Locke on Simple Ideas and Solidity

Recap: last week we looked at the basic account Locke gives for his view that our ideas are derived from experience. We found that he identified two distinct sources for these ideas, sensation and reflection, with the former being his name for the process of our sensory organs receiving input which is subsequently processed by the mind (and marks the passive or receptive element of the mind) and the latter being the attentive process the mind directs upon itself. We also looked in an extended way at Locke’s criticism of Descartes’ view that the mind is always thinking, a criticism essentially founded on the claim that if we have an idea in our mind then we are conscious of having it, a claim defended by reference to the need to find a foundation for the claim we make that we possess the ability to identify ourselves constantly across time. Finally we last week noted the consequence of Locke’s tabula rasa view to be that very young children (and foetuses in particular) are distinct kinds of beings from mature adults as they are closer to “vegetables” on this view than to people.

This week we are going to probe more deeply into Locke’s account of ideas with an especial focus on one of the ideas he presents a detailed account of. Locke does not just distinguish our ideas in terms of the source they are derived from (sensation and reflection), he also separates them in terms of the degree of complexity they possess and this second distinction leads him to argue that some of our ideas are simple and some complex. In making the claim that some ideas are simple Locke accepts that when our senses are affected by qualities we do not find this is due to the fact that the
distinguishable qualities in question are really distinct in the things that are affecting us. We are ourselves however able to distinguish them and the underlying reason for this is that they do enter the senses in distinct ways. Some ideas enter the mind from their effect on one kind of sense for example (ideas connected to sight such as brightness) and some from another (auditory ideas such as noise). This distinction is one we can make even in cases where the distinguishable sensory qualities belong to the same object. So we do not mistake the coldness of the ice for its hardness though both are bound up together in the idea we now have of ice. So the simple ideas relate to a distinction amongst perceptions and Locke suggests when he first mentions the notion of simple ideas that these ideas are connected to a uniform appearance that is presented to the mind.

The next point that is worth making about the simple ideas is that they are the basic foundations of the complex ideas and as such are the atomic building blocks of our understanding. Whilst so far I have only mentioned simple ideas as related to sense there are also simple ideas of reflection but we will leave consideration of these to next week. I also won’t attempt today to lay out carefully how simple ideas are combined in such a way as to produce complex ideas. What Locke indicates however concerning this is that the understanding, once it has received the simple ideas, has the power to “repeat, combine and unite” them and that it is by doing this that it arrives at complex ideas. The mind does not invent the simple ideas and nor can it destroy them once it has them. Hence the ideas serve not merely as foundational but are also constant.
Simple ideas of sense arise either through one sense alone or through the combination of senses. The former types of ideas are like the ones I have already mentioned in being fitted to the sense to which they refer us (light to sight and sound to hearing) and it is this type of idea I want to mainly concentrate on. It is worth pointing out however that Locke distinguishes the varied types of impressions we get from the senses from the names we tend to attach to the simple ideas they give rise to. His example of this is that whilst we smell a great variety of odours our names for smells are very limited and tend to reproduce the pattern of dividing between smells we deem pleasant and those we deem unpleasant.

Now, I would like to turn to one particular simple idea that Locke traces as arising from one sense and consider it in more detail. This is the idea of *solidity*. Locke suggests that this idea enters the mind through the medium of *touch*. The basic origin of this idea that he gives is that we discover from our tactile relation to bodies that one body prevents another from occupying the same space as the first. This impression that he gives as the foundation of solidity is what is often presented as the notion we have of *resistance* and it is sometimes classed as *impenetrability*. Locke’s suggestion is that this idea of solidity is the one we receive most constantly from sensation. Wherever our body is we note that it is supported in its posture and the bodies we observe are prevented by something from approaching each other beyond a certain point and cannot entirely enter into each other.
In presenting this idea of solidity as the most constant one we discover in sensation Locke effectively suggests that the basic way we describe body is through it. A body is a body in other words if it is solid, if, that is, no other thing of the same type as itself can occupy at the same time and in the same place the same allotment of surface as it. In identifying solidity as primary to our idea of body Locke departs from the Cartesian view of body. According to Descartes the key element of our notion of body is just extension and Descartes thinks of bodies as collections of geometrical qualities. Locke, by contrast, brings in another dimension of bodies when he describes them through the quality of solidity. If a body is determined as possessing solidity then a body is not merely a locus of geometrical points, it is also something that concentrates and requires “force”. Hence, Locke in arguing this, departs from the exclusively mathematical view of body that was central to Cartesian views of physical things. Locke is also quite emphatic in making his departure from the Cartesian view here as when he claims that solidity is not only most intimately connected with and essential to body but that it is also a notion that we do not and could not find anywhere else.

In making the point that solidity is essential to the conception of body Locke does not merely mean that it is part of our idea of the basic bodies we are normally sensibly aware of. Rather, he suggests that once we have become aware of solidity as essential to body we can get to work and analyse body into finer and finer parts and in any such part we would always find the power of solidity to be operative. Solidity is the means by
which bodies fill space and if they did not possess this power then bodies
would enter into each other and the world would be completely mutable.
Hence it is not only the case that solidity belongs to the basic sense we have
of matter but that in so belonging it also supplies us with the sense of the
coherence of the whole to which body belongs. Locke presents solidity as
the right thought for the basic property of body rather than impenetrability
however as he suggests that impenetrability is a consequence of solidity.

Solidity is a notion that Locke also distinguishes both from that of
pure space and from that of hardness. In thinking about the difference
between solidity and space he points to the fact that it is possible for us to
conceive of a body moving without any other body around it moving. Since
we can conceive this the motions of bodies are conceptually distinct from
each other and what follows from this is that bodies are also distinct from
the spaces they occupy at any given time. So we can form the conception of
space as something that need not be filled completely and this is what we do
in the notion of a vacuum.

In distinguishing solidity from hardness by contrast Locke uses a
different kind of argument. The difference between solidity and space was
argued on the grounds of the conceivability of their separation. It would be
difficult to argue for a distinction between solidity and hardness on the same
grounds however as solidity involves, as we have noted, the power to repel
other bodies and the effect of this power is to impress on the bodies affected
a sense of the force of the first body. Since hardness is effectively only an
impression of force there is not really a conceptual distinction between
solidity and hardness. Rather, the difference here is between the degrees of effect upon our senses that is registered in the comparison of things when we assess them as soft or hard. That is soft in other terms which is not painful to touch as Locke puts it with the suggestion following that hardness produces an impression of pain. The distinction between solidity and hardness suggested is, then, one that flows from the passions rather than from the operation of a reflective conceptual difference.

The real difference between solidity and hardness can not reside where Locke initially suggests however due to the fact that the sensory difference between something soft and something hard need not be a difference in passional relation. Something soft is, after all, capable of producing an impression of pain in joints that are stiff whilst something hard may produce pleasure if the surface in question is best adapted for what is laid upon it. The real difference between softness and hardness is rather to do with the manner of the resistance affected by something possessing these qualities. Locke agrees with this when assessing why it is that two pieces of marble are more likely to be able to approach one another if all that separates them is water than if what separates them is diamond. In this case, he states, the reason for the greater approach of the marble in the case of water is not that water is less solid than diamond but that it is soft in the sense that its parts are more easily separated from each other than is the case with diamond. This separation occurs due to the susceptibility of water to it through certain kinds of motion being affected upon it. However this still does not entirely work as a statement about the nature of how softness
affects solidity or provide us with a clear enough criterion for the difference between solidity and hardness. After all, as Locke indicates, a football that is filled only with air is nonetheless a sufficiently solid body to prevent any other body from occupying its space.

Returning to the relationship between Locke’s account of body and that of Descartes it is worth pointing out that Locke describes the extension of body as based upon its solidity. The extension of a body is distinguished from the extension of a space by reference to the fact that the body is made up of solid parts whilst the spaces’ parts are not solid. So extension is not only incapable of serving as a primary criterion of body there is more than one type of extension in any case and if we think body through extension we will not note the difference between body and the space it fills. It is clear also that space can be conceived as occupied only by pure figures such as we have in geometry without any real bodies being required. So the extension of space and the conception of space are conceptually distinct from the conception of body.

Space is also distinct from solidity for Locke due to the fact that he presents these two ideas as having a different source. Whilst solidity is based upon touch, space is based on more than one sense as it brings in reference to sight in addition to touch. Whilst both are simple ideas then solidity is a simple idea of only one sense, space of more than one.

The conception Locke has presented of solidity is important for a number of reasons. It makes clearer his view of what a simple idea is like and it leads to the articulation of a quite different view of the nature of body.
than Descartes has. There is one fundamental question however that Locke refuses to answer. What is the basis of solidity? This is something he does not think we can say.