This report on a 14th century Italian philosopher has him leaning towards one of the theories:

Blasius argues that there is no contradiction in maintaining either that species are true substances (so that 'when I see. . . an ass, that ass multiplies asses from itself through the medium to the eye') or that species are qualities rather than substances; however, he prefers the latter alternative.<sup>4</sup>

According to this theory, then, the items that enter the mind in sense perception are instances of qualities—in short, tropes. It was generally known as the 'peripatetic' view of sense perception because it was held by Aristotelians and attributed, though probably wrongly, to Aristotle.

The peripatetic view that sensory 'ideas' are tropes seems to have influenced the writings of some of Locke's contemporaries and immediate predecessors, including some whose

<sup>1</sup> Donald C. Williams, 'The Elements of Being', in his *Principles of Empirical Realism* (Springfield, IL: 1966). For an important precursor, see G. F. Stout, 'The Nature of Universals and Propositions', *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1921). For a useful successor, see Keith Campbell, 'The Metaphysics of Abstract Particulars', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 4 (1981), pp. 477–88.

<sup>2</sup> Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III.vi.42; Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, *op. cit.*, p. 328. For an extended defence of this view of events, see Jonathan Bennett, *Events and Their Names* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), chapter 6.

<sup>3</sup> Katherine H. Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), p. 8. I am indebted to Georgette Sinkler for pointing me to Tachau, and indeed for all I know on this topic.

<sup>4</sup> David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 130f.

own theories of perception were not of that kind. Adams in his wonderful book on Leibniz quotes this from the Port Royal logic: 'It is true that lions are all animals, that is to say, that each one of the lions includes the idea of animal.'<sup>1</sup> In considering what we ought to make of the claim that a lion contains an idea of animal, Adams does not remark that this may be simply an instance of a widespread tendency to conflate ideas with qualities. Without having a scholarly knowledge of this matter, I believe J. J. MacIntosh when he tells me that the conflation was very common in that period.

### 9: Did Locke think that ideas are tropes?

Why should not all this have spread to Locke? If it did, would it not destroy most of the points made in this paper? The line of thought I am after goes like this: Locke held as a matter of philosophical doctrine that ideas are tropes. For him, then, they simply are qualities. There is no ambiguity, no conflation, nothing more to say. I reply **(1)** that Locke did not hold that ideas are tropes, and **(2)** that even if he did, that would not solve the textual problems I have been grappling with here.

**(1)** If Locke identifies ideas with tropes, it must be because he accepts the peripatetic theory of sense-perception. On the face of it, he does not. He tells us that perception works through causation: 'It must needs be some exterior cause, and the brisk acting of some objects without me... that produces those ideas in my mind' (IV.xi.5; 632:26). He also says that such causal transactions must be mediated by impact between the outer world and the percipient's body: 'I cannot... conceive how bodies without us can any ways affect our senses but by the immediate contact of the sensible bodies themselves, as in tasting or feeling, or the

impulse of some insensible particles coming from them, as in seeing, hearing, and smelling.' (IV.ii.11; 536:6) So far from expressing trope-transfer, this is the kind of perceptual mechanics with which Descartes had tried to *replace* the peripatetic account of sense-perception.

Still, we are not quite finished. Some medieval philosophers, including Bacon, extended the theory that sense perception is trope transfer to the stronger thesis that all causation is trope transfer.<sup>2</sup> That view of causation lasted on into Locke's time, and he might be thought to have accepted it. When he writes that in a collision on a billiard table one ball 'only communicates the motion it had received from another, and loses in itself so much as the other received' (II.xxi.4; 235:20), that sounds like trope transfer; and this impression intensifies when he speaks of 'the passing of motion out of one body into another' and describes this as 'obscure and unconceivable' (II.xxiii.28; 311:20). Now, if Locke handled perception in terms of causation, and that in terms of trope-transfer, was he not committed to being a trope-transfer theorist about perception? If so, then perhaps he did identify ideas with tropes after all.

This goes too fast, however. What Locke writes about the 'passing of motion' between bodies is applied not to causation generally but specifically to impact mechanics. It is, he says, 'as obscure and unconceivable as how our minds move or stop our bodies by thought', and of the two ways of moving bodies—bumping and willing—he says that 'the manner how hardly comes within our comprehension: We are equally at a loss in both'. (II.xxiii.21; 311:27) He is equally cautious about the action of bodies on minds: 'Impressions made on the retina by rays of light, I think I understand; and motions from thence continued to the brain may be conceived, and

<sup>1</sup> Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> See Tachau, *op. cit.*, pp. 7f, quoting from Bacon's *Opus maius*, pt. 4, d.2, c.1.

that these produce ideas in our minds I am persuaded, but in a manner to me incomprehensible.'<sup>1</sup> In short, when Locke seems to countenance trope-transfer, this is not for causation generally but only for impact mechanics. Also, it is not a positive theory, but rather a challenge to complacency. Locke is saying to the confident physicist: Here is the best account we can give of impact—see how intellectually disreputable it is!

I should mention the one place where Locke openly rejects the account of perception which he calls 'peripatetic'. He writes that perception 'may be accounted for, as far as we are capable of understanding it, by the motion of particles of matter coming from them and striking on our organs', and that 'I do not think any material species, carrying the resemblance of things by a continual flux from the body we perceive, bring the perception of them to our senses'.<sup>2</sup> The adjective 'material' (in 'material species') echoes Malebranche, whom I shall not expound here. Whether it lessens the force or scope of this rejection of the peripatetic theory I do not know, which is why I have not put this passage at the center of my argument.

**(2)** Even if Locke did hold as a matter of doctrine that ideas are tropes, that would give us little help with the textual problems I have pointed to. There are two main reasons for this.

**(a)** In most of the troublesome passages, our problem concerns how ideas relate not to property-instances but rather to properties, universals. It is true that Locke sometimes

thinks of modes as tropes (by thinking of them as events), but in the contexts where he equates them with ideas, modes are usually qualities, not quality-instances. There are examples of this in Section 7 above.

**(b)** The proposed solution would leave us with the problem of why Locke explicitly says that 'idea' is ambiguous, and offers to explain what the ambiguity is. That explanation, furthermore, takes him nowhere near to the view that ideas are tropes. In introducing his 'idea'-for-'quality' usage in the snowball passage, Locke says that he will sometimes use 'idea' to stand for something of which ideas are effects—not for something of which they are instances.

The view that perception is trope-transfer, with its corollary that ideas are tropes, may have lurked around the edges of Locke's thinking, and may somewhat have encouraged him in the idea-quality conflation which I have mapped in this paper. For the reasons I have given, though, it cannot be much of the story. Leibniz would have agreed with this. He repeatedly corrected Locke on 'idea'/'quality'; he dissented from the peripatetic theory of sense-perception, allowing only that 'perhaps one might tolerate the "sensible species" which travel from the object to the distant sense-organ, tacitly understanding this as the propagation of motion'; and he built his own metaphysic on the rejection of trope-transfer between different substances, which he thought he detected in Locke.<sup>3</sup> Nowhere does he suggest that the 'idea'/'quality' trouble is connected with the other two issues.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Locke, *Examination of Malebranche*, section 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, section 9.

<sup>3</sup> Leibniz, *New Essays*, *op. cit.*, pp. 216, 343, 224.

<sup>4</sup> Earlier drafts of this paper were read and usefully commented on by J. J. MacIntosh, Ian Tipton and John Yolton. Good changes have also been made under the guidance of a referee for the *History of Philosophy Quarterly*. In all my recent work on Locke the help of my colleague William Alston has been inestimable.