

## Complex Ideas

These are collections of simple ideas

## “Collecting”

Ideas are collected when they all occur together.

Sources of collections:

perception

imagination

description and definition

when describing and defining we name the simple ideas that are compounded to make the complex idea

so this only works if you know the meaning of the names used in the description or definition

## Two types of complex ideas

### Closed off

The list of simple ideas constitutive of the compound is laid out in a definition and no changes to the list are allowed

(we get to do this just by stipulation, and we don't need to agree with one another as long as we make it clear what our personal definitions are and alert others if we decide to change them)

### Open ended

The list of simple ideas constitutive of the compound is open to supplementation

whereas closed off complexes are defined by stipulation, open ended complexes are drawn from perception

## Open ended complexes

Perception commonly presents us with groups of ideas that tend to occur together over and over again

We give these groups a single name

We also think that the reason the distinct simple ideas keep recurring in the group is that they are caused by a single object that has powers or “secondary qualities” in virtue of which it simultaneously affects our different sense organs in different ways

The collection is “open ended” because we think there might always be something more to the way the object affects us

or it affects other objects

or it is affected by other objects

that we have yet to discover

So we never “close off” the list of simple ideas

## Closed off complexes

When a list is closed off, we can never be sure that it includes ideas caused by everything that an object would have to have in it in order to exist

So we can never take a closed off list to define an object

In fact, we can never define any object

the best we can do is describe some of what we have so far learned about how it affects us, affects other things, and is affected by other things

Moreover, when a list is closed off, we can never be sure that only one sort of object could be capable of bringing about that list of simple ideas in us

Objects that differ radically in ways we have not listed may all be able to bring about the same collection of simple ideas in us

like a horse and a chair, which both satisfy the list, “something with four legs that you sit on”

## Summing up

Open ended complexes can be called complex ideas of substances

things that exist on their own

Closed off complexes can be called complex ideas of modes

modifications or qualities or accidents that could be common to many different substances

Closed off complexes can be exhaustively defined by naming the simple ideas that go into the complex and taught to others who know the names

Open ended complexes can only be described and different people may know more or less about them

## Examples

### Substances:

John Locke  
Human being  
Gold  
Metal  
Rabbit  
Mammal  
Animal

In short, animals, minerals, vegetables, astronomical bodies, geographical features, considered as particulars, as classes, or as collectives.

### Modes:

Drunkenness  
Hypocrisy  
Promise  
Wrestling  
Fencing  
Theft

## Simple modes

Complex ideas arising from repeating the same simple idea over and over

e.g., repeat the idea of a unit and you get ideas of all the numbers

repeat the idea of a distance and ideas of different distances (you can do this in division as well, and you can do the same with duration)

pile ideas of different distances (finite lines) on top of one another, think of the relations between their endpoints, and you get ideas of all the shapes

piling shapes produces ideas of capacity or volume

repeating volumes produces ideas of larger and larger spaces

## Some anti-Cartesian implications

The idea of infinity is not a positive idea

It is the idea of in-finity or boundlessness that arises when we realize that we can go on doubling or dividing distances without ever reaching a limit

The idea of infinity can only properly be formed from simple modes, not complex ones

While we can repeat the same idea an arbitrary number of times and think we could always do it again

we cannot keep adding continually adding new ideas

we realize we are limited in the number of different ideas we can form

So while we can form the ideas of in-finite space and in-finite duration and an in-finite number sequence

we cannot form the idea of in-finite perfections

## Some anti-Cartesian implications, cont.'d

The simple mode of in-finite space is not identical with the idea of body or material substance

It is based on the simple idea of the distance between the extremities of a sensible quality

So it is just an idea of extension, not of any thing that occupies that extension

While it is divisible into parts, those parts cannot be separated from or moved relative to one another

All motion is motion out of one place into another, so the places must remain behind and stay where they are when motion occurs

This makes space or the network of places the background against which motion occurs and not something that itself can be moved

Because the parts of space cannot move relative to one another, space cannot be displaced by bodies that do move through space

This means that it must coexist with bodies and so must allow itself to be penetrated by them

So whereas body or material substance can be described as solid, movable extension

space on the contrary is penetrable, immobile extension

Because not all space is body, we can conceive an infinite, empty space extending beyond the boundaries of bodies

## Substances

Our ideas of substances are collections of various simple ideas commonly observed to occur together in sense experience or reflection

the recurring unity of these ideas is attributed to the fact that they are brought about by a single thing that contains within itself all the powers needed to bring about that collection of simple ideas

So the idea of substance contains two things

a collection of characteristic simple ideas

the further idea of some ground or cause or “substratum” accounting for the recurrent bundling together of those particular simple ideas

The various bundles of our ideas of sensation are supposed to be caused by various material substances

The bundle of our ideas of reflection is supposed to be caused by a spiritual substance, and we imagine like spiritual substances in others who seem to have ideas of reflection

## A “physicalist” way of cashing out Locke’s views of substance

Bodies have a “real constitution” that is largely unknown to us

(because we cannot see the arrangement of small particles that make them up)

This real constitution gives bodies the powers to cause all the different ideas we get when we experience them (and others we might not experience)

Because the real constitution is made up of moving particles, it can change over time (especially in plants and animals) and so also be responsible for the different ideas we get of the substance over time as it ages naturally

II.xxiii.8:

“For our senses failing us, in the discovery of the bulk, texture, and figure of the minute parts of bodies, on which their real constitutions and differences depend, we are fain to make use of their secondary qualities [i.e., of the ideas of sensible qualities brought about in us by their secondary qualities or powers], as the characteristical notes and marks, whereby to frame *ideas* [i.e., descriptions] of them in our minds, and distinguish them one from another.”

## The problem with this approach

The particles are extended and solid and likely surrounded by empty spaces that do nothing to hold them within bounds

But the solidity of bodies only leads them to push other bodies back from the space they occupy

If the particles are solid, all their parts are solid

so the parts ought to just push one another back

But then why don't the particles just fall apart, as though made of grains of sand?

Moreover, body is infinitely divisible

So why don't all bodies crumble and pulverise into a dust of infinitesimally small bits

so small as to be next to nothing

That is, why don't all bodies disappear into nothing in the in-finite surrounding space?

## An inadequate answer

Matter cannot just be solid extension

there must be some “force” that accounts for the cohesion of the material parts

Gravity won't do the job

it works at a distance whereas the cohesive force works on contact

so that when the contact is once broken (e.g., breaking a piece of chalk) that same degree of proximity cannot renew the cohesion

Hooks and threads won't do the job

the parts of your hooks and threads need to already be cohesive, and to cohere with what they pull after them if they are to bind larger things together

So there seems to be something deeply mysterious and unknowable at the very foundation of our conception of material substance

## More anti-Cartesian implications

Material substance or body is not something of which we have a perfectly clear and distinct idea

we have clear ideas of extension and solidity and the sensible qualities brought about in us by the powers or secondary qualities

but we have no idea of the substance that expresses those powers

## Post-Cartesian Implications

One of the main problems of Cartesianism is the interaction problem

how do minds manage to interact with bodies if they are substances of the radically different sort described by Descartes?

specifically, how does impact of solid parts (i.e., “impulse”) on the sense organs, nerves, and brains manage to produce, not motion, but sensation in the mind?

and how does volition, which is a thought in the mind and not an impulse, manage to make body parts move?

But according to Locke, material substance is every bit as mysterious in its operations as spiritual substance

## Material vrs. spiritual substance

Both substances occupy space

(there is obviously a place where my mind perceives and acts and a body it gets carried around in)

Body is characterized by a cohesion of solid parts

the solidity makes the body communicate motion and be moved as a consequence of impulse

but it defies us to explain either how cohesion works or how impulse works (i.e., what accounts for impenetrability)

Mind is characterized by the ability to perceive as a consequence of impulse and the ability to originate motion without impulse

and it defies us to explain how either of these things is possible

So material and mental substances are both equally unknowable; we can only grasp the ideas of sensation and reflection they cause in us

## Two views of Locke's position on substance

1. All our ideas of substances include the idea of some "substratum" in which the various powers responsible for bringing about our simple ideas inhere

we just don't know what this thing is

2. We have no idea of substratum; things are nothing more than collections of qualities; ideas of substances are no more than collections of ideas, with the qualification that we can never be sure we know all that is in the collection

## Socinian (Arian) implications of view 2

The account of the Trinity as 3 “persons” in one “substance” makes no sense.

There is no underlying substance to make the 3 persons one.

So either only one of them is God  
(Arianism)

Or all three are  
(Tritheism)

Either way, Christianity is a false religion.

## Locke's reply to Stillingfleet

Insist that view 2 was not his view.

But even if it was, the fact that we have no idea of substance does not prove that there could be no such thing.

As a matter of fact, we have a "relative" idea of substance.

## Further Implications of Locke's treatment of substance

If we do not know physical substance any better than we know mental substance

then for all we know the substratum in which our ideas of cohesion of solid parts and motion by impulse inhere could be the same substratum in which our ideas of sensation arising from impulse and initiation of motion by volition inhere

(extended substance may be no different from thinking substance)