107-480B
Prof. Carson

Keith Douglas
9630153

Epistemological Status and Ontological Origin Differences in Locke's Account of the Idea of Modes and the Idea of Substances

In this paper I will explore the two major species of difference between John Locke's (1975 [1700]) account of the idea of modes and of the idea of substances. The first section of this paper will be on three main epistemological distinctions between these ideas, the second will briefly tread upon ontological differences in the origin of these ideas. Finally, the third will see if there is any way in which the epistemological account "fits in" with the ontological one. All page references are to Locke (1975 [1700]), and I have removed any formatting (for example, italics) present in quoted passages.

Section 1 - Epistemological Accounts

To start this section, first let us see what epistemological category (if any) the idea of modes and the idea of substances are supposed to fall into. Locke writes that both ideas of modes and the ideas of substances are in his genus of complex ideas and that further that modes can be broken down in two kinds, namely simple and mixed.

The distinction between simple modes and mixed modes is not, as I see it, relevant to the current distinction under discussion. Therefore, let us next recall Locke's definition of both the idea of mode and the idea of substance. Locke defines the idea of mode on page 165 as follows:

> "First, Modes I call such complex Ideas, which however compounded, contain not in them the supposition of subsisting by themselves, but are considered as Dependencies on, or Affections of Substances; [...]"

A definition of the idea of substance is provided a bit later on the same page, which tells us that the ideas of substances are supposed to be those that "represent distinct particular things subsisting by themselves." But there is a twist to this, as there is an important distinction Locke makes between the idea of substances and the idea of specific substances. Much later (pg. 305), this is taken up. Here Locke provides us with a definition of the idea of specific substance, rather than the idea of substance generally speaking. He writes:

> "[...] I say our specifick Ideas of substances are nothing but a Collection of a certain number of simple Ideas, considered as united in one Thing."

With the definitions now on the table, we can then proceed to examine

epistemological differences between ideas of substances and ideas of modes. I identify three such differences. One suggestion of an important difference centers around the idea of power. We find (pg. 301) that ideas of substances always involve the ideas of various powers, as in the lines below.

> "Powers therefore, justly make a great part of our complex Ideas of Substances. He, that will examine his complex Idea of Gold, will find several of its Ideas, that make it up, to be only Powers, as the Power of being melted, but not spending it self in the Fire; of being dissolved in Aqua Regia, are Ideas, as necessary to make up our complex Idea of Gold, as its Colour and Weight: which if duly considered, are also nothing but different Powers."

Locke thinks that all of the properties we normally attribute to ideas of specific substances are nothing but powers. This is in direct opposition to what he thinks characterizes the properties attributed to ideas of modes. Ideas of modes come about purely by our own free, internal operations upon simple ideas. The properties that the ideas of modes therefore appear to have are therefore put into the idea by us. This is in contrast with the ideas of substances because their powers have the ability to produce change in us (pg. 234-235). He admits that the notion of power itself is very confused, and so this distinction between the (more) active nature involved in the ideas of modes and the (more) passive nature involved in the ideas of substances is itself confused. (Activity and passivity here are with respect to the actions of the agent possessing the ideas.) However, the distinction seems to be an important one, because as an empiricist, Locke has to account for creativity somehow[1], and his account of how ideas of modes arise from within us may be some way in order to produce such an account.

The second distinction is an important one briefly in passing previously. This is the distinction between the idea of substance and the specific ideas of specific substances. As we have seen above, Locke has carefully defined these distinct ideas-of-ideas differently. Locke is correct to make these distinctions, and since they differ widely in their epistemological status in his scheme, it is instructive to look at the differences he draws. We are told (pg. 174) that the general idea of a substance is very confused. He gives a long parable to this effect, explaining that very often "substance" is a vacuous concept with no clear signification. On the other hand, Locke also thinks that our ideas of specific substances (that of gold, man, etc.) are a bit less confused. After all, we do recognize

[1] It has been suggested in more recent work in epistemology that a strict (i.e. one with no rationalistic component at all) empiricism cannot account for creativity (for example, see Bunge 1983). Whether or not Locke is such a strict empiricist or not, he is enough of an empiricist for me to want to draw attention to this potential worry and remark that the accounts of the ideas of modes seem to help here.

that the names for these substances are supposed to pick out constantly joined ideas, even if the cause of the conjunction is unknown to us (pg. 298).

Third, Locke makes (pg. 383, §12-14) another distinction between ideas of modes and ideas of substances. He first remarks how ideas of substances are in some sense copies of the original items that produced the idea. Here he is referring to ideas of specific substances, for instance that of gold. The idea of gold is supposed to be a copy of something real (pg 383). This is to be contrasted with the thesis that ideas of modes are originals, which means they are (pg. 384):

> "... not Copies, nor made after the Pattern of any real Existence to which the Mind intends them to be conformable, and exactly to answer."

Because there is no real existence associated with the ideas of modes, the way we produce these ideas is said to be different. Locke continues (pg. 384)

> "These being such Collections of simple Ideas, that the Mind it self puts together, and such Collections, that each of them contains in it precisely all that the mind intend it should, [...]"

A sort of constructivism is implied here, and a curious form of infallibility[2]. (It is curious, for it seems to rule out being surprised by unexpected properties of purely conceptual objects that we have put together ourselves in this way. This seems implausible, but does not bother Locke.)

On the other hand, the reason for the conjunction of the ideas associated with ideas of substances is, as noted above unknown. Locke seems to also think that we may never be able to figure out what causes the constant conjunction. He writes (pg. 302)

> "We have insight enough into their admirable Contrivances, and wonderful Effects, to admire, and magnify the Wisdom, Power and Goodness of their Author. Such a Knowledge as this, which is suited to our present Condition, we want not Faculties to attain. But it appears not, that God intended, we should have a perfect, clear, and adequate Knowledge of them [substances and things - the present author]: that perhaps is not in the Comprehension of any finite Being. We are

[2] The reason I flag this as seemingly implausible is because mathematicians who explored some properties of a particularly rich mathematical system are often surprised to find certain unexpected results. This is in spite of the fact that all the "starting points" (axioms and definitions) were created by the mathematician in the first place. (I am ignoring strong mathematical platonism as it also would pose a radically different problem for Locke that is irrelevant to the present purpose.) I think this actually creates a problem in Locke's account of the distinction between ideas of modes and ideas of substances, which is why I bring it up here. Weakening the "constructivism" may be necessary for Locke's account to seem epistemologically and mathematically plausible here, and if it does, one of the distinctions between the ideas of modes and the ideas of substances collapses.

> furnished with Faculties (dull and weak as they are) to discover enough in the Creatures, to lead us to Knowledge of the Creator, and the Knowledge of our Duty; and we are fitted well enough with Abilities, to provide for the Conveniences of living: These are our Business in this World. But were our Senses alter'd, and made much quicker and acuter, the appearance and outward Scheme of things would have quite another Face to us; and I am apt to think, would be inconsistent with our Being [...]"

This passage is important for understanding Locke's account of the ideas of substance. He tells us that we have the facilities we have because we were made in a certain way, and if there are limitations in our senses and abilities, so be it. Unlike other thinkers, notably Descartes, Locke recognized that there may be some more confining inherent limitations in the nature of human understanding. Our knowledge of ideas of substances hence may be imperfect due to our very epistemological constitution. On the other hand, because we have less limitation when it comes to modes in understanding the connections between things[3].

We have seen three ways in which ideas of substances and ideas of modes are distinguished in their epistemic status by Locke, namely how they come about, the role of the agent, and the epistemic relation to real things. Let us look at some ways in which these ideas are ontologically different in origin.

Section 2 - Ontological Accounts

Locke draws a distinction between the idea of modes and the idea of substances that is a difference in ontological origin. This origin concerns the notion of power, and related to that, secondary qualities of things. The powers of substances are supposed to invoke in us the secondary qualities associated with them. Thus there is a direct, plausibly causal, relation between an object and an idea of a substance's particular qualities. Locke also thinks that the reason we do not possess a clear idea of substance generally is because it is in fact a qualityless substrate. He is quite understandably a bit confused here, as we shall see. First, let us explore the account of the relation between an object and the production of the complex ideas in us, in order to contrast it with the more abstract process that goes on with the idea of modes. (We have seen some of this briefly above in the epistemological section.)

---

[3] I note in passing that this consideration makes a Lockean "cognitivist" account of morality seem more plausible. If morality were somehow external, ideas of it would be presumably ideas of substance, and hence be confused. But since Locke clearly thinks humans have a divinely appointed station in life, complete with duties, it would not do that our moral duty be (permenantly) confused. Therefore it makes sense that ethics be in the same epistemological sphere as mathematics and other demonstrable disciplines.

In order to understand this difference, let us recall a passage from the chapter On Power (pg. 287):

> "[...] That Gold, or Saffron, has a power to produce in us the Idea of Yellow; and Snow, or Milk, the Idea of White; which we can only have by our Sight, without examining the Texture of the Parts of those Bodies, or the particular Figures, or Motion of the Particles, which rebound from them, to cause in us that particular Sensation: though when we go beyond the bare Ideas in our Minds, and would enquire into their Causes, we cannot conceive any thing else, to be in any sensible Object, whereby it produces different Ideas in us, but the different Bulk, Figure, Number, Texture and Motion of its insensible Parts."

Here Locke explains to his readers how powers are supposed to produce ideas in the agent. Things which we do not have direct experience of nevertheless produce ideas within us that we do in turn have experience of. He suggests attributes of the insensible parts are what causes the ideas in us. (This is in spite of the fact that Locke has told us we do not know and perhaps cannot know anything about these insensible parts.) This external cause for the aggregation of ideas is to be contrasted with the internal cause of the aggregation of ideas necessary in the origin of ideas of modes. To this end, Locke has written as follows (pg. 165):

> "First, Modes I call such complex Ideas, which however compounded, contain not in them the supposition of subsisting by themselves, but are considered as Dependences on, or Affections of Substances; [...]"

Because modes are dependent on substances, substances are ontologically prior. But note that this does not entail that the modes (or generally the idea of modes) is posterior to the idea of substance. In fact, despite the fact that Locke says quite clearly that we put together ideas of modes ourselves, this self-caused process actually occurs prior to being caused to form ideas of substance. This means that the ontological priority of the objects in question is reversed in the understanding. He writes (pg. 295, underlining and bold added):

> "The Mind being, as I have declared, furnished with a great number of the simple Ideas, conveyed in by the Senses, as they are found in exteriour things, or by Reflection on its own Operations, takes notice also, that a **certain number of these simple Ideas go constantly together;** which being presumed to belong to one thing, and Words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are called so united in one subject, by one name; which by inadvertency we are apt afterward to talk of and consider as one simple Idea, which indeed is a complication of many Ideas together; Because, as I have said, not imagining how these simple Ideas can subsist by themselves, we accustom our selves, to suppose some Substratum, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which we therefore call Substance."

This account shows that we put ideas together ourselves in the case of modes, and have ideas in some sense put together for us in the cases of ideas

of substances. However, it is important to note that even ontologically speaking, Locke does not claim to know if this causal account of the conjunction is so much reflecting the true status of the world, or something within us. This is what the underlined phrase is supposed to suggest[4]. This in turn suggests that there plausibly is not as much of an ontological difference between the origins of modes and the ideas of substances. It is only a plausible inference on Locke's part, as he points out that we do not know much about the causal origin of our ideas generally. This is reflected in the bold phrase above, when Locke makes it clear the ideas go together, and not necessarily the cause of them.

Now that we have seen Locke's ontological origin of our ideas of modes and our ideas of substances has been sketched, let us turn to the connection between the ontological and the epistemological accounts as a way of concluding the present paper.

Section 3 - Connections and Conclusion

As we have seen, there are epistemological and ontological differences in the origin of our ideas of modes and our ideas of substances found in Locke. However, there is a common connection which is perhaps not immediately obvious. Both ideas of modes and ideas of substances rely on a sort of "creative subject" model. Both ideas of substances and ideas of modes require some sort of weak creativity. In section 1 we saw that a creativity is necessary epistemologically to put together simple ideas in order to form ideas of modes. Next, ideas of substances require facilities of the mind to put together the perhaps different ontological origin of the ideas, as we have seen in section 2. Therefore one final way in which the ideas of modes and the ideas of substances are alike is one which crosses the epistemological/ontological divide.

Concluding, then, we have seen several epistemological ways in which ideas of modes are like and unlike ideas of substances. We have seen a slight ontological difference in their origin, and finally seen a way in which they are alike which cuts across the ontological/epistemological boundary.

[4] This passage (among a few others) suggests a weak idealism in Locke that I will not explore to any great length here. It is, however, important to note this because later metaphysicists have argued (see Hamlyn 1984) that extreme empiricism in epistemology necessarily leads to an ontology of subjective idealism. If this is correct to any degree, Locke's distinction collapses as there is no distinction between ideas and things and hence no ontological difference in origin of the ideas of substances and the origin of the idea of modes in an ontology of subjective idealism. I do not read Locke as being the extreme empiricist that some have, but if some commentators are right about this, it is important to note that my account of his notions is thereby wrong.

References

Bunge, M. 1983. *Exploring The World.* Volume 5 of Treatise on Basic Philosophy. Dortrecht: Reidel.

Hamlyn, D. 1984. *Metaphysics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Locke, J. 1975. (1700). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. P. H. Nidditch, ed.