

A Study of John Locke's *Simple Ideas*

*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 is 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" (Locke1975, 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 (Locke1975, 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, 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

1 complex ideas into their simple constituents. These simple constituents formed
2 the ultimate data of knowledge.

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

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

25 26 27 **Origin, Classification, and definitions of Simple Ideas**

28
29 According to Locke, mind has no innate idea or principles; all our ideas i.e.,
30 the materials of knowledge and reason, without exception, come from
31 experience. It is important to note here that by experience, Locke implied
32 sensation and reflection. Sensation and reflection were the fountains of
33 knowledge from where all simple ideas were derived. Sensation furnishes the
34 mind with simple ideas of sensible qualities while reflection provides simple
35 ideas of its own operations such as perception or thinking, and volition or
36 willing. Therefore, the ideas of sensation and reflection, in Locke's view, were
37 all simple ideas and can be said to constitute the ultimate data of knowledge. All
38 simple ideas originate from experience. In fact, Locke established his empiricism
39 by tracing the origin of simple ideas in experience.

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

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

14
 15 ...which being each in itself uncompounded, contains in it nothing but *one uniform*
 16 *Appearance*, or Conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different
 17 *Ideas* (Locke1975, Book II, Chap. II, Sec. I, p.119).
 18

19 A simple idea, in accordance with this definition, is in itself un-
 20 compounded, forming one uniform appearance or conception in the mind and is
 21 not distinguishable into different component ideas. Vere C. Chappell, an
 22 American Philosopher of recent times, said that this definition of simple idea,
 23 given by Locke, suggested that the defining feature of simplicity in an idea was
 24 experiential or phenomenal (Chappell1997, p. 36). An idea was simple if there
 25 was no perceptible variation or division within it.

26 However, there are other passages in the *Essay* where Locke had suggested
 27 a semantic or logical criterion of simplicity. Locke said that “*The Names of*
 28 *simple Ideas are not capable of any definitions*” (Locke1975, Book III, Chap.
 29 IV, Sec. 4, p. 421). Apparently, Locke implied that the names of simple ideas
 30 were indefinable. It was not possible to analyse such ideas as entailing other
 31 ideas. For a better understanding of Locke’s semantic logical criterion of
 32 simplicity, we have to look more closely at his views regarding definition.

33 Locke rejected the traditional account of definition. The traditional account
 34 of definition was based on genus and differentia (*Per genus et differentiam*).
 35 These two together make up the essence of an object. Essence signifies the very
 36 being of anything whereby it is what it is. So, to the traditionalists, the definition
 37 and essence were synonymous terms. Locke had pointed out that it was
 38 impossible to know the real essence of objects. Real essence of something is the
 39 real constitution of its insensible parts which determine the nominal essence or
 40 the discoverable qualities. However, our senses are not sharp enough to perceive
 41 the minute particles or insensible parts of bodies and discover their operations.
 42 So, Locke argued that it is not possible to know the real essence of objects. The
 43 traditional way of defining an object is not always tenable. Locke proposed a
 44 more explicit form of definition that is different from the traditional form. He
 45 made it perfectly clear that definition was made of words (Locke1975, Book II,
 46 Chap. II, Sec. 10, p. 413).

1 Locke was of the view that in defining a name of a complex idea, one should
 2 enumerate the simple ideas contained in it. However, the name of a simple idea
 3 itself could not be defined. He pointed out that the reason behind this was that a
 4 name of a simple idea could not be further analysed into parts. He said that
 5 definitions ultimately depend upon something *indefinable* which are already
 6 given to us. If all terms were definable then it would result in ad-infinitum (used
 7 as *in-infinitum* by Locke) (Locke1975, Book III, Chap. IV, Sec. 5, p. 421)). If
 8 the term 'A' is definable by 'B', then 'B' will be definable by 'C' and so on, ad
 9 infinitum. This process will never come to an end. Locke, therefore, admitted
 10 that some names could not themselves be defined but were used to define other
 11 names. In his opinion, these names were simple in the sense of being indefinable.
 12 In reality, the names of simple ideas, Locke argued, were primitives and could
 13 not be broken down into simpler ones. Locke further explained why simple ideas
 14 were indefinable. No word was suitable to make us understand what a particular
 15 simple idea was. According to him, simple ideas were produced only by those
 16 impressions that the objects made on our mind. They were related to the material
 17 world. They could not be raised in our mind by any other way. All the words
 18 used in defining any of their names would never be able to produce in us the idea
 19 it stood for. Words were nothing but sounds and could produce no simple idea
 20 in us (Locke1975, Book III, Chap. IV, Sec. 11, p. 424). Locke here intended to
 21 convey that we could not have an idea of the taste of a pineapple before having
 22 it. No word could produce the exact impression of the taste of the fruit in our
 23 mind. The names of simple ideas were beyond definition.

24 Locke's comment here regarding simple ideas remind us of John Hospers
 25 (Hospers1981, p. 106) when the latter pointed out that simple ideas might be
 26 defined only ostensibly. The reason behind this was that there is no other way of
 27 communicating what the simple ideas mean. As simple ideas are not analysable
 28 into other ideas, there is only one way of conveying the meaning of these ideas,
 29 i.e. confronting people with the relevant sense experiences.

30 Vere Chappell (Chappell1997, p.36) has suggested that these two
 31 definitions put forward in the *Essay*, namely experiential or phenomenal and
 32 semantical or logical, might not be equivalent but this was not a serious handicap
 33 for Locke. Locke's main purpose in marking off simple ideas in this way was to
 34 establish his empiricism based on the doctrine that materials of reason and
 35 knowledge were ultimately derived from experience.

36
 37 Locke's definition of simple ideas has also been criticised by several philosophers
 38 of subsequent eras.

39
 40 O'Connor (O'Connor1967, p. 47) has criticised Locke's experiential or
 41 phenomenal definition of simple ideas. He said that the examples of simple ideas
 42 of sensation, given by Locke, such as the coldness and hardness of ice, the
 43 whiteness of a lily, etc., are merely simple sense data which rarely present as one
 44 uniform character, indistinguishable into parts that differ sensibly from one
 45 another. He reckoned that even a coloured patch with no part of it sensibly
 46 different from any other part in hue, is clearly not uncompounded in an
 47 unqualified sense. It is, for example, made up of smaller patches, i.e., it is

1 spatially compounded. Therefore, O'Connor argued that Locke's examples of
2 simple idea did not satisfy his own definition.

3 Nicholas Jolley (Jolly2004, p. 46) attempted to counter O'Connor's
4 criticism against experiential or phenomenal definition of simple idea. He said
5 that Locke's simple ideas may not be absolutely simple, but they are at least
6 relatively simple with respect to the complex ones. He explained the relative
7 simplicity with a familiar example. He said that a pile of bricks itself can be
8 called complex with respect to one of the individual bricks which make up the
9 pile. This distinction is still valid and useful even if someone says that individual
10 bricks are not truly simple because each is further divisible into smaller units.
11 However, what remains important to note is that each individual brick can still
12 be considered to be relatively simple in relation to the pile. In the same way,
13 Jolley argued, Locke's simple ideas can be considered as relatively simple in
14 relation to complex ideas. Jolley reasoned that the coloured patch, referred to in
15 O'Connor's arguments, is spatially compounded. The coloured patch could be
16 considered to be relatively simple.

17 Jenkin (Jenkin1985, pp. 26-27) also raised a criticism regarding Locke's
18 semantic or logical criterion of simplicity. He pointed out that the idea of
19 'redness' is indefinable and can be said to be simple. However, the idea of
20 'squareness' is not simple in this sense since 'squareness' is definable. Locke
21 explicitly regarded the idea of 'solidity' as a simple idea in Chapter IV of Book
22 II, but he went on to define solidity in another part of his book (Locke1975, Book
23 II, Chap. IV, Sec. 1, p. 123). This, Jenkins argued, belied his own claim that the
24 idea of solidity is a simple idea. Similar arguments may be put forward, Jenkins
25 argued, for 'power,' 'existence' and 'unity' all of which Locke classified as
26 simple ideas.

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

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

35 It is of relevance here to state Gibson's (Gibson1917, pp. 50-51) standpoint.
36 He pointed out that like all other ideas, simple ideas were subjective in the sense
37 that they had no existence apart from the perception or apprehension of the mind
38 to which it was presented. However, its presence in the mind was related to the
39 presence of specific object of thought. As 'an appearance in the mind,' simple
40 idea possesses objectivity. It is an object of thought. So, these ideas can never be
41 identified with elementary sensation or feeling and conceived as a purely
42 subjective modification without any objective reference.

43

1 **The influence of compositional theory on Locke**

2
3 The concept of ‘Simple’ did not originate with Locke. Indeed, many of the
4 thinkers of seventeenth century had a role in developing this conception. They
5 were not aware of how ideas developed through a process of evolution. They
6 were not familiar with the concept of evolution. They primarily believed in the
7 idea of composition. The idea of composition presupposes a distinction between
8 simple and complex. The complex whole, they thought, was a mere
9 conglomeration of the simple. These simple constituents when combined to
10 make the complex did not undergo any modification. A process of direct analysis
11 was required in order to trace these simple constituents which are contained in
12 the complex whole. This compositional theory had a deep influence over the
13 different systems of thought that were then prevalent. We find this theory in
14 different forms and in different connections. Francis Bacon and René Descartes
15 have used this theory in some form or other. In Leibnitz’s work, we find a more
16 developed form of this theory. He asserted that all notions and truths were
17 reducible by analysis to certain simple and primitive ones. Leibnitz also applied
18 this simple and complex distinction to reality. He argued that everything in the
19 world could be resolved into simple substances called monads.

20 Locke, with this theory in mind, proceeded to analyse the origin of ideas.
21 No one has ever denied that Locke’s theory of ideas was based on the theory of
22 compositionalism. Nicholas Jolley (Jolly2004, pp 44-45) opined that this
23 characteristic of the Lockean theory of ideas runs parallel with the
24 corpuscularian hypothesis. He argued that it could not be said that one was self-
25 consciously modelled on the other. However, it could be said that the
26 corpuscularian hypothesis had some influence on Locke’s theory of ideas.
27 According to this hypothesis, physical objects were analysable into their smallest
28 basic parts or atoms. Locke tried to apply this model to the mind and its contents.
29 He perhaps believed that human thought was sometimes very complex and
30 therefore, it was reasonable to assume that it might be composed of more basic
31 ingredients. The contents of the mind being ideas, its basic ingredients must be
32 simple ideas. This suggests that Locke was almost certainly a compositionalist
33 who believed in corpuscularism.

34 However, it would be pertinent to note here that Locke followed the doctrine
35 of compositionalism in a strong sense in the first edition of the *Essay*. This form
36 of compositionalism holds that all ideas are either simple or complex. This
37 classification is both exclusive and exhaustive. It was made in terms of the
38 different types of objects for which the ideas stand. Besides, in this classification
39 scheme, Locke also classified complex ideas exhaustively into modes,
40 substances, and relations. Subsequently, in the fourth edition, Locke proceeded
41 to deviate from this basic classification scheme and revised the official scheme
42 of the classification so that there are ideas which are neither simple nor complex.
43 This classification is based on the mind’s activities. The mind may combine
44 simple ideas into one compound idea, thereby forming complex ideas. Secondly,
45 the mind can bring together two ideas, whether simple or complex, and compare
46 them with one another without uniting them into one. These ideas are ideas of

1 relation. Thirdly, the mind, through a process called abstraction, separate ideas
 2 from all other ideas that accompany them in their real existence and constructs
 3 all general ideas. Thus, general ideas are the products of the mind's abstraction.
 4 He maintained that these two kinds of ideas constituted two distinct categories.
 5 In the earlier editions Locke had subsumed these two kinds of ideas under the
 6 heading of complex ideas.

7 According to Nicholas Jolley, Aaron (Aaron1955, p. 113) had realized that
 8 Locke might have failed to tidy up the text in his later editions. An alternative
 9 and a more plausible argument could be put forward here that Locke, far from
 10 deviating erroneously from his original classification scheme, might have made
 11 new observations in the fourth edition primarily to develop his theory of ideas
 12 further and cover up the shortcomings in the earlier editions. Locke observed in
 13 the fourth edition that some ideas could neither be classified as simple nor as
 14 complex. The nature and content of these ideas did not fit into the old scheme.
 15 Therefore, he changed the criterion of the classification in the fourth edition and
 16 classified ideas according to the activities of the mind. Locke asserted that these
 17 ideas should be classified as ideas of relation and general ideas. He maintained
 18 that these two kinds of ideas constituted two distinct categories. In the earlier
 19 editions Locke had subsumed these two kinds of ideas under the heading of
 20 complex ideas.

23 **Whether knowledge begins with Simple Ideas in Locke's perspective?**

24
 25 It would probably be fair to say that according to Locke, human knowledge
 26 and wisdom begins with the manifestation of the qualities of individual
 27 substances, i.e., to say with complex ideas. He asserted that simple ideas are
 28 observed to exist in several combinations compounded together (Locke1975,
 29 Book II, Chap. XII, Sec. 1, p 164). They are received in groups or in
 30 combinations in the senses. Therefore, we receive complex ideas of things
 31 through experience. He also pointed out that some simple ideas, e.g., those of
 32 existence and unity, are necessary concomitants of all other simple ideas
 33 (Locke1975, Book II, Chap. VII, Sec. 7, p. 131).

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

38
 39 Locke's atomistic treatment of sensation does not accord with the experiential
 40 facts; and the ideas that he regards as 'simple' are not psychologically primitive
 41 (Ayer1963, p. 11).

42
 43 Ayer emphasized that we do not begin with the experience of sensible
 44 qualities in isolation and then put them together to form the idea of perceptual
 45 objects. Locke did not assert that simple ideas are, or can be, received or
 46 represented in their simplicity. Locke did not appreciate the view that knowledge
 47 of the unrelated is possible.

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

7
 8 *Criticisms and Counter-criticisms*

9
 10 A. C. Fraser (Fraser1890, p. 128), a Scottish theologian and philosopher, has
 11 noted that some critics who have trusted Locke of implying that at the beginning
 12 of life each human being is conscious only of simple ideas, have complained that
 13 Locke did not offer an adequate explanation of why and how the simple ideas
 14 become complex and abstract with the attainment of adulthood.

15 Victor Cousin (Fraser1890, p. 129), a French philosopher and a critic of
 16 Locke, said that the process of acquisition of ideas or thoughts about things is
 17 quite opposite to that described by Locke. While Locke believed that life begins
 18 with the consciousness of only those ideas that are simple and unrelated and that
 19 we become conscious of complex ideas only afterwards, Cousin said that all our
 20 primitive ideas are complex, particular, and concrete. He reasoned that we begin
 21 with complex ideas and then by abstraction of these ideas, we advance to the
 22 simple ones. The reason behind this is that our faculties, broadly speaking, act
 23 simultaneously. The simultaneous activity of the senses at once affords us with
 24 several simple ideas unified together in an individual substance.

25 Green (Fraser1890, pp. 130-131) and some other critics have charged Locke
 26 with mixing up two contradictory theories regarding ideas and the origin of
 27 knowledge. They have argued that in some parts of the *Essay*, Locke said that
 28 our knowledge begins with simple ideas of isolated sensations that gradually
 29 proceed towards complex ones, while in other parts, the critics commented,
 30 Locke was of the view that knowledge begins with individual substances
 31 manifested in their qualities, i.e., to say, with complex ideas. This is especially
 32 true in such sections of the *Essay* where Locke dealt with general terms. This
 33 showed, the critics argued, that Locke was self-contradictory.

34 Fraser (Fraser1890, pp. 129-130) contended that Victor Cousin’s charge
 35 against Locke was unacceptable. He argued that the second book of Locke’s
 36 *Essay* was open to be interpreted as a logical analysis of the complex ideas of
 37 things. Locke said in this book that simple ideas exist in different combinations
 38 united together. The mind has the power to consider them separately. He
 39 emphasized that the qualities of a thing that affect our senses are so closely
 40 united with the thing that separation between them is not possible. However, the
 41 ideas they produce in us are simple and unmixed and contain nothing but one
 42 uniform appearance or conception. Fraser said that Locke had accepted here
 43 what psychologists called *abstraction of senses*. The terminology *abstraction of*
 44 *senses* implies that the intellect operative in each sense, abstracts or extracts
 45 simple ideas from the objects which the mind comes across, such as those of
 46 colours (i.e., simple ideas of colour) through the eye, sound through the ear, etc.

1 Fraser said that this does not mean that a human being, at the beginning of life,
2 perceives simple ideas only in their simplicity or that we do not, implicitly at
3 least, refer to them as qualities belonging to things or individual substances, our
4 ideas of which are necessarily complex.

5 Fraser (Fraser1890, pp. 130-131) has also refuted the charges made by
6 Green and other critics against Locke. He stated that these charges of confusion
7 in Locke's theories arose due to the critics' oversight of Locke's own standpoint
8 in those parts of the *Essay* where he seemed to say that knowledge begins with
9 unrelated sensations (Locke1975, Book II, Chap. II, Sec. 1, p. 119) and in those
10 other parts where he treated complex ideas as the starting point (Locke1975,
11 Book II, Chap. XII, Sec. 1, p. 164). Fraser argued that Locke did not support the
12 view that knowledge of the unrelated is possible (Locke1975, Book IV, Chap. I,
13 Sec. 2, p. 525).

14 In one of the two passages that are supposed to be contradictory, Locke
15 proposed a true logical analysis of the matter or the phenomenal constituents of
16 already formed complex and abstract ideas (Locke1975, Book II, Chap. XII, Sec.
17 1, p. 164). In the other set, he described, like a psychologist, the generalisation
18 of the understanding arising from the complex individual presentation of sense
19 phenomenon or 'sense ideas,' which symbolizes the growth of our knowledge
20 (Locke1975, Book II, Chap. II, Sec. 1, p. 119).

23 **Is the mind passive while receiving simple ideas?**

24
25 According to Locke, our understanding passively receives simple ideas.
26 Once the understanding has received these ideas, it cannot refuse, blot or alter
27 them. It has no power to generate new simple ideas by itself. Mind is passive in
28 the sense that it is able to receive these simple ideas but cannot invent them.
29 Locke said that nobody can form a simple idea that he or she never received from
30 experience i.e., from sensation and reflection (Locke1975, Book II, Chap. II,
31 Sec. 1, p. 119).

32 There is a striking resemblance between what Locke said about simple ideas
33 and Hume said (Hume1982, pp. 11-13) regarding ideas and impressions. It is
34 interesting to note that Hume's ideas and impressions stand for Locke's simple
35 ideas and sensations, respectively. Hume advanced two arguments in favour of
36 his thesis that says that all our ideas (i.e., feeble perceptions) are copies of our
37 impressions (lively perceptions). The first argument says that an analysis and
38 examination of our ideas or thoughts reveal that they are derived from preceding
39 impressions. He argued that it is impossible to produce any idea, which is not a
40 copy from a previous impression. He, like Locke, was convinced that no one
41 could ever produce an idea without a previous impression.

42 The second argument in favour of Hume's thesis runs as follows - if anyone
43 is deficient of an impression, he is also deficient of an idea. To quote his words,
44 "A blind man can form no notion of colours; a deaf man of sounds." (Hume1982,
45 p. 12)

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

8 Locke while arguing that the understanding passively receives simple ideas,
 9 gave the analogy of the mirror to clarify his point. He contended that the mind
 10 receives the ideas of sensation passively, as the mirror does. It cannot refuse to
 11 reflect the object placed before it (Locke1975, Book II, Chap. I, Sec. 25, p. 118).
 12 If we take this analogy literally and emphasize that the mirror is passive, a natural
 13 criticism follows. This is that in the reception of simple ideas, the mind is active
 14 rather than passive. Aaron (Aaron1955, pp. 111-112) pointed out that Locke has
 15 not used the terms passive and active consistently. Locke has said in one of the
 16 passages that while receiving simple ideas “the *understanding* is merely
 17 *passive*;” (Locke1975, Book II, Chap. I, Sec. 25, p. 118). Again, in the heading
 18 of the same paragraph, Locke said that ‘the understanding is for the most part
 19 passive.’ Aaron however clarified that in spite of this inconsistency, it is evident
 20 that the mind merely perceives the simple ideas while sensing. We merely
 21 receive simple ideas. The mind does not create them. In this sense, the mind is
 22 passive. The understanding plays a passive role regarding the creation of simple
 23 ideas.

24 However, it may be mentioned here that mind does remain active in another
 25 sense, since receiving itself is an activity. Jenkins (Jenkin1985, p. 24) has
 26 strongly supported this view. He argued that to have a simple idea, for example
 27 the idea of the colour yellow in the mind, the mind must be able to compare and
 28 discriminate yellow from ideas of other colours. Therefore, mind is active while
 29 receiving ideas of sensations. The difficulty arises because Locke did not clarify
 30 the status of these ideas. He suggested in Chapter I of the *Essay* (Locke1975,
 31 Book II, Chap. I, Sec. 1, p. 104) that ideas are the kind of things of which we are
 32 necessarily conscious. To be conscious of something, necessarily implies
 33 activity on the part of the mind such as making a contrast or a comparison.
 34 Jenkins held that it is one thing to receive sense data, where the process may be
 35 passive, but it is another to identify what one receives, for it involves an activity
 36 on the part of the understanding. He contended that there are reasons to hold that
 37 Locke did not take the mirror analogy so literally. It is evident from his
 38 explanation of the ideas of reflection that mind has many in-built powers. Jenkins
 39 further pointed out that as perception is one of these powers, it suggests that mind
 40 is active in the reception of simple ideas (Locke1975, Book II, Chap. IX, Sec. 4,
 41 p. 144).

42 Jenkins held that Locke’s remark here perhaps suggests that his intention
 43 was not to draw a distinction between what is passive with what is active but
 44 between what is passive with what we deliberately choose. His contention is that
 45 if the senses function properly and the powers of the mind are alert, simple ideas
 46 would come to the mind. Locke believed that the contents of our sensation are

1 immediately given but the powers of the mind must be at work to receive the
2 simple ideas.

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

11
12

13 **In what sense has Locke used the word *Simple*?**

14

15 It has been variously argued by O'Conner and Aaron that Locke has used
16 the word 'simple' somewhat ambiguously in the *Essay*. O'Conner (O'Conner
17 1967, p. 48) remarked that Locke used the term 'simple' in four different senses.
18 First, the term 'simple' is used in the sense of the smallest unit or the 'atom.' A
19 simple idea contains within itself nothing but one uniform appearance or
20 conception and is not distinguishable into different ideas. Therefore, we can
21 liken it to an atom. Secondly, it has sometimes been used in the sense of a single
22 sense quality, like the colour 'blue,' the shape 'square' or a 'sweet' taste. Thirdly,
23 O'Conner said that Locke used the term in the sense of what is given to the mind
24 in experience, in contrast to what is constructed by the mind from the materials
25 provided by sensation and reflection. Indeed, Locke said that simple ideas come
26 into our mind either by sensations or by reflections. They are the materials of
27 our mind. In contrast, complex ideas are what the mind makes out of these simple
28 ideas, i.e., they are the result of the workmanship of the mind. Lastly, a simple
29 idea sometimes refers to a determinable quality, like 'coloured' or 'shaped,' in
30 contrast to a determinate quantity like a particular shade of colour or shape. This
31 particular meaning is obvious in Locke's account of ideas of reflection.
32 O'Conner has pointed out that it is very difficult to extract a perfectly clear
33 description of simple ideas from Locke's writings. He contended that we could
34 characterize it negatively as ideas that are not complex.

35

36 Aaron (Aaron1955, pp. 111-113) argued in this context that Locke failed to
37 clarify the nature of simple idea to himself primarily because the term 'simple
38 idea' evoked two distinct meanings to him, namely (i) the given and (ii) the
39 indivisible, i.e., the atom. If simple ideas were characterized as atoms of
40 experience, they could not be described as given. Generally speaking, a simple
41 idea is that which the understanding receives passively. Therefore, they can be
42 considered as given. However, simple idea, according to Locke's definition,
43 goes as quoted below:

44

45 ... which being each in itself un compounded, contains in it nothing but one *uniform*
46 *Appearance*, or *Conception* in the mind, and is not distinguishable in to different *Ideas*
(Locke1975, Book II, Chap. II, Sec. 1, p. 119).

47

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

6 Notwithstanding the arguments forwarded by O'Connor and Aaron, it may
7 be noted here that Locke, while distinguishing simple ideas from complex ideas,
8 did not assert that simple ideas are or can be received or represented in their
9 simplicity. The ideas he regarded as simple are not psychologically primitive.
10 We do not begin our experience of sensible qualities in isolation and then put
11 them together to obtain the perceptual objects. According to Locke, our ideas in
12 experience are complex ideas of things. These ideas may be reduced to their
13 simple constituents by subsequent abstraction to give rise to simple ideas. What
14 is given in our experience is complex ideas of things. This point has already been
15 discussed under Section 6 in this paper. Simple ideas can be considered as atoms
16 of experience since we obtain such ideas from the complex ones by the process
17 of abstraction. Simultaneously, one can also take simple ideas to be *given* in the
18 sense that they are passively received by our understanding. The understanding
19 has no power to refuse, alter or blot them. Understanding plays a passive role in
20 the matter of creation of simple ideas. It is apparent therefore that Locke's usage
21 of the term *idea* in two distinct senses, namely as atoms of experience and as
22 *given*, is not inconsistent. Aaron's argument that Locke used the term 'simple'
23 in two different senses is consequently not well founded.

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

26 It has to be emphasized here that simple ideas can be considered as atoms
27 of experience as well as single-sense qualities. Our ideas are complex ideas of
28 things in experience. The understanding can analyse them into their simple
29 constituents. These simple constituents are the ultimate data of experience and
30 are the simple ideas of sensation. They can be considered as atoms as they are
31 the ultimate data of experience. These simple ideas of sensation may be single-
32 sense qualities like the colour 'blue,' the shape 'square,' etc. Again, these simple
33 ideas may be considered as *given* to the mind in experience, in contrast to what
34 is constructed by the mind. The mind plays a passive role, by merely receiving
35 them, in the process of creation of simple ideas. The three descriptions of simple
36 ideas therefore present no ambiguity and are nothing but different characteristics
37 of simple ideas.

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

45

1 **Is the distinction between simple and complex ideas acceptable?**

2

3 Aaron (Aaron1955, pp. 112-113) observed that Locke’s distinction between
 4 simple and complex ideas is not acceptable. The question here is - whether the
 5 distinction between simple and complex ideas is the distinction between what is
 6 *given* and what is *not given* or whether it is between the atomic and the
 7 composite. None of these two distinctions is tenable. Locke remarked that
 8 “Simple ideas are observed to exist in several combinations united together”
 9 (Locke1975, Book II, Chap. XII, Sec. 1, p. 164). Here, what Locke wanted to
 10 say is that complex ideas are also given. Again, Locke had to admit that some
 11 simple ideas are not atoms. The ideas of space and time are simple, yet the very
 12 nature of both is that they consist of parts. On the other hand, not all complex
 13 ideas are composite, for example, ideas of relations and general ideas. These
 14 ideas are not made up of simple ideas. Hence, not everything given is a simple
 15 idea and not all composites are complex ideas.

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

29

30

31 **Conclusion**

32

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

45 The two definitions of simple ideas, namely experiential or phenomenal and
 46 semantical or logical, that Locke put forward in his *Essay* merely pointed out the

1 simplicity of simple ideas from two different perspectives. Criticisms made by
 2 several critics regarding these definitions have been discussed in this work. As
 3 indicated in the text, some of these criticisms can be overcome, not all. A few of
 4 these criticisms appear to showcase, albeit indirectly, some of the defects in the
 5 *Essay*.

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

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

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