**Berkeley and Locke**

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**Abstract**

This chapter revisits three key disagreements between Locke and Berkeley. The disagreements relate to abstraction, the idea of substance, and the status of the primary/secondary quality distinction. The goal of the chapter is to show that these disagreements are rooted in a more fundamental disagreement over the nature of ideas. For Berkeley, ideas are tied very closely to perceptual content. Locke adopts a less restrictive account of the nature of ideas. On his view, ideas are responsible for both perceptual content and non-perceptual mental content. Recognizing this allows for the following analysis of their disputes. Berkeley often appeals to introspection to suggest that we do not have some particular idea. But Locke’s arguments that we have a particular idea often appeal to the functional role the idea has in our cognitive economy rather than to facts about our immediate phenomenology.

**Keywords**

Abstraction; Substance; Primary/Secondary Qualities; Perception; Cognition; Theory of Ideas

**1. Introduction**

Locke was among the most important influences on Berkeley’s thought. For Berkeley, Locke was a “deservedly esteemed philosopher” (PHKI 11:30). But Locke’s influence on Berkeley was not an entirely positive one. Put differently, many of Berkeley’s most celebrated positions stem from criticisms of views held by Locke. An entry from Berkeley’s *Notebooks* nicely captures his mixed attitude toward his predecessor: “I am no more to be reckon’d stronger than Locke than a pigmy should be reckon’d stronger than a Gyant because he could throw of[f] the Molehill wch lay upon him, & the Gyant could onely shake or shove the Mountain that oppressed him…” (N 678:83).[[1]](#endnote-1) If we take Berkeley at his word here, the passage is revealing. On the one hand, it shows that Berkeley had a lot of respect for Locke: he viewed him as a philosophical giant. On the other hand, it shows that Berkeley saw Locke as a deeply flawed thinker, someone who had not achieved significant findings and who should be challenged.

This chapter will revisit three of the most important disagreements between Locke and Berkeley. First, Locke believes that we can have abstract ideas in our minds and Berkeley rejects this possibility. Second, Locke accepts an idea of substance as an underlying support for properties or features of objects. Berkeley, by contrast, rejects this way of understanding substances. Third, Locke is a proponent of a distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Berkeley rejects any kind of meaningful distinction between the two.

Berkeley is never short of arguments. He is critical of abstract ideas along a number of fronts, he has a great deal to say about how the idea of substance as substratum is misguided, and he employs a number of strategies in arguing against the primary/secondary quality distinction. This chapter will not attempt to offer a complete account of Berkeley’s approach to these topics. Instead, the goal will be to draw out one important strand of thought that is present in his treatment of all three. The key element of Berkeley’s argumentative strategy that this chapter focuses on is his claim that we simply do not have certain important ideas. What Berkeley argues is that if we take a mental inventory or if we introspect in the right way, what we will discover is that we lack the sort of ideas that we would need to properly endorse the views that Locke holds. Given this, it is easy for Berkeley to claim that we should reject those Lockean views.[[2]](#endnote-2) This chapter also considers the effectiveness of this Berkeleyan strategy. On its own terms, it seems highly effective. When we introspect in the way Berkeley asks us to, we do struggle to locate the ideas in question. That being said, there is a way of interpreting Locke according to which his claim that we have these ideas does not depend on our ability to isolate them in our phenomenological experience. Instead, Locke is very often concerned to highlight certain cognitive abilities that humans have and then to argue that certain ideas must play an integral role in explaining those cognitive abilities.

Examining these issues using this framework will help to focus our attention on a more fundamental disagreement between Locke and Berkeley. Specifically, it can help us understand the sense in which Locke and Berkeley disagree about the *nature of ideas*. On the face of it, it can look as though Berkeley adopted Locke’s theory of ideas wholesale. But a closer examination suggests that when asked “What is an idea?”, or perhaps “What is it to have an idea?” or “What work do ideas do?”, the two will offer *very* different answers. Locke’s answer will be much broader in scope. For Locke, an idea is just any unit of mental content. This includes what we might now call perceptual content, but it is not limited to perceptual content. It might contain varieties of non-perceptual content, including what we might now call conceptual content.[[3]](#endnote-3) Berkeley has a *much* more restricted understanding of ideas. For Berkeley, ideas are identified with *all and only* perceptual content. This divergence on the nature of ideas represents a fundamental difference between Locke and Berkeley. And, as I will show, we can understand this fundamental disagreement as driving the downstream disagreements about abstraction, substance, and primary/secondary qualities.

**2. Abstraction**

Locke holds that we can “frame” in our minds abstract ideas of things like dogs and triangles. Berkeley denies that this is possible. A major reason for Berkeley’s view involves his take on our phenomenology.[[4]](#endnote-4) He reports that he is simply unable to form the relevant ideas in his mind:

Whether others have this wonderful faculty of *abstracting their ideas*, they best can tell: for my self I find indeed I have a faculty of imagining, or representing to my self the ideas of those particular things I have perceived and of variously compounding and dividing them… But then whatever hand or eye I imagine, it must have some particular shape and colour… I cannot by any effort of thought conceive the abstract idea above described. (PHKI 10:29)

Berkeley’s point is that he cannot conceive of—meaning he has no idea of—a dog that is not brown or white or black or grey. He cannot get the particularities of a specific dog out of his mind in a way that leaves him a “picture” of some generic dog. The important role played by the language of imagination in this passage can help to make this clear. Berkeley is focused on what it is that he can *image* in his mind. Also telling is a passing comment in the *Notebooks* where Berkeley writes that “Succession is an abstract *i e.* an unconceivable idea.” (N 53a:13). This comment illustrates just how deep the conceptual link between abstract ideas and inconceivability is for Berkeley.

At one stage Berkeley offers a test for whether or not abstract ideas exist. It is meant to offer a proof that they do not. And this test makes explicit appeal to introspection and what is or is not delivered in our phenomenological experience. Berkeley tells us that “If any man has the faculty of framing in his mind such an idea of triangle as is here described, it is in vain to pretend to dispute him out of it, nor would I go about it” (PHKI 13:33). The idea of triangle in question, which at one stage Berkeley refers to as his “killing blow” (N 687), is meant to be neither scalene, nor equilateral, nor isosceles, but also is meant to be all three. Berkeley’s view is that the test of whether or not such an idea exists is whether or not we can frame such an idea in our mind. Because the idea appears to be contradictory or appears to be of an impossible object, Berkeley is confident that we cannot do so. A similar test is offered in *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*:

philonous. But I think the point may be speedily decided. Without doubt you can tell, whether you are able to frame this or that idea. Now I am content to put our dispute on this issue. If you can frame in your thoughts a distinct abstract idea of motion or extension, divested of all those sensible modes, as swift and slow, great and small, round and square, and the like, which are acknowledged to exist only in the mind, I will then yield the point you contend for. But if you cannot, it will be unreasonable on your side to insist any longer upon what you have no notion of. (DHP 193)

Here it is even more clear that the test relies on an appeal to introspection. It is supposed to be beyond doubt that we can tell which ideas are in our minds.

What Berkeley says on this topic is intuitively plausible. We cannot picture an apple without giving it some determinate size, shape, and color. We cannot picture in our minds some generic dog; we are always forced to imagine a specific Dalmatian, Poodle, or Bulldog. But do these observations really gain traction on Locke’s claims about abstraction? Put differently, in claiming that we have abstract ideas did Locke commit himself to the claim that our minds can picture a generic dog in just the same way that they can picture a specific dog like Fido? Arguably, he did not.

In the course of discussing abstract ideas Locke very often focuses less on what the ideas themselves are like and much more on the sort of work that those ideas are meant to do.[[5]](#endnote-5) His goal seems to be to point out the ways in which our minds are able to group things on the basis of their similar features or characteristics. Putting the point differently, one might say that what interests Locke is the *process* whereby the mind comes to think abstractly, whereas Berkeley’s criticism focuses on the purported *result* of that process.

The language Locke uses to discuss abstraction and general ideas and the context in which he introduces these topics help to make this point. There are, of course, times when Locke talks about our *having* abstract ideas or *there being* abstract ideas in the mind. But it is at least as common to see Locke talking about the mind *framing, deriving, forming, making,* or *using* abstract ideas.[[6]](#endnote-6) In line with this, the chapter in the *Essay* where abstraction is first introduced, Book II Chapter xi, is devoted to the *faculties* of the mind and its various *operations*. All of this suggests that Locke is less interested in the phenomenological experience of having abstract ideas than he is in the sorts of tasks the mind can perform and the sorts of roles that abstract ideas play in our larger cognitive economy.

Analyzing the following passage might help to make this clear:

The *Ideas* of the Nurse, and the Mother, are well framed in [childrens’] Minds; and, like Pictures of them there, represent only those Individuals… Afterwards, when time and a larger Acquaintance has made them observe, that there are a great many other Things in the World, that in some common agreements of Shape, and several other Qualities, resemble their Father and Mother, and those Persons they have been used to, they frame an *Idea*, which they find those many Particulars do partake in; and to that they give, with others, the name *Man*, for Example. (E 3.3.7:411)

Locke allows here that the ideas of particular things, at least in the minds of children, are imagistic: they are like pictures. But over time, as the mind takes note of similarities between many different particulars, it is able to form an abstract idea. And Locke’s word for what the mind does in this instance is *frame* an abstract idea, rather than perceive, conceive, or picture an abstract idea. The mind’s goal in framing these abstract ideas, as Locke tell us elsewhere, is to have them to use “as the Standards to rank real Existences into sorts, as they agree with these Patterns, and to *denominate* them accordingly” (E 2.11.9:159).

Locke’s larger goal in the *Essay* is to examine the human understanding and to offer an account of the thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and knowledge that humans have. Part of this involves analyzing our mental capabilities. If an animal is placed in front of a normal human adult, she will almost instantly be able to categorize that animal and report “that’s a dog” or “that’s a horse” or “that’s a penguin.” This is an ability or capacity that the human mind possesses. Put differently, this is a datum that any proper theory of human knowledge must be able to account for. Locke’s claim is that in order for normal human adults to accomplish this sorting there must be an abstract idea of dog, and of horse, and of penguin in our minds. The mind must be able to compare the idea of the animal in front of it with these abstract ideas in order to issue the judgments it does. To use Locke’s language from the quotation above, there must be some standard by which we rank entities into sorts. But it is not entirely clear that in order for this to happen there must be a *picture* of some generic dog that is consciously compared to the idea of the particular animal in question.

Recall Berkeley’s test for whether or not we have abstract ideas. It was meant to be an introspective test; in exploring the mental contents of our mind we discover that none of them is a picture of an animal that is not some specific animal. This contrasts sharply with the test that Locke devises for whether or not we have abstract ideas: “That this is the *way, whereby Men first formed general* Ideas*...* I think, is so evident, that there needs no other proof of it, but the considering of a Man’s self, or others, and the ordinary proceedings of their Minds in Knowledge…” (E 3.3.9:412). Locke here seems to be saying that in order to make sense of important facts about human knowledge, facts about our psychological development as well as facts about how fully developed minds work, we will need to concede that there are abstract ideas. They play a vital role in our cognition.

Again, Berkeley’s criticism of Locke has enormous intuitive pull. But, it is worth noting that even Berkeley will have to be sensitive to these sorts of Lockean considerations. Consider Berkeley’s own story about general ideas. He denies that we can have a general or abstract idea of a dog. Instead, we begin with the idea of a particular dog, for example Fido. This idea of Fido is epistemically responsible in the sense that it is well-grounded in our phenomenology. We then let this idea of Fido stand for all of the other dogs. Here is a quotation that is meant to capture this process: “Now if we will annex a meaning to our words, and speak only of what we can conceive, I believe we shall acknowledge, that an idea, which considered in it self is particular, becomes general, by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort” (PHKI 12:31-32). This sounds very promising. We should note, however, that at the end of the passage Berkeley has smuggled in the concept *of the same sort*. But how is it that I let the idea of Fido stand in for Lassie and Rex and Spot rather than for Lassie and the banana I ate this morning and my car? This “standing in” account will only work if the mind has some kind of capacity to categorize things in the right sort of way. There is one approach to talking about mental capacities of this sort that aligns them with concepts. So, perhaps it is open to Berkeley to deny that there is an abstract *idea* of dog, given his strict understanding of what ideas are. But it is less clear that he can deny that there is some conceptual apparatus in the mind which captures important abstract content about dogs.

**3. Substance**

Another key disagreement between Locke and Berkeley has to do with our idea of substance, in particular our idea of material substance. Locke claims that we have some kind of idea of substance and Berkeley denies this. On the one hand, this disagreement about substance clearly follows on from the disagreement about abstraction. Berkeley claims that the idea of substance is an abstract idea and is therefore problematic. But when not pressing the point in this specific way, Berkeley often argues that if one tries to bring into view an idea of a substance as something that stands under observable features of objects and supports them, one will not be able to do this. According to him, there is nothing in our mental inventory that answers to that idea. The following passages nicely illustrate this Berkeleyan strategy:

But let us examine a little the received opinion. It is said extension is a mode or accident of matter, and that matter is the *substratum* that supports it. Now I desire that you would explain what is meant by matter’s *supporting* extension: say you, I have no idea of matter, and therefore cannot explain it. (PHK 16:47)

For instance, in this proposition, a die is hard, extended and square, they will have it that the word *die* denotes a subject or substance, distinct from the hardness, extension and figure, which are predicated of it, and in which they exist. This I cannot comprehend… (PHK 49:61-62)

hylas. But then on the other hand, when I look on sensible things in a different view, considering them as so many modes and qualities, I find it necessary to suppose a material *substratum*, without which they cannot be conceived to exist.  
Philonous. *Material substratum* call you it? Pray, by which of your senses came you acquainted with that being?  
hylas. I do not pretend to any proper positive idea of it. (DHP 197)

This last passage in particular emphasizes something about the sense in which we have no idea of substance: we cannot form in our mind any obviously perceptual image or picture of bare substance or substratum. Once again, it is easy to be sympathetic with Berkeley’s criticism. Imagine beginning with an ordinary object, an apple, say, and stripping away all of its observable features: its color and smell and taste and shape and so on. It seems clear that at the end of this process one is not left with some *substance* that is buried away as it were at the core of the apple. Instead, once all of the observable features are stripped away, one is left with nothing. As Philonous puts the point: “Take away the sensations of softness, moisture, redness, tartness, and you take away the cherry” (DHP 249).

Locke’s views on the nature of material substances and our idea of substance are notoriously difficult. But one strand in his thinking on the issue again points to the thought that Locke may be more interested in the cognitive *work* done by certain ideas than he is in the ideas themselves. Recall that Locke is interested in offering an account of the sort of thoughts humans have and the sorts of judgments that they make. One fact about humans is that they treat sand castles very differently than they treat piles of rocks. Similarly, humans think about basketball teams very differently than they do about random collections of strangers who happen to be shooting hoops in the gym at the same time. Put differently, it is a fact about humans that we are very sensitive to *unities* or to *collections*, and this sensitivity plays a major role in our cognitive lives.[[7]](#endnote-7)

If this is the case then there is a question about *how it is* that the mind can think about unified collections of properties. And, as we saw above, given his explanatory ambitions Locke is responsible for explaining which element of our cognition accounts for this ability. Arguably, his answer is that it is the idea of substance that is responsible for our capacity to think about unities and collections of things. As Locke writes:

The Mind…takes notice…that a certain number of these simple *Ideas* go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing…are called so united in one subject, by one name… 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 therefore we call *Substance*. (E 2.23.1:295)

This suggestion—that the idea of substance is what is responsible for explaining the robustness or permanence of our ideas of substances—is repeated often throughout the chapter on ideas of substances. Locke mentions “such Combinations of simple *Ideas*, as are by Experience and Observation of Men’s Senses taken notice of to exist together” and he explains that substance not only supports observable qualities but also is the “Cause of their Union” (E 2.23.3:296 and E 2.23.6:298). Substances are meant to be the “common subject” of the observable qualities (E 2.23.4: 297, 2.23.6:298, 2.23.14:305). Similar themes are present in one of Locke’s clearest characterizations of the idea of substances: “But to return to the Matter in hand, the *Ideas* we have of Substances, and the ways we come by them; I say *our specifick* Ideas *of Substances* are nothing else but *a* *Collection of a certain number of simple* Ideas, *considered as united in one thing*” (E 2.23.14:305). There are two things to note about this quotation. First, it reveals how important Locke thought it was to account for the *unified* nature of substances. Second, it clearly indicates what Locke saw as his task in discussing substances. For him, the “matter at hand,” the goal of the discussion, is an explanation of the sort of thinking we do, how we came to be able to do that thinking, and what it is in the mind that allows us to think in the ways we do.

Again, this might leave Locke and Berkeley at something of a stalemate. Berkeley’s fundamental point that we have no clear mental picture of substance is compelling. But Locke’s fundamental insight is important as well. Locke is right that our experience is structured in certain kinds of ways and that we experience the world not as a series of independent sensory features but as containing unified things. With this in mind, it can be useful to look closely at an excerpt from the first section of Berkeley’s *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*: “…a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name *apple*. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book and the like sensible things…” (PHK 1:41). One can imagine Locke reading this text and asking what it means for certain things to be *accounted* one thing. Similarly, he might ask why it is that some collections of qualities *constitute* a stone whereas other collection of qualities, all the ones in the left half of one’s visual field, say, do not constitute an object.[[8]](#endnote-8) Berkeley does, ultimately, have an answer to these questions: there are laws of nature backed by God that explain the structure of objects. But the point is just that there is some important explanatory work that must be accomplished. And, for Locke, that work is done by the mind making use of an idea of substance.

**4. Primary and Secondary Qualities**

Another famous disagreement between Locke and Berkeley centers on the plausibility of a distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Again, this is a place where Berkeley employs a number of different argumentative strategies. One can find in the text, for example, arguments from perceptual relativity and arguments deriving from Berkeley’s anti-abstractionism.[[9]](#endnote-9) But one key strategy involves a sort of parity argument: proponents of the distinction are asked to allow that secondary qualities are entirely mind-dependent and then are forced to allow that the same must be true of primary qualities. As Berkeley writes in the *Principles*: “…after the same manner, as modern philosophers prove certain sensible qualities to have no existence in matter, or without the mind, the same thing may be likewise proved of all other sensible qualities whatsoever” (PHK 14:46).

In the *Notebooks* Berkeley offers a formulation of this parity argument that gives us insight into his thinking on the matter. By way of gesturing toward an argument he hopes to make, he writes: “Primary ideas prov’d not to exist in matter, after the same manner yt secondary ones are provd not to exist therein” (N 20:10). What is especially notable here is that Berkeley employs the language of primary *ideas*, rather than primary *qualities*. Even later in the *Principles*, when Berkeley does begin to use the language of qualities, it is clear that ideas are still central to his understanding of the issue. Consider the identification of qualities with ideas in this sentence: “Qualities, as hath been shewn, are nothing else but *sensations* or *ideas*, which exist only in a *mind* perceiving them…” (PHK 78:74). This identification of qualities with ideas is a pervasive feature of the *Principles*, arguably beginning as early as PHK 1.[[10]](#endnote-10) Berkeley’s belief that he has shown qualities to be ideas is central to his claim that things such as solidity, motion, and extension are mind-dependent in just the same way that things such as color, sound, and smell are. The following passage offers a particularly clear instance of this move:

…the sensible qualities are colour, figure, motion, smell, taste, and such like, that is, the ideas perceived by sense. Now for an idea to exist in an unperceiving thing, is a manifest contradiction; for to have an idea is all one as to perceive: that therefore wherein colour, figure, and the like qualities exist, must perceive them; hence it is clear there can be no unthinking substance or *substratum* of those ideas. (PHK 7:43-44)

Note that the passage begins with Berkeley again identifying qualities with ideas and with those ideas being understood in terms of perceptual content or sense-data. Ideas are unarguably mind-dependent. If qualities just are ideas, then they too will be mind-dependent. And this will be true regardless of what type of idea they are. As Berkeley says in a slightly different context: “It is but looking into your own thoughts, and so trying whether you can conceive it possible for a sound, or figure, or motion, or colour, to exist without the mind, or unperceived” (PHK 22:50). So-called primary quality ideas will be just as mind-dependent as so-called secondary quality ideas. But this means that the distinction will collapse.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Turning to Locke, one striking feature in *his* discussion of primary and secondary qualities is just how important he thought it was to keep qualities—the external causes of ideas—and ideas distinct. Even prior to introducing a distinction between types of qualities in Book II, Chapter viii of the *Essay*,Locke emphasizes the importance of differentiating between ideas and qualities: “These the Understanding…considers all as distinct positive *Ideas*, without taking notice of the Causes that produce them… These are two very different things, and carefully to be distinguished…” (E 2.8.2:132-133). At the start of section 7 in this chapter, Locke again emphasizes that intelligible discourse requires a distinction between, on the one hand, ideas as they are in our minds and, on the other, their external causes. And in section 8 Locke, while acknowledging how easy it is to conflate or confuse the two, makes his clearest distinction between ideas and qualities. This point is important because what Locke hopes to differentiate between are two different types of qualities, rather than two different types of ideas.

Seen in this light, Locke’s conception of qualities as causes of our ideas is central to the dispute between Locke and Berkeley. More specifically, we might ask why Berkeley would feel entitled to entirely ignore this key piece of Lockean conceptual apparatus.[[12]](#endnote-12) Here again, we can understand Berkeley as arguing that we lack the requisite ideas to make sense of Locke’s view. Lockean qualities are the causes of our sensory ideas. This means that our interaction with the quality results in a perception of the sensory idea the quality produces rather than an idea of the quality itself. One upshot of this is that the power to produce an idea is not the sort of thing that can itself be perceived.[[13]](#endnote-13) This is the point Berkeley seizes on to argue that we can therefore have no ideas of Lockean qualities. A passage from Berkeley’s famous Master Argument helps to convey the thought: “When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas” (PHK 23:50). One way to understand this is as claiming that our ideas are the only resources we have for conceptualizing the causes of our ideas. And this generates the problem. The important point about Lockean qualities is that they are not themselves ideas. But if we can only conceptualize qualities in terms of ideas then this means we cannot adequately conceptualize them. We have no proper idea of Lockean qualities. Insofar as we can think of qualities, we are really thinking of ideas, and thus Berkeley is happy to characterize qualities as ideas.

Returning to the thought that key disagreements between Locke and Berkeley are driven by their differing conceptions of ideas, we can notice that there are some presuppositions built into Berkeley’s reasoning as described above. The force of Berkeley’s argument derives in large part from the belief that ideas are fundamentally perceptual. If the realm of ideas is exhausted by sense-data, then it is not surprising that we will struggle to understand a difference between different types of causes of our ideas. But, if Locke is allowed a more expansive understanding of the nature of ideas, then it will be possible for us to consider ideas that have as their content the cause of our perceptual ideas and to consider whether all of the causes are of the same order.

These same issues play a key role in the different approaches to causation that the two thinkers adopt. There are certain Humean strands to Berkeley’s thinking about causation.[[14]](#endnote-14) More precisely, Berkeley is committed to the idea that our experience of the world does not furnish us with ideas of active powers. For Berkeley, our ideas are fundamentally passive:

…for all ideas whatever, being passive and inert, vide Sect. 25, they cannot represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts. A little attention will make it plain to any one, that to have an idea which shall be like that active principle of motion and change of ideas, is absolutely impossible. (PHK 27:52)

It follows straightforwardly from this that Berkeley will deny that we have any ideas of Lockean qualities. Locke, for his part, is committed to the claim that our ideas of power have an adequate basis in our experience of the world.[[15]](#endnote-15) This, in turn, stands behind his willingness to make claims about the causes of our ideas.

**5. Ideas**

So far, we have looked at a number of specific disagreements between Locke and Berkeley. And the suggestion has been that in each case the fundamental explanation of the disagreement is the same. Locke and Berkeley disagree about what ideas are and how ideas work. For Berkeley, the concept of an idea is something that is intimately tied up with perception and with our sense experience. For Locke, the concept of an idea is something that includes sense experience but includes much else besides. To use different language, Berkeley’s ideas are *imagistic* in a way that Locke’s are not.[[16]](#endnote-16) Examining some texts in which the two authors explicitly discuss ideas will help to sharpen the point.

Berkeley’s published works contain no shortage of passages in which he clearly affirms that the category of idea is properly used to capture the immediate objects of our sense experience. For him, “…to have an idea is all one as to perceive” (PHK 7:44). Or, in a more detailed passage:

Light and colours, heat and cold, extension and figures, in a word the things we see and feel, what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas or impressions on the sense; and is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? …my conceiving or imagining power does not extend beyond the possibility of real existence or perception. Hence as it is impossible for me to see or feel anything without an actual sensation of that thing, so it is impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation or perception of it. (PHK 5:42-43)

There are a few strands of thought in this quotation that are worth pulling out. First, Berkeley treats ideas as being on a par with sensations and sense-impressions.[[17]](#endnote-17) Second, he claims that ideas are inextricably linked to perception. And third, he limits our power to conceive to what we can perceive. These commitments can be seen as the foundations of Berkeley’s imagistic approach to ideas. And this approach continues to be both implicitly and explicitly invoked throughout the *Principles* and *Dialogues*, as the following examples help to illustrate:

As for our senses, by them we have the knowledge only of our sensations, ideas, or those things that are immediately perceived by sense, call them what you will… (PHK 18: 48)

But, say you, it sounds very harsh to say we eat and drink ideas, and are clothed with ideas. I acknowledge it does so… But this doth not concern the truth of the proposition, which in other words is no more than to say, we are fed and clothed with those things which we perceive immediately by our senses. (PHK 38: 56)

philonous: …any immediate object of the senses, that is, any idea or combination of ideas… (DHP 195)

philonous: I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things; since those immediate objects of perception, which according to you, are only appearances of things, I take to be the real things themselves.

So, there is ample reason to believe that, for Berkeley, the realm of ideas is limited to the realm of sense perception. We might get some sense of the attraction of this view for Berkeley if we consider David Berman’s suggestion that Berkeley was likely an eidetic imager, or at least had imaging skills far above the human norm (Berman 2005, 4-16).

There is one text, however, that presents something of a puzzle for this understanding of Berkeley on the nature of ideas. At the outset of the *Principles*, he writes: “It is evident to any one who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind…” (PHK 1: 41). Linguistic ambiguity aside, the passage strongly implies that Berkeley thinks there are not just imagistic ideas obtained in sense perception but also ideas obtained through a process of internal reflection. But this would run counter to the passages considered above in which ideas are all and only the immediate objects of sense perception. I propose that we can best make sense of this passage by allowing that it does not represent Berkeley’s considered views on this issue but is instead a product of the way in which his thought developed over time.

One way to gain insight into this is to explore some of the ambiguities present in the *Notebooks*. It is clear in looking at the *Notebooks* that Berkeley was aware of some of the difficulties he might encounter as a consequence of giving ideas such an important role in his thought. He writes: “Excuse to be made in the Introduction for the using the Word Idea viz. because it has obtain’d. But a Caution must be added” (N 685:83). And he recognized how important it might be to clarify what he meant by the term: “Mem. To Premise a Definition of Idea” (N 507:63). Of course, in the event, Berkeley included neither excuse, nor caution, nor definition in the *Principles*. And this might be because at the outset of the *Principles* he was still making up his mind on the issue.

The *Notebooks* are relatively consistent in linking ideas with perception. For example, one candidate definition of “idea” is as follows: “By Idea I mean any sensible or imaginable thing” (N 775:93). The link to perception is also emphasized in (N 572:71): “I Defy any man to Imagine or conceive perception without an Idea or an Idea without perception.” But the *Notebooks* also show Berkeley wavering over the question of whether it is only the immediate ideas of sense perception that are ideas or whether we also receive ideas from a source akin to Lockean reflection. At times, he seems to take a view consistent with the vast majority of passages in the *Principles* and *Dialogues* and opts for a strictly imagistic understanding of ideas. For example, at N 490:61 he remarks on the wisdom of tying ideas to “things sensible” and at (N 657a:80) he writes that “properly speaking Idea is the picture of the Imagination’s making…” (see also N 176a:24). But other entries in the *Notebooks* are closer to the passage from PHK 1 cited above (see, for example, N 571:71). Further evidence that Berkeley was conflicted on this issue comes from the fact that in the entries where he allows some kind of internal sense he takes different positions on how it should be categorized and what relation it has to sense perception. He sometimes suggests that external sense gives us perception whereas the latter gives us something called thought (N 280:34 and 286:35). Elsewhere it appears he is willing to collapse the distinction (N 571:71).

All of this might suggest something like the following. In the *Notebooks*,Berkeley was initially torn between an account of ideas that was purely imagistic and one that recognized ideas from both sensation and reflection. By the time of his published works he had opted for the former view and this is confirmed by the majority of relevant passages in those works. But there are nonetheless some leftover relics of his previous indecision in passages such as PHK 1. This interpretation, which recognizes a diachronic development in Berkeley’s thinking, can be further supported by noting the advent of *notions* in his later work. As will be discussed in more detail below, the introduction of this concept provides further evidence that the passage from PHK 1 does not accurately capture Berkeley’s mature views.

How does this compare with Locke? Unlike Berkeley, Locke did preface his work with a discussion of ideas, a definition of the term, and an indication of the philosophical work he thought ideas might accomplish. Of course, these features of Locke’s text do leave a great deal to be desired. Locke was not as clear about any of these issues as he might have been. But while Locke might not have been perfectly clear, he was at least remarkably consistent. Specifically, he was consistent in maintaining that an idea is just whatever it is that the mind happens to have in it when doing its work of thinking, perceiving, and knowing. Consider the following passages:

But, before I proceed on to what I have thought on this Subject, I must here in the Entrance beg pardon of my Reader, for the frequent use of the Word *Idea*, which he will find in the following Treatise. It being that Term, which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by *Phantasm, Notion, Species,* or whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ’d about in thinking… (E 1.1.8:47)

Every Man being conscious to himself, That he thinks and that which his Mind is employ’d about whilst thinking, being the *Ideas*, that are there… (E 2.1.1:104)

Whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call *Idea*… (E 2.8.8:134)

The formulations that Locke offers—particularly his willingness to run together the highly divergent Scholastic categories of phantasm, notion, and species—are sometimes taken as linguistic sloppiness on Locke’s part or as evidence that he simply did not care to offer a precise definition of one of his key terms. But we do not need to take this approach. It is perfectly reasonable to simply take Locke at his word here. If we do this, then what is true is that Locke has a very expansive notion of what counts as an idea. For him, the category of idea embraces every type of mental content that humans actually have. If it is the case that humans have sense-data or perceptions, then ideas are the conceptual resource Locke uses to make sense of that. If, in addition, if it is the case that humans have abstract concepts or non-sensory mental content, then ideas are also the conceptual resource Locke will use to make sense of that.

Exploring some additional examples of ideas that Locke takes us to have and Berkeley takes us to lack can sharpen the point still further. In Book II, Chapter vii Locke lists a number of ideas that he takes to be absolutely central to human cognition. We have simple ideas of both unity and existence. For Locke, these accompany nearly all of our other ideas. “*Power*”, Locke writes, “also is another of those simple *Ideas*, which we receive from *Sensation* and *Reflection*” (E 2.7.8:131). We also have a simple idea of succession constantly given to us by sensation and reflection. Berkeley denies that we have ideas of any of these. An idea of existence, according to him, is abstract and “the most incomprehensible of all…” (PHK 81:75, see also CGB 319). Unity is similarly dismissed as an abstract idea, as is succession (PHK 13:46 and N 53a:13). The case with power is slightly different, but Berkeley is nonetheless clear that we receive no idea of power in experience. This is because all of our ideas are purely passive (PHK 25:51-52).

For current purposes, we can set aside the question of which thinker is correct. Perhaps Locke is right that we receive these ideas in experience, perhaps Berkeley is right that we do not. What is important at present is that this disagreement helps to emphasize their different conceptions of what ideas are like. For an imagist like Berkeley, it is clear why ideas like *existence* and *unity* pose problems. It is difficult to “picture” either of those things in one’s mind. Berkeley writes: “That I have any such idea answering the word *unity*, I do not find; and if I had, methinks I could not miss finding it…” (PHK 13:46). The suggestion here is that if we survey our phenomenology unity is not obviously one of the things present. For someone like Locke, however, who thinks that ideas can be more than just images, it is clear why we might have ideas of existence and unity.[[18]](#endnote-18) When Locke characterizes our idea of existence, for example, the suggestion is not that we are meant to “find” it in our experience. Instead, the point is about how our thought operates: “When *Ideas* are in our Minds, we consider them as being actually there, as well as we consider things to be actually without us; which is, that they exist, or have *Existence*” (E 2.7.7:131). According to Locke, if this is actually a thought that we have, and if ideas are whatever it is that is in our minds when we think, then there must be some idea that corresponds to existence.

The suggestion thus far has been that Locke allows the category of idea to encompass far more than Berkeley does. This might give the impression that Berkeley is somehow able to *make do with less* and hence offer a more parsimonious account of human thought and knowledge. This may be true. But there is an important difference between Locke and Berkeley which was hinted at above. Unlike Locke, Berkeley makes uses of an additional cognitive category: notions. The category first appears in the *Principles* at a stage where Berkeley is insisting that we do not have ideas of our souls and their powers (PHK 27:52-53).[[19]](#endnote-19) While he is clear on this point, he wants to insist at the same time that we do have *notions* of them. In later texts, Berkeley allows that we have further notions of things such as the souls of others, God, relations, and active powers. Here is one of his clearest statements on the matter:

We comprehend our own existence by inward feeling or reflexion, and that of other spirits by reason. We may be said to have some knowledge or notion of our own minds, of spirits and active beings, whereof in a strict sense we have not ideas. In a like manner we know and have a notion of relations between things or ideas… To me it seems that ideas, spirits, and relations are all in their respective kinds, the object of human knowledge and subject of discourse: and that the term *idea* would be improperly extended to signify every thing we know or have any notion of. (PHK 89:80)[[20]](#endnote-20)

In this passage Berkeley allows that our knowledge and understanding can extend beyond our ideas. Our notions of things are not ideas, but our notions of things allow us to conceive of them.

There is little consensus on the correct interpretation of Berkeleyan notions. Scholars have asked whether Berkeley changed his views over time and the introduction of notions in the 1734 editions of the *Principles* and *Dialogues* is consistent with his earlier views or whether it represents a departure or development.[[21]](#endnote-21) And there has also been debate about whether notions should be understood as mental entities akin to ideas or whether a deflationary account of them can be given by drawing on Berkeley’s philosophy of language.[[22]](#endnote-22) A promising alternative approach suggests that Berkeleyan notions are a special, distinctive type of immediate phenomenological awareness.[[23]](#endnote-23) For present purposes, these disputes can be set aside. What is important is just the fact that Berkeley’s appeal to notions shows the pressure he was under as a result of his restrictive understanding of ideas. There was manifestly certain cognitive work for which ideas—understood imagistically—were unsuited. Berkeley simply could not ignore the mind’s ability to perform this work and our awareness of the mind performing it. This made the appeal to notions necessary. Intriguingly, much of the cognitive work done by notions is similar to the work done by the Lockean ideas Berkeley criticizes.[[24]](#endnote-24) Our notions of finite minds and of God seem to capture abstract features of spirits. Our notions of our own minds give us some understanding of a thing that plays an under-propping or supporting roles for ideas that inhere in it. And our notions also give us a grasp on active powers, including the active powers responsible for producing ideas in our minds. Seen one way, paying attention to this can help to bridge the apparent divide between Locke and Berkeley. At the end of the day, they shoulder similar burdens in attempting to account for our experiences and explain our cognitive behavior. Seen another way, however, this can serve to reemphasize the deep disagreement between the two authors over the role that ideas can play in those explanatory accounts. For Berkeley, it was important to restrict the scope of ideas to the sensory. Locke saw no need for this type of restriction.

**6. Conclusion**

This chapter has offered a way of understanding a number of disagreements between Locke and Berkeley. It has claimed that these disagreements are driven by a more fundamental disagreement over the nature of ideas. This, in turn, can teach us something about the fundamental character of Locke and Berkeley as thinkers.

There is a long tradition of seeing Berkeley’s project as deeply similar to Locke’s. On this view, Berkeley inherited Locke’s starting assumptions and simply noted that they could lead in a direction different from the one Locke had taken them. The narrative can become more compelling if one situates Hume after Berkeley in a larger tradition of “British Empiricism.” There is, no doubt, a great deal to this way of looking at things.[[25]](#endnote-25) There are certainly core similarities between the three figures that repay careful attention. But attention to what Locke and Berkeley think about ideas and what they are like suggests that the two thinkers may actually be engaged in very different projects.

At this point, it might be worth recalling that Berkeley’s first major work was *An Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision*. The concerns of that work are rarely far from the surface in the *Principles* and *Dialogues*. Put differently, an emphasis on the nature of our sensory experience and our lived phenomenological engagement with the world pervades Berkeley’s work. And it is this focus on sensation and our sensory experiences that forms the basis for Berkeley’s larger project of offering an account of the fundamental metaphysical structure of the world and our place in it. While Berkeley does eventually make room for notions in his system, his project is largely funded by his analysis of perception and the corresponding imagistic approach to ideas. By contrast, it is possible to read Locke as embarking on a quite different project altogether. His project is the *historical* one of trying to explain how it is that we might have come to have all the thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and knowledge that we do. His *magnum opus*, as the title suggests and as he informs his readers in the first paragraph of the *Epistle to the Reader* and the first paragraph of the introductory chapter, has as its subject the human understanding. Put differently, Locke’s concerns are more focused than Berkeley’s. He is interested in what we might now call psychology. In line with this, it makes a great deal of sense for him to adopt a more expansive theory of ideas, one that is less closely tied to sensation and which is not imagistic. Focusing on the differing approaches that Locke and Berkeley develop to the nature of ideas can help us to see that, in spite of many commonalities, the two thinkers are oriented in different directions. Berkeley, at heart, is very much a philosopher of *perception*,whereas Locke, at heart, is a philosopher of *cognition*.[[26]](#endnote-26)

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1. More generally, a great number of entries in the *Notebooks* show Berkeley’s indebtedness to Locke. For a skeptical take on the received view regarding Locke’s importance for the development of Berkeley’s views, see Berman (1972). In response, one might note that even if Locke is not always the primary target of Berkeley’s attacks, it seems that the *formulations* of the views criticized by Berkeley are most often Locke’s. To take just one example, Berkeley uses the distinctively Lockean language of “patterns” when he begins his discussion of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities (PHK 9:43). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. There is, of course, a parallel here to one of Hume’s favorite argumentative strategies. Why does Hume reject substantive accounts of causation or substantive accounts of the self? In part, it is because when he “turns inward” he finds no idea of necessary connection and no idea of the self. It is possible to read Berkeley as foreshadowing this Humean move. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jonathan Bennett, who portrays the difference between Locke and Berkeley on this point similarly, mentions Locke’s “use of ‘idea’ to cover both sense-data and concepts.” Helpfully, Bennett also encourages his readers to “recall that Descartes, by whom Locke was much influenced, was prepared to use ‘think’ to cover mental goings-on of any sort at all” (Bennett 1971, §4). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This is not to deny that Berkeley finds other considerations compelling. See Flage (1987, chapter 1) for a discussion of the argument from introspection discussed here and its relative place amongst Berkeley’s other arguments. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kenneth Winkler makes a similar point in his discussion of Locke and Berkeley on abstraction, and his phrasing is helpful: “Locke sometimes writes as if ideas determine the content of thought, but when he does, he is not thinking of ideas as the objects of thought—as entities we confront in the way we confront images and pains—but as acts of thought themselves” (Winkler 1989, 41). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Some examples: for framing, E 1.2.12:53, 3.5.15:437, 3.6.32:460, 4.6.10:584, 4.6.14:589; for deriving, E 2.12.8:166; for forming, E 1.2.23:61, 3.3.9:412; for making, E 1.2.14:54, 2.11.10:160, 3.3.20:420, 3.6.35:461, 4.11.13:638; for using, E 1.2.26:63. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Han-Kyul Kim (2015) has developed one version of the general “functional role” account of the Lockean idea of substance discussed here. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. One of Philonous’s comments in the *Third Dialogue* further illustrates the sort of pressure Berkeley is under here: “…a *cherry*, I say, is nothing but a congeries of sensible impressions, or ideas perceived by various senses: which ideas are united into one thing (or have one name given them) by the mind; because they are observed to attend each other” (DHP 249). Berkeley wants the object to be a mere heap or aggregation of ideas. But he also must allow that the individuals in the heap are correctly accounted as members of the same congeries insofar as they “attend each other.” And he also allows, similarly to Locke, that the mind has some important role to play in our thinking about the ideas as unified. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. It is worth noting that the precise status of these perceptual relativity arguments in particular—what importance Berkeley attached to them and whether they accurately target figures like Locke—has been controversial. For some discussion, see Wilson (1982). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Rickless (2013, chapter 3, section 5) for helpful textual exegesis on this point and discussion of the way in which this marks a clear departure from Descartes and Locke. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Lisa Downing (2018) offers a somewhat different characterization of very similar issues. Focusing on the *Three Dialogues*, in particular, Downing emphasizes the role that Berkeley’s conception of sensible qualities plays in his argument that qualities are mind-dependent. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Part of the reason almost certainly has to do with Pierre Bayle, whose presentation of these issues was an important influence on Berkeley. Bayle’s discussion of the subject runs together secondary qualities and ideas of secondary qualities. For details and relevant texts from Bayle, see McCracken and Tipton (2000, chapter 7). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. One might push back here and note that while a power might not be immediately perceived, perhaps it could be mediately perceived, by means of the idea it produces. See Dicker (2017) for a discussion of what the distinction between mediate and immediate perception means for Berkeley’s analysis of Locke. See Rickless (2013, chapter 1) for a general discussion of mediate and immediate perception in Berkeley. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For an in-depth analysis of this claim and more general discussion of Berkeley’s views on causation, see Winkler (1989, chapter 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For some discussion of how Locke might have constructed an idea of power from our experience of the world, see Jacovides (2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This claim about Lockean ideas is, admittedly, controversial. There are some well-known readings of Locke on which he is committed to an imagistic theory of ideas (see, for example, Ayers (1991, volume 1, part 1)). For convincing criticisms of these readings see Soles (1999) and Hampton (2015). This essay can be understood as a further contribution to anti-imagist readings of Lockean ideas. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Berkeley includes notions on this list as well. In this context, it seems safest to read him here as using a familiar sense of “notion” as an idea or perception rather than his own idiosyncratic sense of the word. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Again, Winkler’s phrasing is helpful: “Locke is willing to call unity a simple idea because he often intends what he says about ideas to be a way of identifying the *content* of thought, rather than its object. If I am considering or attending to the unity of a thing, Locke is prepared to say that I have a simple idea of unity” (Winkler 1989, 74). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. More precisely, the category first appears in the second edition of the *Principles*, published in 1734. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See also PHK 139-142:104-106 and DHP 233. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See Bettcher (2017, 412-418) for a brief account of the way the issues arise in Berkeley’s texts over time. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. For discussion see Flage (1987, chapter 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. A version of this has been defended by Adams (1973). But see the chapter by James Hill in this volume for an excellent articulation and defense of the view. That said, one worry about this interpretation is that while it offers an elegant approach to notions of our own minds, it is more difficult to see how it can account for other things Berkeley claims we have notions of: God, other human minds, and relations. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See Flage (1987, chapter 4) for a discussion of the “epistemic intent” of Berkeleyan notions. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See Ayers (2005) and the chapter by James Hill in this volume for discussions of Berkeley’s contested place amongst rationalists and empiricists. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. A previous version of this paper was presented at the International Berkeley Society’s 2018 Berkeley in Context conference held at the Redwood Library & Athenæum. I am grateful to the audience on that occasion for their helpful questions and feedback. I also want to thank the members of the Cottage Philosophy Group (Finnur Dellsén, Luke Elson, John Lawless, Dan Layman, and Nate Sharadin) as well as Sam Rickless for reading an earlier draft and offering a number of useful suggestions. Finally, I am grateful to Neil Lewis, for his help and patience when I was first beginning to think seriously about Locke and Berkeley, many years ago. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)