Locke on Simple Modes

Locke’s conception of simple ideas is one that we spent sometime looking at last year and is based on the action of either sensation of reflection. However, Locke moves on from discussing simple ideas to giving an account of simple modes which are modifications of simple ideas “which the mind either finds in things existing, or is able to make itself” (II. XIII. 1). A basic way of seeing the point of simple modes is that whilst the notion of a unit is a simple idea, that two is a modification of this notion as would be three, four, etc. Hence the list of numbers is a simple mode of the simple idea of a unit. Similarly, if we assume colour to be a simple idea, then the distinct colours are modes of this simple idea and hence simple modes. Having made this general point Locke moves on to discussing two specific ways in which the modes of certain simple ideas can be grasped, looking at space and time as simple ideas and considering their modes.

Some elements of the discussion of the simple mode of space are fairly obvious such as a description of the types of way of measuring distance being types of simple mode. It does follow from the fact that there are such ways of measuring distance by means of iteration of any given idea of distance that in principle we arrive at a notion of distance that is equivalent to a sense that space is unbounded. We also easily arrive at the simple mode of figure as that in which the angles and relations of space are represented. The relation between space and place is more intricate. Place, as a means of demarcating a relation between certain points of space, is evidently a simple mode. But what complicates the sense of place is that it
is used with regard to different relative measures. So when pieces on a board game are left in the same points on the board we declare them to be in the same place even if the board has been moved. Similarly, we describe a boat fixed to an anchor as staying in the same place despite the movement of the earth. On Locke’s view this shows that place is a designation of convenience and in principle necessarily relative.

The most important part of Locke’s discussion of the simple mode of space concerns however the way in which he uses it to respond to the Cartesian argument that what is essential to body is extension. Locke disputes this view claiming that body is not simply equivalent to extension as it involves something else as well, namely, solidity. Whilst solidity is only present where there is extension the two ideas are nonetheless distinct. The difference between them can be seen by the point that extension is a means of measuring space but need not require solidity as a specific means in which space can be seen to be filled. Space is not the same as body as space does not involve the notion of solidity and so, if body is taken to require solidity, as Locke argues, then it follows that space is something different from body. If the Cartesian view of body as extension were correct, then, it would follow that there was no essential difference between body and space but there is such a difference, hence, the Cartesian view is wrong.

Locke presents a number of distinct arguments for this conclusion that extension is not equivalent to the idea of body. The first argument is the one already given that extension does not include solidity. The second is
that the parts of space are continuous with each other and cannot be
separated either in reality or in our conception. To divide the parts of space
would be to create separate surfaces without them being connected with
each other and in seeing that we could not thereby separate parts of space
from each other we see the clear continuity of parts of space. Evidently we
can divide space in the sense that we only attend to a particular
measurement of it but this is only a partial distinction as the measurement in
question only makes sense by reference to the rest of space. The point that is
implied here but not directly stated is that this inseparability of parts of
space contrasts markedly with the separability of parts of bodies as, with
bodies, it is always possible to separate parts from the whole since the parts
of bodies do not have the same continuity of relation to each other as the
parts of space, hence, bodies are again shown to be distinct from space.

The third argument is that parts of space cannot be moved and are
therefore at rest with regard to each other. What are moved are not the parts
of space themselves but what occupies these parts. Since the parts of space
are then inseparable from each other, cannot be moved and don’t involve
resistance, they are distinct from body. A further argument is given in
relation to the space between bodies. If space is thought of as equivalent to
body then the question arises as to what is between two bodies. If what is
between them is taken to be nothing then the two bodies should touch so it
must be something and yet something that is distinct from bodies. Bare
space is sufficient for bodies not to touch each other even though it is
incapable of preventing motion once it has begun.
The next part of Locke’s part concerns the conceivability of a vacuum: a vacuum being a space without body. Since we can conceive of a vacuum it is clearly possible to think of space as distinct from body so there is no necessary connection between space and solidity. The very fact that there can be a dispute about whether there are any vacuums shows that the separation of space from body is conceptually conceivable. It is not necessary to prove that vacuums exist to see the force of this point, as the mere conceivability of them is sufficient to make the distinction apparent. In any case the general suggestion that the essence of body consists in extension is based on a false conception of what is inseparable from it. If we reach to a more basic level then, on Locke’s view, unity is what is essential to body though this would not give us its simple idea in a sense that could distinguish it from mind since unity must be essential to that too. Locke’s basic argument though is that space is a distinct idea from solidity, as distinct from solidity as motion is or as motion is from space.

Having discussed space and reached, by means of this discussion, a series of arguments against the Cartesian view of body as essentially extension, Locke turns next to duration and its simple modes. Duration is an idea that is taken not from the permanent parts of space but from the transitory experience of successive parts. The modes of duration are the measurements of different lengths of it such as hours, days and minutes. Locke traces the notion of duration to the experience of a train of ideas in the mind. By reflecting on this experience we arrive at the sense of succession and the distance between one idea appearing and being
considered and another taking its place is duration. It is only by means of successive ideas in the mind being experienced that we have knowledge of our own existence as something that is continuing in duration.

So the basic simple ideas of succession and duration arise from such reflection on the mind and are thus understood by Locke as simple ideas of reflection. In support of this view of them Locke points out that when we sleep we do not experience duration so that the moments between falling asleep and waking again are lost to us. Similarly, the experience of severe concentration on some one idea or closely connected sets of ideas is sufficient for us to have only an attenuated sense of succession. Although we take the sense of duration from our continued awareness of our own existence we subsequently apply it to other things which is how we understand that moments have passed that we were unaware of as when we are unconscious. The continual appearance of different ideas in sequence upon each other is what leads us to a sense of succession. The basis for taking it that it is from reflection and not sensation that we arrive at the notion of succession is that we can observe things that are in motion without being led to a sense of succession. So we may be looking at things that are in fact moving and yet not see them as moving with the sense of motion in the things originally only arising for us due to our awareness of a successive idea of them. A difficulty with Locke’s contention here though is that we can successively be aware of the elements of something that is stationary and we may wonder what the reason is why we are not led to the sense of motion in that case.
Locke’s account does explain however why it is that we are frequently not aware of motion since it may be either too slow or too swift for our ideas to accord with it. Thus there are certain bounds to the succession of ideas that set limits on the possibility of being aware of motion at all, bounds that further demonstrate to him that it cannot be as a result of sensory observation that we have the sense of succession. The measure of succession in things is hence grounded on the measure of succession of their ideas to our minds. The consideration of succession and duration is what subsequently leads us to the sense that there is time. It is notable then that whilst Locke takes space to be a simple idea and then considers the modes of this idea, that, by contrast, time is not a simple idea as duration and succession are the simple ideas and time is but a mode of them. Time is the means by which succession and duration are measured. The means by which this is measured can be varied depending on what element of observed durations and successions is taken as a measure. Duration itself is something the parts of which should be viewed as homogeneous with each other so that they are exactly equivalent but no means of measurement of duration is like this since it always involves approximations. “All that we can do for a measure of time, is to take such as have continual successive appearances at seemingly equidistant periods; of which seeming equality, we have no other measure, but such as the train of our own ideas have lodged in our memories, with the concurrence of other probable reasons, to persuade us of their equality.” (II. XIV. 21.)
Aristotle concluded that time is the measure of motion but Locke corrects him pointing to the need for space as well as time for motion to be measured. Motion is clearly distinct from duration furthermore since motions begin and end and from this we can conclude that motion itself is an idea of something for which it is conceivable it could have had a beginning whilst the notion of a beginning of duration appears contradictory. Just as the iteration of the points of space led us to a sense of its immensity so the consideration of the elements of time leads us to a sense of eternity.

Having discussed both duration and space Locke goes on to compare them to each other. The contrastive term to duration is however not taken ultimately to be space itself but rather expansion because space is often used to refer to discrete successive parts as to well as to permanent parts so the notion of expansion is meant to express the definite conception of permanent parts. The point is not seriously significant however since the point Locke wants to make again is that both ideas admit of infinity but that with space some find it harder to see it since they tend to identify space with body and this is the reason why sometimes if people admit space without body they are inclined to think of such space as only imaginary whilst duration, separate from bodies and motions, is nonetheless taken to have a real existence. Time occupies the same place in the consideration of duration as place does in that of space since it is a relative means of measurement.
Both space and duration consist of parts and hence require a form of composition but this does not tell against their simplicity since all the parts of both have to be seen as homogeneous with each other and these parts cannot be separated from each other so are not truly divisible. A real difference between duration and expansion though is that the latter includes many different types of length whilst duration is only conceivable of as a straight line.