

**BOOK II**  
**LOCKE'S IDEAS**

# **THE ORIGIN OF OUR IDEAS**

**In *Book 1* Locke argued against the view that we are born with certain ideas.**

**In *Book 2* he argues that acquisition of our ideas begins with perception.**

**The mind is a tabula rasa, or blank slate, until experience provides the basic building materials in terms of simple ideas out of which most of our complex knowledge is constructed.**

**Locke defines an idea as “Whatever the mind perceives in itself or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding....”**

**Perception of ideas is not of the essence of the soul, but, like extension of bodies, one of its operations.**

**Note: In both of these respects Locke differs from Leibniz, and his view that extension is not the essence of bodies is a radical departure from all of the rationalists. We will examine his arguments for the latter view later. But for now, a few words on the former thesis are worth noting.**

**Locke claims that there is no perception of ideas while sleeping without dreaming.**

**Thus, he rejects Leibniz's petite perceptions. There are evidently no unconscious thoughts.**

**"... to be in the understanding and not to be understood, to be in the mind and never to be perceived, is all one, as to say anything is and is not in the mind or the understanding. " [p. 273] "... it must necessarily be conscious of its own perceptions." [p. 279]**

He argues that if the soul should think while sleeping, but not know it, this would make two persons in one man.

“It will perhaps be said, ‘that the soul thinks even in the soundest sleep, but the memory does not retain it.’ That the soul in a sleeping man should be this moment busy thinking, and in the next moment in a waking man not remember nor be able to recollect one jot of all those thoughts, is very hard to be conceived and would need some better proof than bare assertion to make it believed.” [p. 279]

The Pollux/Castor Counterexample:

“Let us then, as I say, suppose the soul of Castor separated during his sleep from his body, to think apart. Let us suppose too, that it chooses for its scene of thinking the body of another man, e.g. Pollux, who is sleeping without a soul. For if Castor’s soul can think while Castor is asleep, what Castor is never conscious of, it is no matter what place it chooses to think in. We have here then the bodies of two men with only one soul between them, which we will suppose to sleep and wake by turns.... I ask then, whether Castor and Pollux, thus, with only one soul between them, which thinks and perceives in one what the other is never conscious of, nor is concerned for, are not two as distinct persons as Castor and Hercules or as Socrates and Plato were?” [p. 279]

Locke is seeing something important here, but does it show what he thinks it shows, viz., that thinking without recognizing that one is doing so is incoherent? What about Alzheimer’s?

**Ideas are either simple or complex.**

**SIMPLE IDEAS**

# Characteristics of simple ideas:

All simple ideas are positive.

The mind is passive with respect to those that arise from the senses.

Locke provides two different criteria for an idea's being simple:

## *The Uniform Appearance Criterion:*

Simple ideas contain nothing but one uniform appearance.

**So how many simple ideas are there? How many colors?**

## *The Indefinability Criterion:*

**If this is so, his book is sorely lacking in definitions.**

Simple ideas are subdivided into:

Simple Ideas of Sensation

Simple Ideas of Reflection



# **SIMPLE IDEAS OF SENSATION**

**Some simple ideas of sensation come only from one sense (e.g. ideas of colors, tastes, etc.).**

**Note: Locke distinguishes solidity (which we receive by touch) from space and hardness. It differs from pure space which is incapable of motion or rest, and from hardness which doesn't exclude other bodies.**

**Solidity deals with the extension of bodies.**

**Other simple ideas of sensation come only from more than one sense (e.g. ideas of space or extension, figure, rest and motion).**

# **SIMPLE IDEAS OF REFLECTION**

**Simple ideas of reflection arise when the mind takes the ideas above and reflects on them.**

**These include remembrance, discerning, reasoning, judging, knowledge, and faith.**

**Finally, some simple ideas are ideas of both sensation and reflection.**

**These include pleasure and pain, existence and unity, power (which is passive through sensation, but active through reflection), and succession.**

# **ACTIVITIES OF THE MIND**

**The mind can engage in three different types of action in putting simple ideas together:**

- 1. It can combine them to form complex ideas of substances (which are independent existences) or modes (which are dependent existences). Ideas of modes include mathematical ideas, moral ideas, and all the conventional language of religion , politics, and culture.**
- 2. It can bring two ideas, whether simple or complex, together without uniting them. This gives us the idea of relations.**
- 3. It can produce general ideas by abstraction from particular ones.**

**COMPLEX IDEAS**

## Modes – Dependencies – e.g. triangle:

These are divided into:

I. Simple modes – figure and space. These involve combinations of the same simple idea – e.g. a dozen.

Space and Extension vs. body:

Locke defines extension as the space between bodies.

Unlike space, solidity can't exist without extension.

Extension doesn't include solidity.

**Note here how Locke's view differs from that of Leibniz.**

Locke's Proofs that there is space beyond body (i.e., a void):

1. *The Hand Outside Corporeal Beings Experiment* (p. 297):

Suppose “**God placed a man at the extremity of corporal beings.**”  
Could he not stretch his hand beyond his body? If yes, the  
Cartesians must recognize the existence of empty space, but this  
they deny. But if no, what impedes him?

**Note: Descartes denies that space is infinitely extended. But it is not a problem for Leibniz.**



## 2. *The Annihilation Argument* (p. 298):

Suppose God stopped all motion in the universe and then annihilated just one part of matter. Wouldn't a vacuum result?

**Note: This is also not a problem for Leibniz.**

“Even if successful, neither of these arguments of course establishes the reality of empty space against the Cartesians. Even the first argument establishes only the conditional thesis that if there is no such space, then matter is infinite. But we should not infer from this that Locke regards the Cartesian thesis concerning the essence of matter as simply unjustified dogmatism. Certainly Locke believes that it is not possible for us to know the real essence of matter, but it is also clear that he regards the Cartesian thesis as demonstrably false. For, as he realizes, to prove the falsity of the doctrine he does not need to show that there is in fact empty space in our universe; he needs to establish only the logical possibility of such a supposition, for this is what the Cartesian thesis denies. And Locke believes that the ideas of matter and space are evidently distinct, that is, not equivalent; any analysis of the concept of body or matter must include the concept of solidity. Hence, it must be admitted that there could be space void of matter. Descartes' thesis about the essence of matter thus involves conceptual and even linguistic absurdities; it is part of the rubbish that must be cleared away.” [Jolley, p. 57]

**Note: The modern view: Space is unbounded but finite.**

## II. Complex Ideas: These are further divided into:

- a. Simple modes – figure and space. These involve combinations of the same simple idea – e.g., a dozen.
- b. Ideas of mixed modes – which are complex in a strict sense – e.g., a rider.
- c. Abstract Ideas – which result from the mind's exercising its power of processing the data in a certain way (defined in a causal way).

Locke provides two different accounts of Abstract Ideas:

1. *The Selective Attention Account:* We focus on only certain features of them (e.g. their color).
2. *The Elimination Account:* We eliminate differences between them (e.g. Mary, Joan, etc., are all similar in being mothers).

**Note: The topic of abstract ideas is going to be very important when we come to Berkeley. To anticipate: Is it possible to either focus on only certain features that all dogs have in common (what features are those?) , or eliminate differences between them?**

- d. Relations – These involve comparisons of simple and complex ideas (e.g. being older than).

**In earlier editions, relations and abstract ideas were included (like here) as a species of complex ideas, but later they seem to be independent. This raises the question of whether Locke was a Compositionalist in the strong sense of someone who thinks that all ideas are ultimately derived from sensations, or only a Compositionalist in a weaker sense. He isn't always consistent.**

**d. Ideas of substances – which represent things capable of subsisting.**

**Kinds of substances:**

**i. Body – the names of these are definable in terms of solidity, extension, and mobility.**

**ii. Spirit – the names of these are definable in terms of the power to think and move.**

**iii. God – definable in terms of understanding, power, duration, and infinitude.**

**Note: We will have more to say about Locke's concept of substance shortly. It is a concept both Berkeley and Hume attack.**

# IDEAS AND QUALITIES

**PRIMARY AND SECONDARY QUALITIES  
AND THE IDEAS OF THESE**

**Often Locke suggests that being really in bodies is logically sufficient for being a real (primary) quality. (But, for example, color then seems to qualify as a primary quality.) And often he says that while our ideas of primary qualities resemble the primary qualities, our ideas of secondary qualities do not resemble the secondary qualities. (Excessive heat causes pain, but the pain is not in the material body. And an absence of light affects the colors we see in the porphyry, but not the porphyry. (Note: he is not saying that it affects the power in the object to cause these colors.)**

**This was an attack on the Scholastic view that both the primary and secondary properties were in the objects.**

**The secondary qualities were powers in the object to produce ideas of secondary qualities in us. In this respect his treatment of secondary qualities differed from the treatments of Descartes and Galileo for whom the secondary qualities had no existence in bodies.**

**While both qualities cause us to have ideas of them, and cause requires contact, which can be most reasonably explained by the corpuscularian hypothesis, only the primary qualities are such that a body that is divided will still retain them (i.e., it retains some shape, size, etc.) while this is not true of the secondary qualities.**

**There are a number of issues among scholars about Locke's account here:**

- 1. He gives different lists at different times.**
- 2. It isn't always clear exactly what his criteria are.**
- 3. Do all the secondary qualities come from only one sense while all the primary qualities come from more than one sense?**
- 4. In addition to atoms, do collections of atoms also have primary qualities?**
- 5. Locke probably holds a *Representational Theory of Perception* according to which objects cause ideas, and ideas are what the mind perceives. (The alternative, Naïve Realism, holds that the mind perceives objects directly.)**

**SUBSTANCES**



**The old view of Locke's concept of substance sees it as just the substratum holding the qualities together. Unfortunately, as Berkeley showed, this interpretation leads to all kinds of problems for an empiricist.**

**The newer interpretation sees Locke as suggesting that it is a confused notion that has little role in a corpuscularian philosophy. He is committed to property dualism in the sense that mental states like thinking and willing are not physical states, but this doesn't mean he is committed to a mind/body dualism. To say that we have an idea of spiritual substance is not to say that there is anything in the world that corresponds to this idea; just as to say that we have an idea of a unicorn doesn't mean that there are unicorns.**

**“If it is demanded (as usually it is) whether space void of body is substance or accident, I shall readily answer I do not know, nor shall be ashamed to own my ignorance, until they who ask show me a clear distinct idea of substance.” And later, “... of substance, we have no idea of what it is, but only a confused obscure one of what it does.” [p. 297]**

# **LOCKE ON FREEDOM AND VOLITION**

Book 2, Chapter 21

# **THE FREE WILL vs. DETERMINISM DEBATE**

The *Thesis of Determinism* maintains that every event (and hence too every act) is caused.

The *Thesis of Indeterminism* maintains that some events are uncaused. So it is exactly the denial of determinism.

Normally, philosophers are indeterminists in those cases, and only in those cases, where a person has free will.

A person has free will just in case there is at least one act which he can do and can refrain from doing.

There are several views that philosophers have held with respect to the relation between free will and determinism:

Some philosophers are *Hard Determinists*. The *Hard Determinist* holds that determinism is true and there is no free will.

Other philosophers are *Soft Determinists*. (This position is sometimes also referred to as *Compatibilism*, which is probably a better term, since the person who adopts this view is not soft on determinism.) The *Soft Determinist* holds that determinism is true and there is free will.

Finally, some philosophers are *Libertarians*. The *Libertarian* maintains that there is free will and that Indeterminism is true.

# The Central Argument:

P1) Either determinism is true or indeterminism is true.

P2) If determinism is true, there is no free will.

P3) If indeterminism is true, there is no free will.

C) There is no free will.

The *Soft Determinist* rejects the second premise.

The *Libertarian* rejects the third premise.

The *Hard Determinist* accepts the entire argument and concludes that there is no free will.

**But note that the *Hard Determinist* is not necessarily committed to *Fatalism*. The *Fatalist* maintains that every event that occurs must occur. And remember also that Leibniz was not accused of being a *Hard Determinist*. He was accused of being a *Fatalist*, though he denied it.**

**On the other hand, Spinoza is generally regarded as a *Hard Determinist*. While Locke and Hobbes are generally regarded as *Soft Determinists*, and Kant is viewed as a *Libertarian*.**

# **LOCKE'S SOLUTION**

# **ACTIVE AND PASSIVE POWERS**

**There are two types of powers: Active Powers (I.e. powers to make changes) and Passive Powers (I.e. powers to receive changes).**

**Bodies have only passive powers because they have only the power to receive (through impulse) from other bodies.**

**God and spirits provide clear examples of active power.**

**But reflection on the operation of our own minds (as opposed to sensation of external bodies) provides us with the best insight into the idea of active power.**

**“... when by impulse it sets another ball in motion that lay in its way, it only communicates the motion it had received from another and loses it in itself so much as the other received; this gives us but a very obscure idea of an active power of moving in body, while we observe it only to transfer but not produce any motion. For it is but a very obscure idea of power which does not reach the production of the action but the continuation of the passion... The idea of the beginning of motion we have only from reflection on what passes in ourselves, where we find by experience that barely by willing it ... we can move the parts of our bodies which were before at rest....” (#2)**



# Volition and Freedom:

## Volition:

“This *Power* which the mind has, thus to order the consideration of any *Idea*, or the forbearing to consider it; or to prefer the motion of any part of the body to its rest, and *vice versa* in any particular instance is that which we call the *Will*. The actual exercise of that power, by directing any particular action, or its forbearance is that which we call *Volition* or *Willing*. The forbearance or performance of that action, consequent to such order or command of the mind is called *Voluntary*.”

## Freedom:

“Every one, I think, finds in himself *Power* to begin or forbear, continue or put an end to several *Actions* in himself. From the consideration of the extent of this power of the mind over the actions of the Man, which every one finds in himself, arise the *Ideas of Liberty* and *Necessity*.”

## The Distinction:

If a person engages in an act because he wants (wills) to the act is voluntary. But a person is free with respect to doing that act if and only if he wants (wills) to do it, he is able to do it, and if he wants (wills) not to do it he is free not to do so.

## Locke's Example:

“Again, suppose a man be carried, whilst fast asleep, into a room, where is a person he longs to see and speak with; and be there locked fast in, beyond his power to get out: he awakes, and is glad to find himself in so desirable company, which he stays willingly in; i.e. prefers his stay to going away. I ask, is not this stay voluntary? I think nobody will doubt it: and yet being locked fast in, it is evident he is not at liberty not to stay, he has not freedom to be gone.”

The usual way of raising the philosophical problem we are examining is by asking whether or not man has free will. So how does Locke answer this question?

**Locke rejects the question as unintelligible. Why?**

**Freedom is the power to do what we want. Will is the power to choose one course of action over another from among alternatives that are physically possible. When we speak of the will being free we are, then, predicating one power (freedom) of another. But powers can, according to Locke, only be predicated of agents. So this way of asking the question is nonsensical. [#16]**

**The view that powers could be predicated of things other than agents (e.g., What digests meat in the stomach? The digestive power!) was a characteristic Scholastic view. It had been exploded in the sciences but Locke also applies it to the philosophy of mind.**

**Nor is it correct to ask whether or not a man has the freedom to will. According to Locke, liberty concerns overt acts of behavior, not the will.**

**But, suppose we rephrase the question by asking, is the will causally determined, and if so, by what?**

**Locke had originally suggested that it is. It is determined by what we take to be the greater good.**

But, in later editions he rejects this view because he notes that a man may recognize the greater good and still not be moved by it. (Thus, I may continue to smoke even when I recognize that it is not as good to do so as to refrain.)

“It seems so established and settled a maxim by the general consent of all mankind, that good, the greater good, determines the will, that I do not at all wonder, that when I first published my thoughts on this subject, I took it for granted ... But yet, upon a stricter inquiry, I am forced to conclude that good, the greater good, though apprehended and acknowledged to be so, does not determine the will, until our desire, raised proportionally to it, makes us uneasy in the want of it.” [#35]

But what then determines our desires?

These are evidently caused by an unease, which is due to a lack of happiness. (In this respect Locke is a hedonist.) They can, however, be affected by our judgment (reason).

This, however, leads to a further question, and one that is distinctively modern. Are reasons causes? And, are they caused by preceding events?

Locke doesn't answer these questions, so we don't know. But if he answered them both yes, he is a *Compatibalist*. If not, then he is a *Libertarian*.

One typical answer to this issue is that reasons are not caused by prior events. Rather, agents have reasons. Those reasons may then cause an agent to act according to his reasons. But an agent is not an event.

If Locke had held this view he would have to be classified as a *Libertarian*. If not, then he was a *Compatibalist*.

In addition to this, there is a further issue worth discussing here.

Suppose someone brainwashes me, so that I desire x and want to do it. (If I wanted not to do x I could have, but of course I don't want to not do it.) Would that be a case of my freely willing to do x?

This is an important issue, for example, in jurisprudence. There have been women who, while suffering from postpartum depression, killed their children. Are such women to be held legally (and morally) responsible for their actions? And what about people who have been "brainwashed" by a religious or political cult? Are they morally responsible for their actions? Was Patty Hearst, for example, responsible for holding up banks?

Locke says some things that are suggestive here, but don't really answer the question. He says, for example, that ". . . so far as a Man has a power to think, or not to think; to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a Man *Free*."

“ . . . the Person having the Power of doing, or forbearing to do, according as the Mind shall choose or direct. Our *Idea* of Liberty reaches as far as that Power, and no farther. For where ever restraint comes to check that Power, or compulsion takes away that Indifferency of Ability on either side to act, or to forbear acting, there *liberty*, and our Notion of it, presently ceases.”

**LOCKE'S ONTOLOGY AND SOME  
PRELIMINARY REMARKS LEADING UP  
TO HIS DISCUSSION OF PERSONAL  
IDENTITY**

# SUBSTANCES

Simple			Compound		
God	Spirits	Corpuscles	Bodies	Organisms	Non-bodies
			Masses		Persons

# MODIFICATIONS

Actions		Non-actions	
Thoughts (of spirits)	Motions (of bodies)	Ideas (of spirits)	Qualities (of bodies)



# **PRINCIPLES:**

**One thing cannot have two beginnings of existence.**

**It is impossible for two things of the same type to occupy the same place at the same time.**

**Proof that an oak (i.e., a living organism) and its mass are not the same thing:**

**P1) Consider an oak that exists at times  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ . It is composed of a mass of atoms at both times.**

**P2) But the mass of atoms the oak is composed of at  $t_1$  is not identical with the mass of atoms it is composed of at  $t_2$ .**

**C) The oak and the mass of atoms it is composed of must be different things.**

# THE PERSISTENCE OF MASSES AND LIVING ORGANISMS:

A mass, “consisting of the same Atoms, must be the same Mass, ... let the parts be never so differently jumbled.”

A mass may have only a momentary existence.

A living organism, in contrast, must persist through time.

Living organisms are composed of atoms, but also of masses of atoms.

They may have different atoms and different masses of atoms at different times.

Living organisms cannot undergo radical shifts in their atoms, or cease to exist and then begin to exist again.

# PERSONS:

Persons have some similarities to living organisms. Like living organisms they are composed of masses of atoms.

Whether or not they are substances is, however, debatable.

But persons are also agents. **“Person,”** Locke says, is **“a forensic term appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law.”**

Persons also evidently have consciousness and likely contain souls.

But, unlike living organisms, persons can cease to exist and then begin to exist again.