
2 Locke's theory of ideas

Ideas play a large role in Locke's philosophy. In Locke's view, everything existing or occurring in a mind either is or includes an idea; and all human knowledge both starts from and is founded on ideas. The very word "idea" appears more frequently in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* than any other noun; its occurrences outnumber even those of such common words as "he," "have," and "for."

Locke's ideas have, however, perplexed readers and provoked critics from the time of the *Essay*'s first publication. His contemporary Edward Stillingfleet, the bishop of Worcester, noted the novelty of the term "idea" and charged that Locke's use of it had encouraged "ill men" to take up the "new way of ideas" and use it "to promote scepticism and infidelity, and to overthrow the mysteries of our faith" (W IV: 129-30). Stillingfleet had no objection to Locke's own use of the word, much less to ideas themselves, since he took these to differ only *nomine* from the "common notions of things, which we must make use of in our reasonings" (ibid.). But John Sergeant, another contemporary critic, found "idea," as used in the *Essay*, to be "highly Equivocal, or *Ambiguous*"; and he argued that in at least one of the meanings assigned it by Locke the word stands for nothing at all, a "meer Fancie" (Sergeant 1697: 3; Preface). This charge of ambiguity, especially, has been a staple of Locke criticism for three centuries: Thomas Reid advanced it, and so did Gilbert Ryle, who wrote, echoing Sergeant, that not only is "the term 'idea' . . . used by Locke in a number of complete different senses," but "there is one sense in which he uses the term . . . in which it must be categorically denied that there are such things as 'ideas' at all. And," Ryle continued, "had this been the only sense in which Locke used the term, then his whole *Essay* would have been, what it is not, a laboured anatomy of utter nonentities" (Ryle 1933: 17).

My aim in this chapter is to expound and explain the theory of ideas, as it is presented in Locke's writings. I shall in so doing indicate some connections between this theory and Locke's philosophies of mind, body, language, and knowledge. These connections are further explored later in this book, in the chapters individually devoted to these topics. The discussion here is intended in part to set the stage for these later chapters.

I. MIND, THOUGHT, AND PERCEPTION

Our first task is to get clear what an idea is according to Locke. He makes a point of explaining his use of the word "idea" early in the *Essay*. "It being that Term," he writes, "which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by *Phantasm*, *Notion*, *Species*, or whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ'd about in thinking" (E I.i.8: 47). Later, in another passage in which he is self-consciously defining the word, he says that "whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call *Idea*." A snowball, for instance, may "produce in us the *Ideas* of *White*, *Cold*, and *Round*"; and these, "as they are Sensations, or Perceptions, in our Understandings, I call them *Ideas*" (E II.viii.8: 134). And in a response to Stillingfleet, Locke again states the meaning of his term: "the thing signified by ideas, is nothing but the immediate objects of our minds in thinking" (W IV: 130).

These passages establish that an idea, for Locke, is first of all something that exists in a mind. More specifically, it is something that exists in an understanding, which is what Locke calls the mind's intellectual or cogitative part, as opposed to its volitional or appetitive part. More specifically still, ideas are the *objects* of certain mental actions or operations, namely those of thinking or perceiving. It must not be supposed that thinking and perceiving are two different actions for Locke. He hardly ever uses the word "perception," by itself, to mean sense perception: when he wants to speak of this he adds the qualifier "sense" or "sensible" or "by the senses." For the most part, Locke uses the terms "thought" and "perception" (and their cognates) interchangeably (but see E II.ix.1: 143). Each of them covers, generically, every exercise of the understanding. In many cases, an instance of thinking or perceiving is merely that, an instance of being conscious or aware of something. But sometimes one's thinking is also an instance of some more specific type of mental action, such as remembering, discerning, comparing, compounding, judging, and reasoning.

It is also Locke's view, though he does not state it explicitly in the passages quoted, that ideas exist nowhere but in minds, and nowise other than as the objects of perception or thought. Furthermore, there is no thinking or

perceiving that does not have an idea for its object. It follows that for every Lockean idea there is an act or operation of perception or thought, and conversely. Neither does or can occur without the other.

Locke does not, however, identify ideas with perceivings. Descartes had distinguished two senses of the word “idea”: according to one of these an idea is an act of thinking, according to the other it is the object of such an act. And it is true that much of Locke’s understanding of ideas - along with his basic decision to make ideas central to his philosophy - was taken over from Descartes. But Locke does not make the first of these Cartesian uses of the word “idea” - he does not sometimes mean by “idea” an act or occurrence of perception or thought, as opposed to the object of such an act or occurrence.

Locke does occasionally equate ideas with perceptions and even with sensations, as in the passage quoted earlier (at E II.viii.8: 134). But the words “perception” and “sensation,” like “thought” but unlike “idea,” are systematically ambiguous; they have reference both to acts and to objects of perceiving or sensing. When Locke says that ideas are perceptions he means perceptions in the object-sense of the word. And when he wants to speak of perception in the act-sense, he uses, not “idea,” but “having an idea” (as at E II.i.9: 108: “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. IDEAS AS OBJECTS

Locke says that ideas are objects of the mind or understanding, and also that they are objects of perception and thought. These are not two different points but two ways of putting the same point. The fundamental fact for Locke is that ideas are the objects of thoughts, that is, of actions of thinking. Since every such action must have a mind for its agent, we can also attribute its object to the mind that performs it, although we speak somewhat loosely in doing so. It must be remembered, however, that the Lockean mind, unlike the Cartesian, is not always thinking. Hence there are times when it exists without containing, or having before it, any ideas; whereas there is no thought, or thinking, without an idea.

What does it mean to say that an idea is an object of thinking or thought? The first thing to note is that it belongs to the nature of thinking to be directed toward something, to have a subject matter or target. There is no such thing as merely thinking - thinking, period - without thinking something, thinking of or about something. And the same holds for perceiving, and for all of the other more specific operations of the understanding. Locke uses the word “object” to refer to this required target or subject matter: the object of a thought is that which the thought is of or about.

But not only is it required that a particular perception or thought be about something, and thus that it have some object or other. It also is necessary that it have the very object it has, that it be a perception or thought of that very thing. For its identity is determined by this. Locke bases the identity of mental actions on other factors as well, namely, the minds performing them and the times at which they occur. But he does hold that a perception of x and a perception of y occurring in the same mind at the same time can only be one and the same perception if x and y are the one and the same object, whatever x and y happen to be.

According to Locke, every idea is an object of some action of perception or thinking. But Locke does not hold that ideas are the only such objects. Ideas are all in our minds, as our perceiving is; but very often we perceive things that are outside our minds - outside not only in the sense of being separated from them in physical space but in the sense of being independent of them, not needing them in order to exist. People see stars, hear coaches, and remember Paris in the spring. These are things they perceive and hence objects of their minds, though none exists therein, and none, therefore, is an idea. Locke acknowledges this point by characterizing ideas as the *immediate* objects of our thought, thereby distinguishing them from those external beings which are not immediately perceived and which are not ideas.

Locke’s doctrine is that an action of perception *may* have a nonimmediate object, not that it *must* have one. And in fact there are plenty of cases in which perception occurs and there is no external thing perceived, no object outside the mind. We think of nonexistent entities; Macbeth saw a dagger that was not there - or if he did not see any dagger, he at least “saw” something, and in any case engaged in an action of perception. So if every action of perception has an object, and some such actions do not have objects that exist outside the mind, then there must be internal objects of perception - which is precisely what Locke conceives ideas to be.

But Locke does not hold that perceptions have ideas for objects only in those cases in which no external object is available. His view is rather that every perception has an internal immediate object - that it is the perception of an idea - whether or not it has any external one. To be sure, Locke does not say that one *thinks* of an idea as well as of Vienna when she thinks of Vienna. But he does say that one *perceives* an idea in that case, besides thinking

of the external thing, Vienna. The two terms, “think” and “perceive” are not perfectly interchangeable for Locke - they are not intersubstitutable in every context - even though his frequent usage is such that, whenever a mind perceives *x*, it thinks of *x*, and conversely. (Locke also would not say that one perceives Vienna when one is only thinking of it and not actually seeing it.)

This view, that every perception is of an idea, meaning that it has an immediate object existing within the mind, has been a favorite target of the critics of Locke. Exception to it has been taken both on metaphysical and on epistemological grounds. The metaphysical objection is that Locke, by making mental objects necessary ingredients of the perceptual process, has introduced superfluous entities, thus violating Ockham’s rule; besides which, the entities so introduced are of a strange and elusive kind - “shadowy beings” in Reid’s phrase, “queer entities” in Wittgenstein’s. The epistemological objection is that the presence of such objects in perception creates an impenetrable “veil” between perceivers and the external world, making it impossible for them to know that anything exists outside their minds; and that this leads, as Reid put it, to “paradoxes [that are] shocking to common sense, and [to] a skepticism, which disgrace[s] our philosophy of the mind” (Reid 1970: 26). These objections, and especially the latter, have weighed rather heavily with Locke’s readers, enough so that some commentators who count themselves his friends have simply conceded their force, and then argued that Locke did not after all hold the view so objected to. These scholars have devoted considerable effort to reinterpreting Locke’s writings, so that the offensive view will no longer be seen to be stated in them.

But these objections - and at least some of the revisionary interpretations they have prompted - are based on misunderstandings of Locke’s position. The metaphysical critics have misconstrued the nature of Locke’s ideas, the epistemologists their function in sense perception and knowledge, according to his system. Both sorts of criticism are instructive, however, and that, plus their currency, makes them worthy of further consideration. The first or metaphysical sort of objection is discussed in the following section. The epistemological objection will be taken up briefly in Section VII, and is more fully discussed in Chapter 6 of this volume.

III. REAL VERSUS INTENTIONAL BEINGS

What kind of being is a Lockean idea: what is its “ontological status”? This is not a question that Locke himself poses, or perhaps had any interest in: to an early critic’s complaint that he had not begun the *Essay* with “an account of the Nature of Ideas” (Norris 1690: 3), he responded that it sufficed for his purpose to consider ideas no farther “than as *the immediate objects of perception*” (Locke 1971: 10). But the question has been raised by the critics just referred to, who claim that Locke has a conception of the nature of ideas, even if he does not acknowledge it, and furthermore that this conception is mistaken. Locke’s defenders on this issue agree that the conception in question is mistaken, but deny that it can fairly be attributed to Locke, whose true view of ideas, they argue, is something quite different.

The most prominent such defender is John Yolton; and the critic whose position Yolton is most often concerned to refute is Thomas Reid. According to Yolton, the ontological doctrine that Reid and his ilk attribute to Locke is that ideas are “real beings,” “separate, distinct real entities,” which stand between a perceiver and external objects and serve as “proxy, inner objects” for the latter (Yolton 1984: 89; Yolton 1975a: 162; Yolton 1990: 59). But the truth, Yolton claims, is that Lockean ideas are not “special objects,” “they are not things, entities, at all” (Yolton 1990: 58; Yolton 1975b: 383). In saying that ideas are not entities, Yolton apparently means to deny that they are independent beings, able to exist on their own, apart, in particular, from any action of perceiving or thinking, and hence from any mind. Given this meaning, Yolton’s claim is certainly correct: ideas *are* mind- and perception-dependent beings for Locke, as we have noted. Unfortunately, the word “entity” is not normally given this restrictive sense, either in metaphysics or in real life. The result is that Yolton’s point has been missed by many readers, and some have summarily rejected it. In the ordinary sense of the word, anything capable of being referred to, anything that can be individually considered or spoken of, is an entity. That Lockean ideas are entities in this sense is as obvious as anything could be.

As for saying that ideas are not objects, this too is misleading, since the word “object” is ambiguous. It may mean, as Yolton evidently intends it to do, “external real being,” or, as the dictionary says, “individual thing seen or perceived, or that may be seen or perceived; a material thing” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1971: 1:1963). But it also has the sense of “that to which action, thought, feeling, or action is directed” (*ibid.*; cf. Anscombe 1965: 158-60). It is in this latter sense that ideas are objects for Locke: he not only frequently calls them so but defines them as such. (It doesn’t help Yolton’s case that he seems to take passages in which Locke says that ideas are objects as somehow weighing against his own claim that they are not, as if Locke’s use of “object” and his were the same: see Yolton 1975a: 160; Yolton 1984: 89).

Yolton has not stopped with saying what ideas are not for Locke: he also has ventured to describe them in positive terms. But this part of his message is clouded by the fact that he has given two different characterizations of Lockean ideas. On the one hand, he calls them “perceptions,” meaning thereby “acts of perception”: he does this especially while maintaining the affinity of Locke with Arnauld, citing the latter’s polemic against Malebranche (Yolton 1975a: 159; Yolton 1984: 93). On the other hand, Yolton identifies Lockean ideas with the “contents” of perceptual acts (Yolton 1970b: 88; Yolton 1975b: 384). The difficulty is that these two characterizations are inconsistent with one another; besides which, as we have seen, the first one is false. Ideas for Locke are not, as they are for Arnauld and on occasion Descartes, perceptions in the sense of acts of perception. There are indeed passages in the *Essay* and in his “Examination of P. Malebranche’s Opinion” in which Locke says or strongly implies that ideas are perceptions (e.g., E II.i.5: 106; E II.x.2: 150; E II.xxxii.1: 384; W IX: 220; W IX: 250). But in all of these passages, the word “perception” either must or at the very least may be taken to mean “object perceived,” as opposed to “act of perceiving.” And this holds in particular for all the passages cited by Yolton in his effort to bolster this account of Lockean ideas (see Yolton 1975a: 159; Yolton 1984: 90).

Yolton’s other characterization, however, is more promising. In his best formulation of it, he begins by observing that Locke took for granted “an act-content . . . analysis of perception” - in common, he might have added, with every other European epistemologist in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He then avers that Locke “wanted to find a way of saying that an act of awareness, [e.g., one] of being aware of the sun, is a mental act but that it also has a content, a psychic, cognitive feature distinct and different from the object seen [e.g., the sun]. [He] wanted to capture the cognitive content of awareness without turning that content . . . into entities.” And the way that Locke found, Yolton concludes, is the way of ideas: “idea” is simply Locke’s term for “cognitive content” (Yolton 1975b: 384; cf. Yolton 1970b: 88). Yolton’s point here (bating his deviant use of the word “entities”) is well taken: many philosophers since Locke have found the notion of “content” to be helpful in the effort to comprehend human mentality. In current work in philosophical psychology, the term most frequently used to convey this same notion is “intentional object”; and two leading Locke scholars, while dissenting somewhat from the position of Yolton, have recently argued that Locke’s ideas are best understood as intentional objects (Mackie 1985: 223; Ayers 1986: 19).

But taking ideas to be intentional objects (or cognitive contents) does not solve every problem that arises concerning their nature. Ideas so regarded are entities, *pace* Yolton, but it must be admitted that they are indeed “queer” entities, quite apart from their dependence on minds. For one thing, as intentional objects, ideas need not be fully determinate. A real or material apple has a size and a shape and a color, and it must, in addition, have some particular size, shape, and color. But the idea of an apple need not have any size, or shape, or color at all, let alone any particular one. The point is not merely that the idea of an apple is not itself, for example, round, since roundness is a physical property and no such property can intelligibly be attributed to an idea: on that ground, the idea of an apple is also not an apple. Suppose we call the idea of an apple an “intentional apple,” and speak of its properties as “intentional roundness” and the like. Then the point about indeterminacy is that an intentional apple need not be intentionally round - have intentional roundness - even if the material apple of which it is the idea is round. More radically: an intentional apple need not have any intentional shape whatsoever, even though its associated material apple - its material counterpart, as we might call it - must have some shape or other.

Now this does sound bizarre; but the principle from which it follows is stated very clearly by Locke. “Let any *Idea* be as it will,” he declares, “it can be no other but such as the Mind perceives it to be” (E II.xxix.5: 364). An object of perception has all and only those properties which it is perceived to have, which is to say, those which appear in the perception, or of which the perceiver is consciously aware. And not only do people sometimes perceive things to have features they don’t in fact have: they often fail to perceive features they do have, even features in themselves perceptible, and features the things in question could not exist without having. (Of course we must distinguish not perceiving something to be F from perceiving it not to be F: an intentional apple could not be intentionally shapeless.) Thus the indeterminacy of intentional objects is, given their nature and the facts of human psychology, perfectly normal. Such objects only seem bizarre, no doubt because we unreflectingly tend to assimilate them to material objects, to suppose that the former are objects in the same sense of the word that the latter are.

It is worth noting that Locke does not in general use the language of predication in speaking of ideas (although in the passage just quoted he does speak of an idea as *being* “no other but such . . .”). It would not be at all natural for him to say that the idea of an apple is red or round, or that it has color or shape, even the idea of color or shape (or intentional color or shape). The reason is that he does not regard an idea such as that of an apple as a subject, or its specifications such as color and shape as properties. The idea of an apple is rather, for Locke, a compound

entity, made up of simple (or simpler) components: a “complex idea” that “includes” or “contains” “simple ideas” of qualities such as redness and roundness. (Locke’s doctrine of complex and simple ideas will be discussed shortly.)

IV. SIMPLE AND COMPLEX IDEAS

One basis for the charge that Locke’s use of the word “idea” is ambiguous is that he applies it to entities of different kinds. He himself makes a number of divisions within the class of ideas: between simple and complex, particular and general, concrete and abstract, adequate and inadequate, and so forth. But the items so divided are still all ideas, in one and the same sense of the word: several species in a genus not only does not entail several senses in the term for the genus, it entails the contrary (see Matthews 1972). A more substantial point is that Locke uses the one term “idea” indifferently to refer to things that his predecessors had called by different names. Again, he is quite explicit about this: “I have,” he says, “used [this term] to express whatever is meant by *Phantasm, Notion, Species*” (E I.i.8: 47). But to his critics the differences among the things customarily meant by these terms were such as to make Locke’s usage at the least misleading to readers, and beyond that, they took it as an indication of a false opinion on his part, the opinion that these things do not in fact differ among themselves, or do not differ in any significant way. Thus John Sergeant says that this passage by itself “manifests that [Locke] uses that word [sc. “idea”] very *Equivocally*: For a *Phantasm*, and a *Notion*, differ as widely, as *Body* and *Spirit*; the one being a *Corporeal*, the other a *Spiritual* Resemblance; or rather, the one being a Resemblance, or a kind of *Image*, or *Picture*; the other the *thing Resembled*” (Sergeant 1697: 3).

Whatever the differences between notions and phantasms as Sergeant conceived them, they are not our concern here. But we do need to consider some of the divisions that Locke himself saw fit to make within the class of ideas, beginning with the most fundamental: that between simple and complex ideas.

A simple idea, Locke says, is one that, “being . . . in it self uncompounded, contains in it nothing but *one uniform Appearance*, or Conception in the Mind, and is not distinguishable into different *Ideas*” (E II.ii.1: 119). This suggests that the defining feature of simplicity in an idea is experiential or phenomenal: an idea is simple if no variation or division is perceived within it. But in other passages, Locke proposes a semantic or logical criterion of simplicity: simple ideas are those “the *Names of [which] are not capable of any definitions*” (E III.iv.4: 421), which means that such ideas cannot be analyzed, or understood as entailing other ideas. These two specifications may not be equivalent: a simple idea according to one of them may not be such according to the other. But this is not a fatal difficulty for Locke, whose main purpose in marking off simple ideas is to bolster his empiricism, that is, the doctrine that “all the materials of Reason and Knowledge” are ultimately provided by experience (E II.i.1: 104). For this purpose it is sufficient that there be some clear examples of simple ideas.

Prominent among the examples Locke gives of simple ideas are those of the “sensible qualities” of physical objects: “*Yellow, White, Heat, Cold, Soft, Hard, Bitter, Sweet,*” and the like (E II.i.3: 105). Locke calls such ideas “ideas of sensation” because it is by means of the bodily senses that they are “convey[ed] into the mind” (ibid.). In addition, he recognizes simple “ideas of reflection,” so called because the mind gets these “by reflecting on its own Operations within it self”: these include the ideas of “*Perception, Thinking, Doubting, Believing, Reasoning, Knowing, Willing,* and all the different actings of our own Minds” (E II.i.4: 105). Sensation and reflection are each modes or forms of experience for Locke, and the two together exhaust it, so that any idea we have from experience must flow from one or the other of these two “fountains.” On the other hand, Locke lists several ideas that he says are simple and yet certainly are not ideas either of sensible qualities or of mental operations: those of “*Pleasure, or Delight, . . . Pain, or Uneasiness. Power. Existence. Unity,*” to which list he later adds “the *Idea of Succession*” (E II.vii.1 and 9: 128 and 131). Hard put to attribute these ideas either to sensation or to reflection, Locke declares that they “convey themselves into the Mind, by all the ways [both] of Sensation and Reflection” (E II.vii.1: 128). They do so because they always (or almost always) “join themselves to,” or “are suggested . . . by,” the ideas we do have by sensation and reflection (E II.vii.2 and 7: 128 and 131).

Locke holds that every simple idea that is present in a mind has its source in experience, that is, has come into the mind either by sensation or by reflection. And the mind, he says, “is wholly passive in the reception of all its simple *Ideas*” (E II.xii.1: 163). For “the Objects of our Senses . . . obtrude their particular *Ideas* upon our minds, whether we will or no: And the Operations of our minds, will not let us be without, at least some obscure Notions of them” (E II.i.25: 118). Not only is the mind unable to “refuse, alter, or obliterate” any such idea; it also cannot create any new one in itself. It is not Locke’s position, however, that simple ideas are the only ones that come from experience. Many of the ideas we receive via sensation and reflection are in fact compounds consisting of two or more simple ideas joined together. It is such compounds that Locke calls “complex ideas.” The idea that I have

when I see an apple, for example, is a complex idea, composed of simple ideas of the apple's color, shape, size, and so forth. And the reason these simple ideas are joined together in my mind is simply that the visible qualities to which they severally correspond are really joined together in the external apple I see. So my mind is no less passive with respect to this complex idea than it is with respect to the simple ideas that compose it.

But in addition to complex ideas of this kind, which experience imposes on our minds, Locke recognizes others which the mind itself creates. It does not create them *ex nihilo*, of course. What it does, Locke claims, is join together ideas that are already in its possession separately, so as to make a single new idea out of them: the former serve as raw material or data for the latter. These prepossessed ideas may be simple, or they may themselves be complex: all that Locke's empiricism demands is that they, or their components, or their components' components, . . . , have come into the mind originally by sensation or reflection. In this process of creating new complex ideas, the mind is no longer merely passive. Instead it actively exerts itself, operating upon the ideas it has to make the new ones. Furthermore, its action is voluntary; and the products thereof may be quite out of line with any preexistent reality, external-sensible or mental-operational: ideas of fantastic voyages and fabulous monsters.

In fact the mind has, for Locke, several different ways of acting on ideas so as to generate new complex ones, and the ideas so generated are divided into different kinds accordingly. First, the mind may simply combine or put together several different (simple or complex) ideas into one. This Locke calls the action of "composition" or "compounding"; and the resulting complex ideas are either "ideas of substances" or else "modes," with modes being subdivided into simple modes and mixed ones, all this depending both on the nature of the ideas compounded and on the manner of their compounding. Second, the mind may bring two ideas together, "setting them by one another, so as to take a view of them at once, without uniting them into one" (E II.xii.1: 163); and then the result is a complex idea of the kind Locke calls "relations."

It should be noted that when Locke first treats of complex ideas in Book II of the *Essay*, he speaks of "ideas of substances," but uses the terms "mode" and "relation" to stand for what are themselves ideas. This usage comports with his official metaphysical position, according to which substances are real beings existing outside the mind, whereas relations and modes (at least the mixed ones) are "creatures of the Understanding," "having no other reality, but what they have in the Minds of Men" (E II.xxx.4: 373). But Locke often abandons this official position, and his usage shifts accordingly: especially in Books III and IV he regularly speaks of "ideas of modes" and "ideas of relations." From the standpoint of his theory of ideas, this shift is merely verbal - which is not to say that the difference in metaphysical doctrine it reflects is so.

Locke's discussion of these different kinds of complex idea - relations, modes, and ideas of substances - and of the realities (if any) that answer to them extends throughout the *Essay*, and includes much of what is most distinctive and valuable in his philosophy. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to follow this discussion further, several aspects of it are considered elsewhere in this volume, especially in Chapters 3, 5, 6, and 8.

V. ABSTRACT AND GENERAL IDEAS

In addition to the actions of compounding and comparing, Locke recognizes a third kind of mental operation on ideas, abstraction. The new ideas produced by this operation he calls "abstract ideas"; but because he holds that all and only abstract ideas are general, he often calls the products of abstraction "general ideas" as well. The two terms "abstract" and "general" do not have the same meaning for Locke; but they do serve to mark off one and the same subclass within the whole class of ideas.

In Book II of the *Essay* Locke describes abstraction as an action in which the mind takes "particular *Ideas*, received from particular Objects," and considers them "as they are in the Mind such Appearances, separate from all other Existences, and the circumstances of real Existence, as Time, Place, or any other concomitant *Ideas*" (E II.xi.9: 159). Further on in the same book he speaks of abstraction as the act of "separating" ideas already in the mind's possession "from all other *Ideas* that accompany them in their real existence" (E II.xii.1: 163). Then in Book III, in recounting how our ideas develop "from our first Infancy," Locke gives the following account of the "way of abstraction":

the *Ideas* of the Persons Children converse with . . . are like the Persons themselves, only particular. . . . Afterwards, when time and a larger Acquaintance has made them observe, that there are a great many other Things in the World, that in some common agreements of Shape, and several other Qualities, resemble . . . those Persons they have been used to, they frame an *Idea*, which they find those many Particulars do partake in; and to that they give, with others, the name *Man*, for Example. . . . Wherein they make nothing new, but only leave out of the complex *Idea* they had of *Peter* and *James*, *Mary* and *Jane*, that which is peculiar to each, and retain only what is common to them all. (E III.iii.7: 411)

It is clear that Locke is describing two different forms of abstraction in these passages, if not two different procedures altogether. In the case presented in Book II, the mind starts with a complex idea, say an idea of one's mother, visually perceived on a particular occasion. It then picks out one component of this complex idea, say the simple idea of brown (taking brown to be the mother's skin color), and focuses on it alone, ignoring its fellow components. In the Book III kind of case, the mind also starts with a complex idea, suppose again the idea of one's mother. Here, however, it proceeds by removing several components from this complex idea, say the simple ideas of the mother's color, shape, size, and such, while keeping its attention on the original idea, or what is left of it, which is now no more than the idea of a woman - some woman or other. In the one case, the abstract idea, the intended product of the mind's abstractive action, is one simple idea, isolated from the complex idea that originally contained it. In the other, the abstract idea is a complex idea, the same one the mind started with, deprived of some of its original content - a "partial" idea, as Locke says.

Locke does not give much attention in the *Essay* to the operation of abstraction as such: he says almost nothing more about it than is contained in the passages just quoted. But he says a great deal about the abstract ideas that are its products. The chief reason for his interest in them is that abstract ideas also are general ideas. Furthermore, general ideas are the only entities that are general for Locke, apart from the words used to signify them. For there is no generality in nature: "all things that exist are only particulars" (E III.iii.6: 410). Yet generality is fundamental to civilized human life: not only developed language and effective communication among persons but thought itself, beyond the most primitive level, depend upon it. Despite its importance, however, generality is entirely a human creation, according to Locke; and it is by the mental operation of abstraction that generality is brought into the world. Thus abstract general ideas play in Locke's philosophy the roles assigned to Universals and Forms and Essences in the theories of his predecessors - the deficiencies of which he never tires of reminding his readers.

Locke explains how general ideas are created in the same passages as those in which he describes the abstraction process. In the Book II passage he says that

the Mind makes the particular *Ideas*, received from particular Objects, to become general; which is done by . . . *ABSTRACTION*, whereby *Ideas* taken from particular Beings, become general Representatives of all of the same kind; and their Names general Names, applicable to whatever exists conformable to such abstract *Ideas*. (E II.xi.9: 159)

He then cites an example:

the same Colour being observed to day 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 imagin'd or met with; and thus Universals, whether *Ideas* or Terms, are made. (ibid.; the first hiatus marked here is where the description of abstraction quoted earlier occurs)

In the Book III passage Locke says that

Ideas become general, by separating from them the circumstances of Time, and Place, and any other *Ideas*, that may determine them to this or that particular Existence. By this way of abstraction they are made capable of representing more Individuals than one; each one of which, having in it a conformity to that abstract *Idea*, is . . . of that sort. (E III.iii.6: 411)

Proceeding to describe the abstractive process "a little more distinctly" - this is the passage containing the second description quoted earlier - he writes that children's first ideas of their nurses and mothers, being "only particular,"

represent only those Individuals. The Names [the children] first give to them, are confined to these Individuals; . . . Afterwards, when time and a larger Acquaintance has made them observe, that there are a great many other Things in the World, that in some common agreements of Shape, and several other Qualities, resemble their Father and Mother, . . . they frame an *Idea*, which they find those many Particulars do partake in; and to that they give, with others, the name *Man*, for Example.

And thus, he concludes, "*they come to have a general Name, and a general Idea*" (E III.iii.7: 411).

Comparing these passages, one sees that Locke recognizes two different kinds of general ideas, corresponding to the two different "ways of abstraction" by which they are produced. In both cases, to be general, for an idea or for a word, means to be applicable to many distinct individual things. In the Book II case, the general idea is a simple idea of a sensible quality: whiteness. It applies to many distinct individuals - individual instances of whiteness or individual white things - because it has been separated from all the ideas accompanying it (on the occasion of its possessor's perception thereof) that serve to particularize it, that is, which serve to connect it with the individual white physical object - "Chalk or Snow" - whence it has come into the perceiver's mind. Locke's

presupposition, evidently, is that such ideas are general in themselves and of their own nature, and that their application to particular individuals is determined by factors extraneous to them as such - especially by such "circumstances of real Existence, as Time, and Place," or rather by the ideas thereof.

In the case described in Book III, by contrast, the general idea is a complex idea of a material substance: man. It applies to many distinct individual men because all simple or simpler ideas of features that serve to distinguish one man from another have been removed from the idea by the abstraction process. It is the point of this kind of abstraction, Locke says, to "leave out of the complex *Idea*" one has of distinct individuals "that which is peculiar to each, and retain only what is common to them all" (E III.iii.7: 411). The features the ideas of which are left out in this way are not merely the extraneous circumstances of time and place, but include proper qualities such as color, size, and shape. Thus ideas that are general in this manner are indeterminate within themselves, unlike the general ideas of Book II, which, though simple, are fully determinate. Indeterminacy, as we have noted, is a perfectly acceptable property for ideas to have in Locke's philosophy.

In both these kinds of general idea, the idea is general in its own nature - it is itself a "general Nature," as Locke puts it. This might seem a violation of the fundamental principle of Locke's nominalistic metaphysics, the principle that all existing things are particulars. But it is not really so. For this principle applies only to the realm of real existence. This includes physical objects, and their qualities, which are outside people's minds; and it includes the actions and events that occur within minds, including acts of perception and thought. But it does not include the intentional objects of such acts, which is what ideas are according to Locke: ideas so conceived are entities, but not real entities, not entities that really exist or occur.

Of course, Locke does often speak of particular ideas, and he has more than one reason for doing so. He calls some ideas particular because in their own nature they are particular, just as some ideas are in their own nature general. These are for example the child's earliest ideas of its nurse and mother, the ones (among others) whence it eventually abstracts the general idea of man. Also particular in this way are one's primitive visual sensations of (cups of) milk and (patches of) snow, from which the general idea of whiteness is eventually abstracted.

But there is another reason for calling ideas particular, and this applies to ideas that are general in nature as well as to those that are not. To understand this, it is useful to compare ideas to words. Philosophers and linguists nowadays commonly distinguish two senses of the word "word," according to whether what is meant is a "type" or a "token": they also say that the word "word" is "type-token ambiguous." The difference between these two senses can be exhibited by asking how many words are contained in the sentence, "The cow jumped over the moon," for example. For there are obviously two correct answers to this question: "six" and "five." "Six" is the correct answer if "word-tokens" are what "words" is taken to mean, "five" if "word-types" are meant. A similar point holds for the word "idea" in Locke's use of it. When Locke says that "*Ideas* are actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them" (E II.x.2: 150), he is speaking of idea-tokens. If, on the other hand, the same idea is said to occur to both you and me at the same time, you and I being different people or minds, or one of us is said to have the same idea on several different occasions, then the idea referred to is an idea-type. (Strictly speaking, it is not idea-types themselves that occur to people or exist in their minds: to "have" [loosely] an idea-type is to have [strictly] a token of that type.) The point about particularity, then, is that the phrase "particular idea" is often used to mean "idea-token," or "idea as occurring in such and such a particular context." Using the phrase in this way, we could say without contradiction that some particular ideas were nonetheless general, that is, general with respect to their own natures. For the particularity in this case would be extrinsic to the idea-type; it would be a function or consequence of the context in which that type was instantiated, just as a word-token is particular in virtue of the particular inscription or utterance in which the corresponding word-type is embodied.

Before leaving this topic of abstract and general ideas, we ought to look at a famous passage in the *Essay*, the misreading of which has caused many critics, beginning with Berkeley, to attribute an absurd doctrine of abstract general ideas to Locke (see Berkeley 1948-57: 2:33-34). The passage occurs in Book IV, where Locke is arguing that so-called maxims, such as the axioms of geometry, are not "the *Truths first known* to the Mind." For, he observes, it "require[s] some pains and skill to form the *general Idea* of a *Triangle*," for example. And the reason it does is that this idea "must be neither Oblique, nor Rectangle, neither Equilateral, Equicrural, nor Scalennon; but all and none of these at once. In effect, it is something imperfect, that cannot exist; an *Idea* wherein some parts of several different and inconsistent *Ideas* are put together" (E IV.vii.9: 596). The implication of this passage, the critics contend, is that general ideas for Locke are self-inconsistent, because they are made up of parts that are inconsistent with one another. But this is not what the passage says. First, Locke does not state that the general idea of a triangle itself contains inconsistent parts, but that it contains parts of other ideas which are, taken as a

whole, inconsistent with one another: but the parts in question are not said to be those that are responsible for that inconsistency. Second, when Locke declares (somewhat loosely, it must be admitted) that this idea is both “all and none of” Oblique, Rectangular, and so forth, what he means is (1) that the ideas of none of these determinations of triangles are explicitly contained in the general idea of a triangle, and (2) that the general idea applies to all the triangles that have these determinations. And finally, when he says that the general idea of a triangle is “something imperfect, that cannot exist,” he means that it is indeterminate because incomplete or “partial” and that it cannot exist in reality: but it does not by any means follow for Locke that it cannot exist in the way that intentional objects are wont to exist, that is, as objects of perception and thought.

VI. IMAGES AND CONCEPTS

In interpreting Locke’s theory of ideas, a number of commentators have appealed to a distinction between “concepts” on the one hand, and “images” (understood to include “sensations”) on the other. It is admitted that Locke himself did not draw this distinction: the word “concept” does not occur in the *Essay*, and though “conception” and “image” do appear occasionally, they are only rarely applied to anything that Locke would call an idea. But some scholars have claimed that the class of things that Locke calls ideas is divided into (what they call) concepts and images (including sensations). Others have claimed, presupposing the same distinction, that all Lockean ideas are images, and that Locke provides no place in his philosophy for concepts.

It is not always clear just how the proponents of these interpretations understand the terms “concept” and “image.” One point seems to be that concepts are general and abstract, whereas images are particular, in the sense of being particular in their own nature. On that understanding, it is correct to claim that for Locke some ideas are concepts and some are images (given the interpretation of Locke advanced in this chapter). Sometimes, however, the term “image” is applied to ideas that are “sensible” or have sensory features - have them intentionally, that is. In that case images include not only present sensations, both of sensible qualities and of physical objects possessing such qualities, but also the subsequent memories of such sensations. On that understanding too the claim that Lockean ideas divide into concepts and images is correct - though now the line dividing concepts from images no longer coincides with that between general and particular ideas. For some of the ideas that Locke does or would countenance are nonsensible and particular - those, for example, of God and one’s own mind or soul. And some are general and sensible - the abstract idea of whiteness for one, and an idea of man that is only slightly abstract, that is, an idea of a particular man from which size, say, but not shape and color have been removed by abstraction.

The alternative claim, that all of Locke’s ideas are images and none concepts, has been defended recently by Michael Ayers. Locke, according to Ayers, is “an imagist,” for whom “the only thing ‘which the Mind can be employ’d about in thinking’ is a sensation or image” (Ayers 1991: 1:45). It is evident that Ayers takes images to be both sensory and particular, for his imagists hold that “thought is bound to particular sensations and sensory images” and that “when we think of X in its absence, X is presented in consciousness in the same general way as it is presented in sensation” (Ayers 1991: 1:249; Ayers 1986: 4). One consequence of this interpretation is that no Lockean idea is abstract or general in its own nature. Ayers not only acknowledges, he embraces this consequence, for he thinks it can be shown independently that “for Locke an abstract idea is a particular perception or image ‘partially considered’ . . . and given a certain function in thought”; so that “it is not possible to have the abstract idea of *two* in mind without having in mind the idea of some dual in particular, but considered barely *as* a dual” (Ayers 1991: 1:49).

It will be obvious that Ayers’s reading of Locke conflicts with the one that has been presented in this chapter. But it would take us too far away from our main business to try to refute Ayers’s view, which is developed with great care and subtlety. It is worth noting that Ayers himself says that the question “whether Locke’s ‘ideas’ are all sensory images . . . has yet to be settled by modern commentators”; and he concedes the “relative unpopularity” of his way of settling it - while yet claiming that the grounds favoring his position are “conclusive” (Ayers 1991: 1:44).

There is another use of the word “concept,” different from the one we have been considering, that is current among modern philosophers. According to this usage, the concept of a triangle is not the abstract, nonsensory idea that one keeps consciously in mind while proving a Euclidian theorem, for example, although that would be a concept in the other sense of the word. A concept in this sense is not something that occurs or exists in a mind at some times and not others, nor is it something that one perceives or is aware of. It is rather a potentiality or power, itself unperceived, a disposition to do or suffer certain things under certain conditions, which, once acquired, is kept and possessed even at times when it is not being manifested. Thus the concept of a triangle is the ability one has, inter alia, to understand and use the word “triangle” correctly, to recognize certain visual shapes as triangles,

and to carry out proofs of theorems about triangles. In this sense there are concepts, not only of abstract nonsensible entities such as triangles, but also of sensible qualities and of physical objects - the concept of whiteness and the concept of man. Let us call concepts in this sense “dispositional concepts,” to distinguish them from the concepts that are mental occurrents. The question now to be raised is whether Locke’s ideas include dispositional concepts, in addition to the mental occurrents - sensations and images as well as occurrent concepts - that are most prominently called by that name.

Quite a number of commentators have answered this question affirmatively. In support of this answer they often have cited two passages about memory that Locke added to the *Essay*’s second edition. The first occurs in the context of his polemic against innate ideas in Book I. If there were any innate ideas, Locke contends, there would be “*Ideas*, in the mind, which the mind does not actually think on”; and these would have to be “lodg’d in the memory, and from thence . . . be brought into view by Remembrance.” For, he continues, “whatever *Idea* is in the mind, is either an actual perception, or else having been an actual perception, is so in the mind, that by memory it can be made an actual perception again” (E I.iv.20: 96-97). Here Locke is granting that there are ideas that are “lodg’d in the memory,” and he contrasts them with those that are actually present to consciousness on particular occasions. And the distinction between these two sorts of ideas seems exactly to match that between dispositional concepts and mental occurrents.

In the second passage, which he inserted in his discussion of the mental operation of retention in Book II, Locke provides a gloss upon his earlier references to memory as a storehouse or repository in which ideas are “laid aside out of Sight.”

But our *Ideas* being nothing, but actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them, this *laying up* of our *Ideas* in the Repository of the Memory, signifies no more but this, that the Mind has a Power, in many cases, to revive Perceptions, which it has once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before. And in this Sense it is, that our *Ideas* are said to be in our Memories, when indeed, they are actually no where, but only there is an ability in the Mind, when it will, to revive them again; and as it were paint them anew on it self. (E II.x.2: 150)

In this passage Locke still is granting the existence of things that reside in the mind more or less permanently, and distinguishing them from actual perceptions, although he no longer wishes, in strict speech, to call them ideas. And in making these things abilities or powers he is aligning them even more closely with the modern philosopher’s dispositional concepts. It is true that the only power Locke mentions here is that of producing an actual perception, as if - for example and loosely speaking - having an idea of magenta in one’s memory entirely consisted of being able to bring a visual image of magenta before one’s present consciousness. For our philosophers this is only one of several abilities that having the concept of magenta would entail, and a minor one at that, since in their view the most important constituents of concepts are verbal and perceptual capacities - the capacity to use the word “magenta” correctly, for instance, and to distinguish by sight the magenta flowers in a bouquet from those of other colors. But it turns out that Locke too assigns different functions to (still speaking loosely) ideas stored in the memory, over and above that of generating, or of themselves reappearing as, consciously entertained memory images.

To confirm this, it is useful to examine some of the passages in which Locke describes the process by which children first acquire ideas. One of these occurs early in Book I of the *Essay*:

The Senses at first let in particular *Ideas*, and furnish the yet empty Cabinet: And the Mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the Memory, and Names got to them. Afterwards the Mind proceeding farther, abstracts them, and by Degrees learns the use of general Names. In this manner the Mind comes to be furnish’d with *Ideas* and Language, the Materials about which to exercise its discursive Faculty. (E I.ii.15: 55)

Another such passage is found in Book II, where Locke is considering ideas of reflection. It is, he observes, pretty late, before most Children get *Ideas* of the Operations of their own Minds; . . . Because, though they pass there continually; yet like floating Visions, they make not deep Impressions enough, to leave in the Mind clear distinct lasting *Ideas*. (E II.i.8: 107)

In both of these passages, the ideas with which the acquisition process begins are particular occurrents, things that pass in and out of the mind. Those which the process produces, by contrast, are general and, once established, remain in the mind permanently. These latter ideas reside in the memory, since in Locke’s view that is the only way that ideas other than occurrent perceptions can be in the mind. But being there they are apt to be used in ways other than that simply of being recalled to present consciousness. It is in fact these acquired ideas, the ones that

the mind “comes to be furnished with,” that are Locke’s primary concern in the whole *Essay*. It is these that his empiricist thesis is a thesis about, and these that, as the first quoted passage indicates, make human language and reason and knowledge possible - these in which “both the Rightness of our Knowledge, and the Propriety or Intelligibleness of our Speaking consists” (E II.xxxii.8: 386). The case, therefore, for regarding ideas of this sort as concepts, in the modern dispositional sense of the word, is overwhelming.

Just how it is that acquired general ideas, which is what our words “immediately signify,” make language possible according to Locke is detailed in Chapter 5 of this book. How knowledge and reason are fashioned from these ideas, which serve as their only “materials,” is considered in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively. These matters need not, therefore, be further pursued in this chapter. As for the many questions that a critic might raise about Locke’s treatment of memory and concept acquisition - whether his views are coherent and, if so, whether they are supported by a more exact rendition of the facts of experience than he himself was able to provide - these we may not pursue for want of space. We must, to use Locke’s own frequent phrase, leave them to be considered.

VII. IDEAS AND REPRESENTATION.

We have now examined the major divisions that Locke makes, or that exist, within the class of ideas: between ideas simple and complex, concrete and abstract, particular and general, between images and concepts, and between occurrent and dispositional ideas. Near the end of Book II of the *Essay*, in Chapters xxix-xxxii, Locke introduces several features of ideas that generate further divisions among them: clarity, distinctness, reality, adequacy, and truth. The first two of these need not concern us; but the others are important, not so much in themselves but because they presuppose a more fundamental property of ideas. These features belong to ideas, Locke says, “in reference to things from which they are taken, or which they may be supposed to represent” (E II.xxx.1: 372). It is this representative function of Lockean ideas, the fact that they stand or are supposed to stand for things other than themselves, that we need to examine.

Locke defines real ideas as those that “have a Foundation in Nature; [that] have a Conformity with the real Being, and Existence of Things, or with their Archetypes.” These are contrasted with “fantastical” ideas, which “have no Foundation in Nature, nor have any Conformity with that reality of Being, to which they are tacitly refer’d” (ibid.). Adequate and inadequate ideas are then marked off as subclasses of real ideas. Adequate ideas are those “which perfectly represent those Archetypes, which the Mind supposes them to be taken from; which it intends them to stand for, and to which it refers them,” whereas those “which are but a partial, or incomplete representation of those Archetypes to which they are referred” are inadequate (E II.xxxi.1: 375). As for truth and its contrary falsity, these are not actually properties of ideas, since it is only propositions or judgments that are in strict speech true and false for Locke. Still, when an idea is judged or supposed to conform to something “extraneous to” itself, then in a loose or derived sense it may, he says, be “called true” (E II.xxxii.4: 385).

Locke’s discussions of the reality, adequacy, and truth of ideas are divided into three sections, corresponding to the three major categories of ideas he has distinguished: simple ideas, complex ideas of (mixed) modes (and of relations), and complex ideas of substances. The conclusions he reaches are: (1) that all simple ideas are real, all are adequate, and all are true; (2) that all ideas of mixed modes (and relations) are real, adequate, and true; and (3) that some ideas of substances are real and some “fantastical,” none are adequate, and some are true while others are false.

Among the several claims that Locke is making here, the most important for our purposes are those concerning the reality and the adequacy of simple ideas and ideas of substances. For not only is truth not strictly a property of ideas, but the conformity that justifies our calling an idea true is precisely that which makes it real, and perhaps also adequate, so that its being real or adequate entails its being true. As for ideas of mixed modes, their reality and adequacy (and therefore truth) are at best merely nominal. For since such ideas have “no other *reality*, but what they have in the Minds of Men,” they have no archetypes, no “standing Patterns” to which they are intended to conform. This means that they “cannot differ from their Archetypes,” or “want any thing” that such archetypes might possess (E II.xxx.4: 373; E II.xxxi.3: 376). But instead of concluding that the notions of reality and adequacy have no application to such ideas, and that they simply have no representative function, as he might well have done, Locke chooses to say that the ideas of modes are themselves archetypes and that they represent themselves (E II.xxxi.3: 377). By making this choice he does indeed guarantee the reality and adequacy of such ideas; but he also renders their possession of these properties quite trivial.

Locke claims that simple ideas are real because they are the “constant Effects” of “Qualities, that are really in things themselves,” and thus are able to serve as “the Marks, whereby we . . . know, and distinguish Things, which we have to do with.” These qualities may be no more than “Powers . . . ordained by our Maker, to produce in us”

such ideas, and the ideas need not in any way resemble those qualities: indeed, Locke claims to have “shewed” that no idea of a secondary quality does resemble the quality of which is the idea. But the ideas are nonetheless real because of “that steady correspondence, they have with the distinct Constitutions of real Beings,” that correspondence consisting in the fact that the same constitutions constantly produce the same ideas (E II.xxx.2: 372-73).

The same consideration proves the adequacy of simple ideas according to Locke. Since simple ideas are “nothing but the effects of certain Powers in Things, fitted and ordained by GOD, to produce such Sensations in us, they cannot but be correspondent, and adequate to those Powers.” They are adequate thereto because their function is merely to indicate the presence of the powers. They do not purport to provide information about them, about their nature or what they are like; and we do not expect them to do so (E II.xxxi.2: 375).

Complex ideas of substances, by contrast, are sometimes real, sometimes fantastical. For such ideas are “made in reference to Things existing without us, and intended to be Representations of Substances, as they really are.” Hence they are real only when they are “such Combinations of simple *Ideas*, as are really united, and co-exist in Things without us” (E II.xxx.5: 374). But some of our ideas of substances are combinations that we ourselves create and whose elements are never found together in nature, as for example the idea of “a rational Creature, consisting of a Horse’s Head, joined to a body of humane shape, or such as the *Centaurs* are described” (ibid.). These then are fantastical ideas.

Our (real) ideas of substances are nonetheless, Locke holds, all inadequate. For as he has argued in his chapter on substance, every such idea contains three kinds of component: (1) several ideas of observable qualities and powers; (2) the idea of an unknown essence from which such qualities and powers “flow”; and (3) “the obscure and relative *Idea* of Substance in general” (E II.xxiii.3: 296). But, first, “those Qualities and Powers of Substances, whereof we make their complex *Ideas*, are so many and various, that no Man’s complex *Idea* contains them all.” Not only do we “rarely put into [our] complex *Idea* of any Substance, all the simple *Ideas* [we] do know to exist in it”; but there are vast numbers of qualities and powers of substances whereof we have no knowledge and no ideas whatsoever (E II.xxxi.8: 381). Second, even “if we could have, . . . in our complex *Idea*, an exact Collection of all the secondary Qualities, or Powers of any Substance, we should not yet thereby have an *Idea* of the Essence of that Thing” (E II.xxxi.13: 383), which essence must indeed remain forever beyond our ken. And finally, “a Man has no *Idea* of Substance in general, nor knows what Substance is in it self” (ibid.).

It is not easy to extract a coherent doctrine of representation from these discussions. Locke most often seems to treat representation as a relation, whereby ideas are connected (except in the case of mixed modes) to things other than themselves. But sometimes he makes this an absolute relation, one that holds without qualification - either an idea *x* does represent *y* or else it does not - as in his discussion of the reality of ideas. And sometimes he makes its holding a matter of degree - *x* represents *y* more or less fully or accurately or faithfully - as in his discussion of the adequacy of ideas. So representation is either one relation with apparently contradictory properties, or two different relations with the same name. One way or the other, Locke has some explaining to do.

In some passages, however, Locke seems not to be thinking of representation in relational terms. It is natural enough to treat a real idea, for instance one that represents the sun, as standing in a relationship to something, because the sun is something that does really exist, and so is able, so to speak, to hold up one end of a relationship. But what of a fantastical idea, for instance that of Santa Claus, for which there is no thing for it to be related to? We might say that this idea does represent something, just not something existent. Alternatively, we might say that because there is nothing for the idea to represent, it has no representative function: the idea is not a representer at all. What Locke does say is that fantastical ideas are such as have no conformity “with that reality of Being, to which they are tacitly referr’d, as to their Archetypes” (E II.xxx.1: 372). Hence it appears that even fantastical ideas are “referred to” things other than themselves thought of as archetypes - even if no such archetypes exist. And being so referred may be all that is required for an idea to be representative. If so, then being representative could be an intrinsic property of ideas, or one that belongs to them solely in virtue of their relation to a mind - which in either case would be a property belonging to every idea, fantastical as well as real. On the alternative view, whether an idea is a representer or not would depend upon the existence of things external to itself and indeed to the mind it is in, and thus might change as such things come into and pass out of being.

Whether or not he conceives of representation relationally, Locke must have some answer to the question of how an idea acquires its representative function. Some passages suggest that ideas become representers for Locke by being caused to exist by some real thing without the mind: the idea then represents the thing that causes it. Others suggest that representing is a function imposed upon an idea by the mind to which it belongs: ideas become representers when the mind refers them to or intends them to stand for things outside themselves. It may be,

however, that Locke takes both of these factors, the external-causal and the mental-referential, to figure essentially in representation. It could be his view that in order for an idea *x* to represent something *y*, not only must *y* have caused *x*, but *z*, the mind in which *x* resides, must refer *x* to *y*, that is to that, whatever it is, which *x* has been caused by.

Even if so, there would have to be something about *x* that prompts or enables *z* to take referential action with respect to it. Locke himself suggests that a mind takes its ideas, at least those that come from external realities (qualities or substances), to be “marks” or signs of those realities, and that that is how it is able to make the uses of them that it does - for example “to know and distinguish Things, which we have to do with” (E II.xxx.2: 373). The fact that a mind takes its ideas in this way could be attributed to that ordination by nature or God which Locke sometimes appeals to, whereby certain sorts of external realities cause certain sorts of ideas to appear in our minds, in constant and regular ways. God or nature could also ordain that ideas so appearing be labeled as signs, or rather as representers of the things that have caused them - so labeled that their text, as it were, would be intelligible to the minds that receive such ideas. Or, rather than supposing them labeled, we could imagine each such idea to have the “additional Perception annexed” to it that it has been produced by something without - in the way that memories for Locke are nothing but “Perceptions, which [the mind] has once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before” (E II.x.2: 150). On this view, ideas would be “natural signs” of their representata.

If Locke did hold such a position then he would have a defense against those critics mentioned in Section II, who claim that Locke’s insistence that the mind’s immediate objects are always ideas condemns him to an extreme and incurable skepticism with respect to the external world. Locke could simply respond to such critics that our perception of external objects, the causes of our ideas, is altogether natural, as natural as our perception of ideas - which, after all, itself requires some special capacity on the part of the mind, a capacity that Locke regards as part of its natural endowment. There would not be any fallible or in-principle unverifiable inference involved in perceiving external objects, even though the perception would not be immediate, as it is in the case of ideas. The mind would simply be drawn or led without thought or awareness from the idea it perceives to the external object that is causally responsible for it.

To be sure, the fact that a mind is naturally moved in this way does not mean that it thereby has knowledge, or even a justified belief, that external objects exist. Skepticism is often taken to be a doctrine about the relation not between our ideas and their representata, but between our beliefs and the things they are supposed to be true of. It is in this form that Locke himself discusses skepticism in Book IV of the *Essay*; and the present defense would not by itself be conclusive against it. (Locke’s response to this form of skepticism is considered in Chapter 6 of this volume.) The fact that representation is a natural process also does not mean that a person could not be misled on a matter of representation in particular cases, that she could not suppose a particular token of the idea of the sun in her mind on some occasion to represent and so to have been caused by the sun on that occasion, when in fact it was the hypnotist’s suggestion, or the hallucinogenic drug she had taken, that caused it. What God or nature ordains is general; it is that some certain sort or species of substance or quality correspond to some certain type of idea, that the instances of the one constantly and steadily produce tokens of the other, and hence that such tokens be reliable indicators of instances of such sorts - reliable but not infallible.

Of course, it remains to be shown that Locke does in fact hold the position on representation that we have been sketching for him. That is likely to be a difficult task: he is not very explicit on the topic of representation - as indeed he is not on some of the other topics discussed in this chapter. It is, however, one of the attractions of Locke’s work for contemporary philosopher-scholars that credible answers to philosophical questions he himself never considered can often be drawn his texts, even when they are not obviously present there.