

A Study of John Locke's *Simple Ideas*

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John Locke was a versatile philosopher. He published his views on a wide range of topics in philosophy. The present paper attempts a study of the various aspects of Locke's simple ideas. Indeed, he recognised simple ideas as the ultimate data of knowledge in his work "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding". The origin, classification, nature, definition, and the problems regarding Locke's simple ideas are examined in this work. An endeavour is made here to reflect critically on queries such as (i) if knowledge really begins with simple ideas, (ii) if the mind is passive while receiving simple ideas or (iii) in what sense did Locke use the word 'simple,' and (iv) is the distinction between simple and complex ideas acceptable in the context of the Essay. An insight into these issues is expected to lead to a better understanding of the nature of simple ideas in Locke's theory of knowledge.

Keywords: simple ideas, knowledge, quality, experience, sensation, empiricism

Introduction

John Locke's primary philosophical concern in his epochal work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (hereinafter referred to as the *Essay*) was to investigate into the origin, certainty, and the extent of human knowledge, along with the "... Grounds and Degrees of Belief, Opinion, and Assent" (Locke 1975, Book I, Chap. 1, Sec. 2, p. 43). With this end in view, he adopted the so-called self-propounded 'historical plain method' to enquire into the nature of human understanding, i.e., the cognitive part of the mind. By 'historical' Locke intended to suggest that his method was based on observations or experiments. He was trying to examine his own conscious experiences in the *understanding* as a cognitive being. He wanted to discover the origin and nature of knowledge by passive observation of what goes on in one's own mind.

To start with, he attempted to discover the origin of knowledge, i.e., how the ultimate data or the raw materials of knowledge come to our mind. He believed that it was essential to know how we obtained knowledge in the first place in order to inquire into what knowledge consisted of and how far it extended. He argued that every human being was conscious to himself that he could think. Thinking presupposed something about which we think. He did not believe in innate ideas or principles from which thinking may start. Instead, he espoused the belief that ideas (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. VIII, Sec. 8, and Book I, Chap. 1, Sec. 8, pp. 134, 47) that come from experience were the raw materials of knowledge. He contended that knowledge, therefore, is not innate but it originates from experience. He then proceeded to establish the rest of his philosophical findings regarding knowledge on this fundamental understanding. According to him, human experience is of two kinds,

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namely sensation and reflection. However, Locke believed these raw materials or ideas that come to our mind from experience were, without exception, simple in nature. In reality though, our ideas are complex in experience. Our understanding analyses these complex ideas into their simple constituents. These simple constituents formed the ultimate data of knowledge.

Locke contended that all ideas, other than simple ideas, were derived from simple ideas by such operations as combining simple ideas, and comparing them or abstracting from them. Again, one has to admit that Locke's account of the ways in which complex ideas are made by combining two or more simple ideas into one, cannot be regarded as a description of the actual process that takes place. It is possible that Locke's account, in some ways, was a mere referral to a philosophical doctrine that suggests the logical relationships between complex and the simple ideas on the ground that the complex ideas were analysable into the simple ones. Besides, Locke also claimed to have determined the ways by which our understanding acquired such knowledge that were derived from simple ideas. He observed that in order to understand the nature, manner, and extent of our knowledge, we have to recognise that some of our ideas are simple and some are complex. The present review is expected to provide an insight into the nature of simple ideas and some important issues related to these ideas, especially those that pertain to simple ideas of sensation.

A cursory glance into Locke's *Essay* will provide enough evidence to the effect that Locke's main concern was with the ideas of sensation leading to our knowledge of the external world. If Locke also discussed the ideas of reflection here, which led to the psychological part of Book II, it was only in order to provide a complete account of simple ideas. The present paper is however not concerned either with the psychological issues of the *Essay* or the ideas of reflection.

Origin, Classification, and Definitions of Simple Ideas

According to Locke, mind has no innate idea or principles; all our ideas i.e., the materials of knowledge and reason, without exception, come from experience. It is important to note here that by experience, Locke implied sensation and reflection. Sensation and reflection were the fountains of knowledge from where all simple ideas were derived. Sensation furnishes the mind with simple ideas of sensible qualities while reflection provides simple ideas of its own operations such as perception or thinking, and volition or willing. Therefore, the ideas of sensation and reflection, in Locke's view, were all simple ideas and can be said to constitute the ultimate data of knowledge. All simple ideas originate from experience. In fact, Locke established his empiricism by tracing the origin of simple ideas in experience.

Locke stated that the simple ideas were of four kinds. These were (a) the ideas that come to our mind through single sense only, such as the idea of colour, sound, smell, etc.; (b) through more than one sense, namely the idea of space or extension, shape and motion, etc.; these ideas come to us through sight and touch; (c) through reflection only, where the simple ideas originate from the perception of the operations of our own minds about its other ideas. Locke here distinguished the action of the

mind under two main heads – perception or thinking and volition or willing. The power of thinking is called *Understanding* and the power of volition is called the *Will*. These two ideas, namely thinking and willing, are the simple ideas of reflection. All other ideas of reflection are complex as all such ideas constitute different modes of thinking and willing. Finally, (d) the fourth type of simple ideas convey themselves into our mind by both sensation and reflection. These ideas are the ideas of pleasure or delight, and their opposites, namely pain and uneasiness, power, existence, and unity. Beside these, Locke also added the idea of succession to this list. The fourth class thus appears to be a surprisingly heterogeneous collection of concepts. He explained that we do not get these ideas by themselves but that they come to us in a way suggesting, as if they were affixed to the other ideas which come to our mind by ways of sensation and reflection. Locke defined simple ideas in the *Essay* as:

...which being each in itself uncompounded, contains in it nothing but *one uniform Appearance*, or Conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different *Ideas* (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. II, Sec. I, p.119).

A simple idea, in accordance with this definition, is in itself un-compounded, forming one uniform appearance or conception in the mind and is not distinguishable into different component ideas. Vere C. Chappell, an American Philosopher of recent times, said that this definition of simple idea, given by Locke, suggested that the defining feature of simplicity in an idea was experiential or phenomenal (Chappell 1997, p. 36). An idea was simple if there was no perceptible variation or division within it.

However, there are other passages in the *Essay* where Locke had suggested a semantic or logical criterion of simplicity. Locke said that “*The Names of simple Ideas are not capable of any definitions*” (Locke 1975, Book III, Chap. IV, Sec. 4, p. 421). Apparently, Locke implied that the names of simple ideas were indefinable. It was not possible to analyse such ideas as entailing other ideas. For a better understanding of Locke’s semantic logical criterion of simplicity, we have to look more closely at his views regarding definition.

Locke rejected the traditional account of definition. The traditional account of definition was based on genus and differentia (*Per genus et differentiam*). These two together make up the essence of an object. Essence signifies the very being of anything whereby it is what it is. So, to the traditionalists, the definition and essence were synonymous terms. Locke had pointed out that it was impossible to know the real essence of objects. Real essence of something is the real constitution of its insensible parts which determine the nominal essence or the discoverable qualities. However, our senses are not sharp enough to perceive the minute particles or insensible parts of bodies and discover their operations. So, Locke argued that it is not possible to know the real essence of objects. The traditional way of defining an object is not always tenable. Locke proposed a more explicit form of definition that is different from the traditional form. He made it perfectly clear that definition was made of words (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. II, Sec. 10, p. 413).

Locke was of the view that in defining a name of a complex idea, one should enumerate the simple ideas contained in it. However, the name of a simple idea itself could not be defined. He pointed out that the reason behind this was that a name of

a simple idea could not be further analysed into parts. He said that definitions ultimately depend upon something *indefinable* which are already given to us. If all terms were definable then it would result in *ad-infinitum* (used as *in-infinitum* by Locke) (Locke 1975, Book III, Chap. IV, Sec. 5, p. 421)). If the term 'A' is definable by 'B', then 'B' will be definable by 'C' and so on, *ad infinitum*. This process will never come to an end. Locke, therefore, admitted that some names could not themselves be defined but were used to define other names. In his opinion, these names were simple in the sense of being indefinable. In reality, the names of simple ideas, Locke argued, were primitives and could not be broken down into simpler ones. Locke further explained why simple ideas were indefinable. No word was suitable to make us understand what a particular simple idea was. According to him, simple ideas were produced only by those impressions that the objects made on our mind. They were related to the material world. They could not be raised in our mind by any other way. All the words used in defining any of their names would never be able to produce in us the idea it stood for. Words were nothing but sounds and could produce no simple idea in us (Locke 1975, Book III, Chap. IV, Sec. 11, p. 424). Locke here intended to convey that we could not have an idea of the taste of a pineapple before having it. No word could produce the exact impression of the taste of the fruit in our mind. The names of simple ideas were beyond definition.

Locke's comment here regarding simple ideas remind us of John Hospers (Hospers 1981, p. 106) where the latter pointed out that simple ideas might be defined only ostensibly. The reason behind this was that there is no other way of communicating what the simple ideas mean. As simple ideas are not analysable into other ideas, there is only one way of conveying the meaning of these ideas, i.e. confronting people with the relevant sense experiences.

Chappell (1997, p. 36) has suggested that these two definitions put forward in the *Essay*, namely experiential or phenomenal and semantical or logical, might not be equivalent but this was not a serious handicap for Locke. Locke's main purpose in marking off simple ideas in this way was to establish his empiricism based on the doctrine that materials of reason and knowledge were ultimately derived from experience.

Locke's definition of simple ideas has also been criticised by several philosophers of subsequent eras.

O'Connor (1967, p. 47) has criticised Locke's experiential or phenomenal definition of simple ideas. He said that the examples of simple ideas of sensation, given by Locke, such as the coldness and hardness of ice, the whiteness of a lily, etc., are merely simple sense data which rarely present as one uniform character, indistinguishable into parts that differ sensibly from one another. He reckoned that even a coloured patch with no part of it sensibly different from any other part in hue, is clearly not uncompounded in an unqualified sense. It is, for example, made up of smaller patches, i.e., it is spatially compounded. Therefore, O'Connor argued that Locke's examples of simple idea did not satisfy his own definition.

Jolley (2004, p. 46) attempted to counter O'Connor's criticism against experiential or phenomenal definition of simple idea. He said that Locke's simple ideas may not be absolutely simple, but they are at least relatively simple with respect to the complex ones. He explained the relative simplicity with a familiar example. He said

that a pile of bricks itself can be called complex with respect to one of the individual bricks which make up the pile. This distinction is still valid and useful even if someone says that individual bricks are not truly simple because each is further divisible into smaller units. However, what remains important to note is that each individual brick can still be considered to be relatively simple in relation to the pile. In the same way, Jolley argued, Locke's simple ideas can be considered as relatively simple in relation to complex ideas. Jolley reasoned that the coloured patch, referred to in O'Connor's arguments, is spatially compounded. The coloured patch could be considered to be relatively simple.

Jenkin (1985, pp. 26–27) also raised a criticism regarding Locke's semantic or logical criterion of simplicity. He pointed out that the idea of 'redness' is indefinable and can be said to be simple. However, the idea of 'squareness' is not simple in this sense since 'squareness' is definable. Locke explicitly regarded the idea of 'solidity' as a simple idea in Chapter IV of Book II, but he went on to define solidity in another part of his book (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. IV, Sec. 1, p. 123). This, Jenkin argued, belied his own claim that the idea of solidity is a simple idea. Similar arguments may be put forward, Jenkin argued, for 'power,' 'existence' and 'unity' all of which Locke classified as simple ideas.

It would probably be pertinent to state here that Locke did not give any reason for considering the ideas of 'squareness,' 'solidity,' 'power,' 'existence,' 'unity,' etc., as simple ideas despite their definability. This clearly is a flaw in his definition of simple ideas.

It cannot be said that Locke himself had made any serious attempt to apply this criterion of un-analysability to determine which ideas could be accepted as simple. Moreover, he did not clarify the sense in which this un-analysability of the content of simple ideas applied.

It is of relevance here to state Gibson's (1917, pp. 50–51) standpoint. He pointed out that like all other ideas, simple ideas were subjective in the sense that they had no existence apart from the perception or apprehension of the mind to which it was presented. However, its presence in the mind was related to the presence of specific object of thought. As 'an appearance in the mind,' simple idea possesses objectivity. It is an object of thought. So, these ideas can never be identified with elementary sensation or feeling and conceived as a purely subjective modification without any objective reference.

The Influence of Compositional Theory on Locke

The concept of 'Simple' did not originate with Locke. Indeed, many of the thinkers of seventeenth century had a role in developing this conception. They were not aware of how ideas developed through a process of evolution. They were not familiar with the concept of evolution. They primarily believed in the idea of composition. The idea of composition presupposes a distinction between simple and complex. The complex whole, they thought, was a mere conglomeration of the simple. These simple constituents when combined to make the complex did not undergo any modification. A process of direct analysis was required in order to trace these simple

constituents which are contained in the complex whole. This compositional theory had a deep influence over the different systems of thought that were then prevalent. We find this theory in different forms and in different connections. Francis Bacon and René Descartes have used this theory in some form or other. In Leibnitz's work, we find a more developed form of this theory. He asserted that all notions and truths were reducible by analysis to certain simple and primitive ones. Leibnitz also applied this simple and complex distinction to reality. He argued that everything in the world could be resolved into simple substances called monads.

Locke, with this theory in mind, proceeded to analyse the origin of ideas. No one has ever denied that Locke's theory of ideas was based on the theory of compositionism. Jolley (2004, pp. 44–45) opined that this characteristic of the Lockean theory of ideas runs parallel with the corpuscularian hypothesis. He argued that it could not be said that one was self-consciously modelled on the other. However, it could be said that the corpuscularian hypothesis had some influence on Locke's theory of ideas. According to this hypothesis, physical objects were analysable into their smallest basic parts or atoms. Locke tried to apply this model to the mind and its contents. He perhaps believed that human thought was sometimes very complex and therefore, it was reasonable to assume that it might be composed of more basic ingredients. The contents of the mind being ideas, its basic ingredients must be simple ideas. This suggests that Locke was almost certainly a compositionalist who believed in corpuscularism.

However, it would be pertinent to note here that Locke followed the doctrine of compositionism in a strong sense in the first edition of the *Essay*. This form of compositionism holds that all ideas are either simple or complex. This classification is both exclusive and exhaustive. It was made in terms of the different types of objects for which the ideas stand. Besides, in this classification scheme, Locke also classified complex ideas exhaustively into modes, substances, and relations. Subsequently, in the fourth edition, Locke proceeded to deviate from this basic classification scheme and revised the official scheme of the classification so that there are ideas which are neither simple nor complex. This classification is based on the mind's activities. The mind may combine simple ideas into one compound idea, thereby forming complex ideas. Secondly, the mind can bring together two ideas, whether simple or complex, and compare them with one another without uniting them into one. These ideas are ideas of relation. Thirdly, the mind, through a process called abstraction, separate ideas from all other ideas that accompany them in their real existence and constructs all general ideas. Thus, general ideas are the products of the mind's abstraction. He maintained that these two kinds of ideas constituted two distinct categories. In the earlier editions Locke had subsumed these two kinds of ideas under the heading of complex ideas.

According to Nicholas Jolley, Aaron (1955, p. 113) had realized that Locke might have failed to tidy up the text in his later editions. An alternative and a more plausible argument could be put forward here that Locke, far from deviating erroneously from his original classification scheme, might have made new observations in the fourth edition primarily to develop his theory of ideas further and cover up the shortcomings in the earlier editions. Locke observed in the fourth edition that some ideas could neither be classified as simple nor as complex. The nature and content of these ideas

did not fit into the old scheme. Therefore, he changed the criterion of the classification in the fourth edition and classified ideas according to the activities of the mind. Locke asserted that these ideas should be classified as ideas of relation and general ideas. He maintained that these two kinds of ideas constituted two distinct categories. In the earlier editions Locke had subsumed these two kinds of ideas under the heading of complex ideas.

Does Knowledge Begin with Simple Ideas in Locke's Perspective?

It would probably be fair to say that according to Locke, human knowledge and wisdom begins with the manifestation of the qualities of individual substances, i.e., to say with complex ideas. He asserted that simple ideas are observed to exist in several combinations compounded together (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. XII, Sec. 1, p. 164). They are received in groups or in combinations in the senses. Therefore, we receive complex ideas of things through experience. He also pointed out that some simple ideas, e.g., those of existence and unity, are necessary concomitants of all other simple ideas (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. VII, Sec. 7, p. 131).

Therefore, our ideas are complex in experience. However, the understanding can analyse them into their simple constituents. These simple constituents are the ultimate data of experience. These are simple ideas of sensation. Ayer said:

Locke's atomistic treatment of sensation does not accord with the experiential facts; and the ideas that he regards as 'simple' are not psychologically primitive (Ayer 1963, p. 11).

Ayer emphasized that we do not begin with the experience of sensible qualities in isolation and then put them together to form the idea of perceptual objects. Locke did not assert that simple ideas are, or can be, received or represented in their simplicity. Locke did not appreciate the view that knowledge of the unrelated is possible.

Therefore, Locke's account of the ways in which complex ideas are made out of simple ideas may not be regarded as a description of a factual process that really takes place. It is not a psychological doctrine about the way in which complex ideas are formed out of simple ideas. It is a philosophical doctrine that indicates the logical relationships that complex ideas hold with the simple ideas if they are to be analysable in terms of them.

Criticisms and Counter-criticisms

Fraser (1890, p. 128), a Scottish theologian and philosopher, has noted that some critics who have trusted Locke of implying that at the beginning of life each human being is conscious only of simple ideas, have complained that Locke did not offer an adequate explanation of why and how the simple ideas become complex and abstract with the attainment of adulthood.

Victor Cousin, a French philosopher and a critic of Locke, said that the process of acquisition of ideas or thoughts about things is quite opposite to that described by Locke (Fraser 1890, p. 129). While Locke believed that life begins with the consciousness of only those ideas that are simple and unrelated and that we become conscious of complex ideas only afterwards, Cousin said that all our primitive ideas are complex, particular, and concrete. He reasoned that we begin with complex ideas and then by abstraction of these ideas, we advance to the simple ones. The reason behind this is that our faculties, broadly speaking, act simultaneously. The simultaneous activity of the senses at once affords us with several simple ideas unified together in an individual substance.

Green and some other critics have charged Locke with mixing up two contradictory theories regarding ideas and the origin of knowledge (Fraser 1890, pp. 130–131). They have argued that in some parts of the *Essay*, Locke said that our knowledge begins with simple ideas of isolated sensations that gradually proceed towards complex ones, while in other parts, the critics commented, Locke was of the view that knowledge begins with individual substances manifested in their qualities, i.e., to say, with complex ideas. This is especially true in such sections of the *Essay* where Locke dealt with general terms. This showed, the critics argued, that Locke was self-contradictory.

Fraser (1890, pp. 129–130) contended that Victor Cousin's charge against Locke was unacceptable. He argued that the second book of Locke's *Essay* was open to be interpreted as a logical analysis of the complex ideas of things. Locke said in this book that simple ideas exist in different combinations united together. The mind has the power to consider them separately. He emphasized that the qualities of a thing that affect our senses are so closely united with the thing that separation between them is not possible. However, the ideas they produce in us are simple and unmixed and contain nothing but one uniform appearance or conception. Fraser said that Locke had accepted here what psychologists called *abstraction of senses*. The terminology *abstraction of senses* implies that the intellect operative in each sense, abstracts or extracts simple ideas from the objects which the mind comes across, such as those of colours (i.e., simple ideas of colour) through the eye, sound through the ear, etc. Fraser said that this does not mean that a human being, at the beginning of life, perceives simple ideas only in their simplicity or that we do not, implicitly at least, refer to them as qualities belonging to things or individual substances, our ideas of which are necessarily complex.

Fraser (1890, pp. 130–131) has also refuted the charges made by Green and other critics against Locke. He stated that these charges of confusion in Locke's theories arose due to the critics' oversight of Locke's own standpoint in those parts of the *Essay* where he seemed to say that knowledge begins with unrelated sensations (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. II, Sec. 1, p. 119) and in those other parts where he treated complex ideas as the starting point (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. XII, Sec. 1, p. 164). Fraser argued that Locke did not support the view that knowledge of the unrelated is possible (Locke 1975, Book IV, Chap. I, Sec. 2, p. 525).

In one of the two passages that are supposed to be contradictory, Locke proposed a true logical analysis of the matter or the phenomenal constituents of already formed complex and abstract ideas (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. XII, Sec. 1, p. 164). In the

other set, he described, like a psychologist, the generalisation of the understanding arising from the complex individual presentation of sense phenomenon or 'sense ideas,' which symbolizes the growth of our knowledge (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. II, Sec. 1, p. 119).

Is the Mind Passive while Receiving Simple Ideas?

According to Locke, our understanding passively receives simple ideas. Once the understanding has received these ideas, it cannot refuse, blot or alter them. It has no power to generate new simple ideas by itself. Mind is passive in the sense that it is able to receive these simple ideas but cannot invent them. Locke said that nobody can form a simple idea that he or she never received from experience i.e., from sensation and reflection (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. II, Sec. 1, p. 119).

There is a striking resemblance between what Locke said about simple ideas and Hume (1982, pp. 11–13) said regarding ideas and impressions. It is interesting to note that Hume's ideas and impressions stand for Locke's simple ideas and sensations, respectively. Hume advanced two arguments in favour of his thesis that says that all our ideas (i.e., feeble perceptions) are copies of our impressions (lively perceptions). The first argument says that an analysis and examination of our ideas or thoughts reveal that they are derived from preceding impressions. He argued that it is impossible to produce any idea, which is not a copy from a previous impression. He, like Locke, was convinced that no one could ever produce an idea without a previous impression.

The second argument in favour of Hume's thesis runs as follows - if anyone is deficient of an impression, he is also deficient of an idea. To quote his words, "A blind man can form no notion of colours; a deaf man of sounds" (Hume 1982, p. 12).

Hume however, said that there might be some exceptions to this. According to him, a man who has become acquainted with every shade of blue but one, can supply the missing shade from his imagination. Thus, we find that Hume, in drawing a distinction between impressions and ideas, is substantially in agreement with Locke. The only point of difference between them seems to be this: while Locke made ideas alone as the contents of mind, Hume looked upon both impressions and ideas, not merely ideas, as the content of mind.

Locke while arguing that the understanding passively receives simple ideas, gave the analogy of the mirror to clarify his point. He contended that the mind receives the ideas of sensation passively, as the mirror does. It cannot refuse to reflect the object placed before it (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. I, Sec. 25, p. 118). If we take this analogy literally and emphasize that the mirror is passive, a natural criticism follows. This is that in the reception of simple ideas, the mind is active rather than passive. Aaron (1955, pp. 111–112) pointed out that Locke has not used the terms passive and active consistently. Locke has said in one of the passages that while receiving simple ideas "the *understanding* is merely *passive*;" (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. I, Sec. 25, p. 118). Again, in the heading of the same paragraph, Locke said that 'the understanding is for the most part passive.' Aaron however clarified that in spite of this inconsistency, it is evident that the mind merely

perceives the simple ideas while sensing. We merely receive simple ideas. The mind does not create them. In this sense, the mind is passive. The understanding plays a passive role regarding the creation of simple ideas.

However, it may be mentioned here that mind does remain active in another sense, since receiving itself is an activity. Jenkin (1985, p. 24) has strongly supported this view. He argued that to have a simple idea, for example the idea of the colour yellow in the mind, the mind must be able to compare and discriminate yellow from ideas of other colours. Therefore, mind is active while receiving ideas of sensations. The difficulty arises because Locke did not clarify the status of these ideas. He suggested in Chapter I of the *Essay* (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. I, Sec. 1, p. 104) that ideas are the kind of things of which we are necessarily conscious. To be conscious of something, necessarily implies activity on the part of the mind such as making a contrast or a comparison. Jenkin held that it is one thing to receive sense data, where the process may be passive, but it is another to identify what one receives, for it involves an activity on the part of the understanding. He contended that there are reasons to hold that Locke did not take the mirror analogy so literally. It is evident from his explanation of the ideas of reflection that mind has many in-built powers. Jenkin further pointed out that as perception is one of these powers, it suggests that mind is active in the reception of simple ideas (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. IX, Sec. 4, p. 144).

Jenkin held that Locke's remark here perhaps suggests that his intention was not to draw a distinction between what is passive with what is active but between what is passive with what we deliberately choose. His contention is that if the senses function properly and the powers of the mind are alert, simple ideas would come to the mind. Locke believed that the contents of our sensation are immediately given but the powers of the mind must be at work to receive the simple ideas.

It is difficult to decide what Locke's opinion really was regarding passivity on the part of the understanding while receiving simple ideas. It appears that Locke believed that the mind is passive in the sense that it does not create any simple idea; it merely receives them passively. The mind plays a passive role regarding the creation of simple ideas. However, the mind is active in receiving these simple ideas since reception itself involves an operation of the understanding by which its content is noticed, compared with, and discriminated from other ideas.

In What Sense has Locke used the Word *Simple*?

It has been variously argued by O'Conner and Aaron that Locke has used the word 'simple' somewhat ambiguously in the *Essay*. O'Conner (1967, p. 48) remarked that Locke used the term 'simple' in four different senses. First, the term 'simple' is used in the sense of the smallest unit or the 'atom.' A simple idea contains within itself nothing but one uniform appearance or conception and is not distinguishable into different ideas. Therefore, we can liken it to an atom. Secondly, it has sometimes been used in the sense of a single sense quality, like the colour 'blue,' the shape 'square' or a 'sweet' taste. Thirdly, O'Conner said that Locke used the term in the sense of what is given to the mind in experience, in contrast to what is constructed by the mind from the materials provided by sensation and reflection.

Indeed, Locke said that simple ideas come into our mind either by sensations or by reflections. They are the materials of our mind. In contrast, complex ideas are what the mind makes out of these simple ideas, i.e., they are the result of the workmanship of the mind. Lastly, a simple idea sometimes refers to a determinable quality, like 'coloured' or 'shaped,' in contrast to a determinate quality like a particular shade of colour or shape. This particular meaning is obvious in Locke's account of ideas of reflection. O'Connor has pointed out that it is very difficult to extract a perfectly clear description of simple ideas from Locke's writings. He contended that we could characterize it negatively as ideas that are not complex.

Aaron (1955, pp. 111–113) argued in this context that Locke failed to clarify the nature of simple idea to himself primarily because the term 'simple idea' evoked two distinct meanings to him, namely (i) the given and (ii) the indivisible, i.e., the atom. If simple ideas were characterized as atoms of experience, they could not be described as given. Generally speaking, a simple idea is that which the understanding receives passively. Therefore, they can be considered as given. However, simple idea, according to Locke's definition, goes as quoted below:

... which being each in itself uncompounded, contains in it nothing but one *uniform Appearance*, or *Conception* in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different *Ideas* (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. II, Sec. 1, p. 119).

So, it is the atom. These two meanings are inconsistent. Aaron argued that the atoms are the outcome of a process of abstraction rather than products of sensation. He maintained that it is inexplicable how Locke could use the term simple sometimes in one and sometimes in another sense, thereby creating confusion.

Notwithstanding the arguments forwarded by O'Connor and Aaron, it may be noted here that Locke, while distinguishing simple ideas from complex ideas, did not assert that simple ideas are or can be received or represented in their simplicity. The ideas he regarded as simple are not psychologically primitive. We do not begin our experience of sensible qualities in isolation and then put them together to obtain the perceptual objects. According to Locke, our ideas in experience are complex ideas of things. These ideas may be reduced to their simple constituents by subsequent abstraction to give rise to simple ideas. What is given in our experience is complex ideas of things. Simple ideas can be considered as atoms of experience since we obtain such ideas from the complex ones by the process of abstraction. Simultaneously, one can also take simple ideas to be *given* in the sense that they are passively received by our understanding. The understanding has no power to refuse, alter or blot them. Understanding plays a passive role in the matter of creation of simple ideas. It is apparent therefore that Locke's usage of the term *idea* in two distinct senses, namely as atoms of experience and as *given*, is not inconsistent. Aaron's argument that Locke used the term 'simple' in two different senses is consequently not well founded.

O'Connor has argued that Locke has used the word 'simple' in four different senses. Hence, it is difficult to extract a clear description of simple ideas.

It has to be emphasized here that simple ideas can be considered as atoms of experience as well as single-sense qualities. Our ideas are complex ideas of things

in experience. The understanding can analyse them into their simple constituents. These simple constituents are the ultimate data of experience and are the simple ideas of sensation. They can be considered as atoms as they are the ultimate data of experience. These simple ideas of sensation may be single-sense qualities like the colour 'blue,' the shape 'square,' etc. Again, these simple ideas may be considered as *given* to the mind in experience, in contrast to what is constructed by the mind. The mind plays a passive role, by merely receiving them, in the process of creation of simple ideas. The three descriptions of simple ideas therefore present no ambiguity and are nothing but different characteristics of simple ideas.

However, O'Connor has pointed out that Locke has also used the term 'simple' in his *Essay* sometimes in the sense of single determinate sense qualities like the colour 'blue' or the shape 'square' and sometimes in the sense of determinable qualities like 'coloured' or 'shaped.' In this respect, we can certainly appreciate O'Connor's negative characterisation of simple ideas as *ideas that are not complex*, based on Locke's usage of the term simple idea in the *Essay*.

Is the Distinction between Simple and Complex Ideas Acceptable?

Aaron (1955, pp. 112–113) observed that Locke's distinction between simple and complex ideas is not acceptable. The question here is - whether the distinction between simple and complex ideas is the distinction between what is *given* and what is *not given* or whether it is between the atomic and the composite. None of these two distinctions is tenable. Locke remarked that "Simple ideas are observed to exist in several combinations united together" (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. XII, Sec. 1, p. 164). Here, what Locke wanted to say is that complex ideas are also given. Again, Locke had to admit that some simple ideas are not atoms. The ideas of space and time are simple, yet the very nature of both is that they consist of parts. On the other hand, not all complex ideas are composite, for example, ideas of relations and general ideas. These ideas are not made up of simple ideas. Hence, not everything given is a simple idea and not all composites are complex ideas.

Aaron argued that since complex ideas are also given, Locke's distinction between simple and complex ideas is not tenable if the distinction is made between what is *given* and what is *not given*. This criticism of Aaron can be countered for we know that according to Locke, our ideas are complex ideas of things in experience. We receive simple ideas through abstraction from complex ideas by our understanding. Therefore, what is given in experience are complex ideas of things and not simple ideas. Locke's distinction between simple and complex ideas can be considered as the distinction between what is *given* and what is *not given*. On the other hand, if the distinction between simple and complex ideas is the distinction between atomic and the composite, then Aaron's criticism follows necessarily. It is surely a defect in Locke's *Essay* that it offers no reason for why space and time, being simple, consist of parts while the ideas of relations and general ideas are complex ideas but not made up of simple ideas.

Conclusion

The primary objective of the present paper is (i) to present an account of Simple Ideas as conceived by Locke and an assessment of the criticisms made by philosophers belonging to both the contemporary period and to later generations, and (ii) to clarify the nature of simple ideas, recognised by Locke as the ultimate data of knowledge. Locke acknowledged ideas as the fundamental units of mental content in his *Essay*. He did not believe in innate ideas or principles. According to him our mind is a *tabula rasa* or a blank sheet of paper. He argued that all our ideas, without exception, come from experience i.e., from sensation and reflection. The ideas of sensation and reflection in Locke's view were all simple ideas. All other ideas, Locke argued, were derived from simple ideas. The various aspects and issues regarding simple ideas have been discussed in length at order to understand its nature appropriately.

The two definitions of simple ideas, namely experiential or phenomenal and semantical or logical, that Locke put forward in his *Essay* merely pointed out the simplicity of simple ideas from two different perspectives. Criticisms made by several critics regarding these definitions have been discussed in this work. As indicated in the text, some of these criticisms can be overcome, not all. A few of these criticisms appear to showcase, albeit indirectly, some of the defects in the *Essay*.

Critics have expressed different opinions regarding the process of acquisition of simple ideas or thoughts by an individual. Locke's observations in Book II of the *Essay* suggest that our ideas are complex in experience. However, our understanding has the power to analyse them into their simple constituents. These are simple ideas of sensations. Locke's account of the ways in which complex ideas are formed out of simple ideas may not be regarded as a description of any factual process that actually takes place. It is better to term it as a philosophical doctrine that indicates the logical relationships that complex ideas hold with simple ideas (if they are to be analysable in terms of them).

Simple ideas play a significant role in Locke's theory of knowledge. They are the materials of all knowledge and reason. Locke's main purpose in marking off simple ideas was to establish his empiricism. In defining complex ideas, they also play an important role.

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