

# AN EARLY CRITIC OF LOCKE: THE ANTI-SCEPTICISM OF HENRY LEE

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## Introduction

Although John Locke is often hailed as one of the founding fathers of modern epistemology, some have cast him as a major villain in the story of how the fundamentals of our knowledge came to be infested with the pernicious germ of scepticism. This latter picture emerges from the writings of eminent thinkers such as Bishop Berkeley and Thomas Reid. In fact, already in Locke's own time it was feared that the author of the *Essay* had blocked off all roads to certain knowledge of the world.

An important contemporary critic of the *Essay* was Henry Lee. In his own day, Lee's *Anti-Scepticism: or, Notes Upon each Chapter of Mr. Lock's Essay concerning Humane Understanding* (1702) was widely recognized as posing a serious challenge to Locke. Thus, as a recent study of the early Locke-reception points out, Locke's correspondents 'singled out Lee's performance for special mention in their reports'.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in his preface to Carroll's *Spinoza Reviv'd* (1709), George Hickee ventured that 'had Mr Locke foreseen that such a book would have been written against his *Essay*, he would never have wrote that', and Timothy Goodwin's biography of Edward Stillingfleet (1710) referred to Lee as 'a person of great ingenuity and learning'.<sup>2</sup> In our own days, however, Lee's work has received very little scholarly attention, even though those scholars who have (albeit briefly) discussed

<sup>1</sup> Pahlan (2009: 90).

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Pahlan (2009: 90).

his work seem unanimous in their judgement that Lee was an interesting figure in the history of Early Modern thought. Thus, Benschop, McCracken, and Tipton have pointed out that Lee was an important predecessor of Bishop Berkeley, and in his classical study of the early reactions to Locke, Yolton argued that Lee was a major early critic of Locke.<sup>3</sup> More recently, John Rogers lamented the fact that ‘unlike Locke, Lee’s arguments have never received the attention they deserve. It is a task which still remains to be accomplished’, and as recently as 2009, Homyar Pahlan wrote that ‘Lee’s *Anti-Scepticism* deserves to be better known’.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I hope to contribute to filling that lacuna by studying the charge of scepticism which Lee levels against Locke. I shall do this by comparing Lee’s critique of Locke with that of his better known contemporary John Sergeant. According to Sergeant, Locke opened the gates for scepticism about external reality because he endorsed a representationalist theory of cognition: a theory according to which all we ever have direct epistemic access to are mental representations or ‘ideas’ in the mind. He consequently proposed to reject Locke’s ‘way of ideas’ and substitute for it an Aristotelian account of cognition. Although it often looks as if Lee’s critique is of a kind with Sergeant’s, Lee’s approach to the scepticism that he thinks plagues the *Essay* is quite different. Lee agreed with Sergeant that Locke often sounded like a representationalist. He also agreed that Locke had invited all kinds of sceptical worries about our knowledge of the extramental realm. Yet he did not think that it was Locke’s representationalist inclinations that invited those sceptical worries. Instead, Lee believed that Locke can avoid the scepticism that pervaded the *Essay* only by acknowledging that ultimately, our body of knowledge is erected upon a fundamentally unprovable assumption.

<sup>3</sup> Benschop (1997), McCracken and Tipton (2000: chapter 9), Yolton (1993: 101).

<sup>4</sup> Rogers (2003: 53), Pahlan (2009: 90).

But before I turn to these matters, let me first briefly introduce Lee's *Anti-Scepticism*.

### 1. Lee and *Anti-Scepticism*

Locke's *Essay* initially appears to have been favourably received, and in the course of the nineties of the seventeenth century, it gradually found itself a way to the Oxford curriculum. Indeed, in 1696 Molyneux wrote to Locke that 'I do not wonder that your *Essay* is received in the Universities'.<sup>5</sup> But although the *Essay* had thus 'crept into the world without any opposition', in 1697 it seemed to Locke that 'it is agreed by some men that it should no longer do so'.<sup>6</sup> Locke was right to feel the public opinion regarding his work was changing: around the turn of the century, numerous authors were publishing their worries over the *Essay*'s implications for religion, morality, and epistemology.

One of them was Henry Lee. Little is known about Lee's life. We know that he was educated at Cambridge, where he became a fellow of Emmanuel College in 1667. Besides, Lee had a modest career within the Church of England and filled the rectorships of Titchmarsh in Northamptonshire from 1678 and, from 1690 until his death in 1713, Brighton, Huntingdonshire.<sup>7</sup> As a fellow of Emmanuel College, Lee can hardly have failed to notice the attraction that the *Essay* exercised over young minds.<sup>8</sup> In 1702, he decided that a substitute for the *Essay* was called for: a work

<sup>5</sup> Feingold (1997: 425) ; Locke to Molyneux, cited after Pahlman (2009: 53).

<sup>6</sup> Locke to Molyneux, 22 February 1697. Locke (1981: 6).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Goldie (2004: 73–4) and Brendall, Brooke, and Collinson (1999: 283).

<sup>8</sup> 'The celebrated Author of the *Essay concerning Humane Understanding* has all the Advantages desirable to recommend it to the *inquisitive Genius* of this Age; an avow'd Pretence to *new Methods* (...), and above all, a *natural Elegancy of Style*'. Lee (1984: epistle dedicatory). Henceforth: *AS* page.

acquainting students with Locke's book, yet clearly laying bare its weak spots and dangers. This work was *Anti-Scepticism*, a work dedicated 'to the author's two sons in the Universities'.<sup>9</sup> It was a book of exactly the same folio format as the *Essay*, that contained a critical exposition of every single chapter of Locke's work. It dealt with problems that had become central to the controversies in which the *Essay* had become implicated between 1697 and 1702. Without getting too deeply involved in the details of these controversies, some words about this need to be said.

In his 1696 *Christianity not Mysterious*, John Toland had put the philosophical vocabulary of the *Essay* to the service of a highly controversial deism that went well beyond Locke's own attempts to 'clip the wings of revelation'.<sup>10</sup> Toland had held that the Christian religion can contain nothing that is beyond reason. Echoing Locke, he had defined 'reason' as the method to find out agreements or disagreements between the ideas in our minds.<sup>11</sup> Toland's use of Locke's apparatus led Bishop Stillingfleet to argue in his 1697 *Discourse in the Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* that Locke's 'way of ideas' was a highway to religious heterodoxy. Surely, this development was at the front of Lee's mind when he explained to his sons that a work like *Anti-Scepticism* was called for 'out of that regard we all owe to the Principles of Natural and Reveal'd Religion, which, by this way of resolving all Knowledge or Certainty into *Ideal Agreement*, have been so boldly confronted by other Authors'.<sup>12</sup> Lee rejected the rationalist approach to religion that a reading of the *Essay* apparently encouraged. He acknow-

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Pahlan (2009: 52, 90).

<sup>10</sup> The expression is due to Ayers. See Ayers (1991: 121). On the relation between Locke and Toland's deism, see Higgins-Biddle (1976) and Locke (1999: pp. xxvii–xxxvii).

<sup>11</sup> Toland (1696: 11–12). Toland was here harking back to Locke's definition of knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> *AS* preface. Lee refers to the Stillingfleet–Locke correspondence in his preface.

ledged that only a few revealed propositions were constituted of ideas that could be seen to 'agree' or 'cohere', but did not feel that this was to be lamented. Indeed, this was the advice he gave to his sons:

If you find any Proposition *clearly Reveal'd* in the Holy Scriptures (...) don't enter into any Philosophical Enquiries after the *Mode* or *Manner* how the matter of fact was or will be wrought, or its parts cohere; for that perhaps is inexplicable in the most familiar Propositions that can be named: But reckon yourselves to have a *rational* Ground for your Belief of it.<sup>13</sup>

Although Stillingfleet's religiously motivated attack marked an important turning-point in the reception of the *Essay*,<sup>14</sup> other authors were more concerned with the allegedly relativist tendencies of Locke's moral philosophy. Writers such as Thomas Burnet and James Lowde felt that Locke had rejected innate moral laws only to replace them by 'the Law of custom or opinion'.<sup>15</sup> To counter such relativism, they felt that a variety of nativism had to be restored: God had implanted in our minds universal moral principles such as 'do by others as you would be done by' and 'parents are to be honoured'.<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, Lee observed that 'when he [Locke] comes to tell us what this *Virtue* is (...), he makes it nothing *certain*, but what every Man by Custom, Education or Humour is inclin'd to call by that *honourable* Name'.<sup>17</sup> Lee commented that some moral laws 'seem to have a *deeper* Root than meer Custom'

<sup>13</sup> *AS* preface.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pahlan (2009: 68).

<sup>15</sup> Burnet (1699: 4, 6-7), Lowde (1699: 7). Cf. also Lowde (1694: preface). On Locke's targets, see Yolton (1993: 30-48). For a philosophically rewarding discussion of Locke's argumentative engagement with his predecessors, see Kim (2003).

<sup>16</sup> The classic study of this episode is Yolton (1993: 48-64).

<sup>17</sup> *AS* 18.

and pointed out that such principles as ‘Preserve your Lives and Off-springs’ and ‘God is to be Worship’d’ are innate in every human being.<sup>18</sup>

With the publication of John Sergeant’s *Solid Philosophy* in 1697, the controversy over Locke’s theory of knowledge gained momentum.<sup>19</sup> Sergeant believed that Locke’s presumed representationalism led straight to scepticism about our knowledge of external reality.<sup>20</sup> His *Solid Philosophy* was meant as a university textbook that would stop the further spread of ‘the fancies of the ideists’.<sup>21</sup> In it, Sergeant argued that Locke’s avowed disapproval of the Aristotelian paradigm lay at the root of the scepticism that haunted the *Essay*. This scepticism could be defeated only by rejecting Locke’s representationalist ‘way of ideas’ and substituting for it a good old-fashioned Aristotelian account of cognition.<sup>22</sup> Like Sergeant, Lee often interpreted the ‘way of ideas’ in a representationalist vein. Again like Sergeant, he felt that Locke’s principles ‘will neither prove, nor allow us to suppose, the *real* Existence of any thing out of the Mind itself’. Not only did this undermine ‘the best and most intelligible Arguments to prove the Existence of (...)’

<sup>18</sup> Resp. *AS* 14, 11, 28. To Lee this meant that we have ‘the *Disposition* or *Aptness* to Judge of the Truth of *those* Propositions, rather than the *contrary*’ (*AS* 8). Authors like Burnet, Lowde, and Edwards also embraced dispositional varieties of nativism. For the difference between their Platonist nativism and Lee’s form of the theory, see Pahlan (2009: 158–9).

<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that Sergeant was the first to express his concerns over Locke’s epistemology. Already in 1690, John Norris had expressed his worries over the representationalist tendencies of Locke’s *Essay*. On Norris, cf. Perler (2007). For a discussion of Sergeant in the context of seventeenth-century Aristotelianism, see Krook (1993).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Glauser (1999: 188–93).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Levitin (2010: 461).

<sup>22</sup> Recently, Dimitri Levitin has convincingly argued that Sergeant’s attacks on the way of ideas were religiously motivated. Cf. Levitin (2010).

GOD',<sup>23</sup> but it also led to endless scepticism in all the other domains of human knowledge of the external world. Although Lee's critique often looks uncannily similar to Sergeant's, we will see that this is misleading. To see this, we must first turn to the attack that Sergeant launched on Locke in *Solid Philosophy*.

## 2. Sergeant's Sceptical Critique

Locke has often been interpreted as a representationalist.<sup>24</sup> Representationalism is the theory which says that all we ever have direct epistemic access to are representations in the mind. It is a central tenet of this view that all knowledge of the world that we have must be gleaned from these representations.

Locke appears to invite such a reading when he says that 'the Mind, in all its Thoughts and Reasonings, hath no other immediate Object but its own *Ideas*',<sup>25</sup> which ideas 'signify' and 'represent' external objects.<sup>26</sup> Locke believes that all our knowledge is based on a perception of the connection between such ideas:

SINCE the Mind, in all its Thoughts and Reasonings, hath no other immediate Object but its own *Ideas*, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident, that our knowledge is only conversant about them. Knowledge then seems to me to be nothing but the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our *Ideas*.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *AS* preface.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Woozley (1967: 32–3), Cranston (1969: 15), Bennett (1971: 69), Ott (2004: 19–22), Newman (2004) and Newman (2009).

<sup>25</sup> *Essay* IV. i. 1, 524. Henceforth: *E.* book, chapter, paragraph, page.

<sup>26</sup> *E.* IV. xxi. 4, 721.

<sup>27</sup> *E.* IV. i. 1, 525.

Taken at face value, this passage denies that we ever have knowledge of the world outside our minds. But that, Locke himself believes, would be a scandalous view to hold. He handles this problem by drawing a distinction between mere 'knowledge' and 'real knowledge'. Any perception of a relation between ideas is knowledge, but we have 'real knowledge' only when we are assured that these ideas have extramental correlates:

Where-ever we perceive the Agreement or Disagreement of any of our Ideas there is certain Knowledge: and where-ever we are sure those Ideas agree with the reality of Things, there is certain real Knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, this immediately raises the question how I can ever be assured that my ideas have extramental correlates: 'What shall be here the Criterion? How shall the Mind, when it perceives nothing but its own *Ideas*, know that they agree with Things themselves?'<sup>29</sup> As I shall henceforth put it: how can I ever be assured that my ideas are *veridical*?

Although Locke was optimistic that this question could be answered, Sergeant believed that Locke's real knowledge was an unattainable ideal. Ideas are 'Gay and Florid Pictures' in the mind, which can never give me any information about whether or not the depicted objects have extramental existence:

How can any Man know that such things *are*, or have any being *in nature*, by a bare similitude of them. I may see the picture of such a shap'd *Man*, but whether that Man *is*, or ever *was*, the picture cannot inform me, so that it might be some Fancy of the Painter.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *E. IV. iv. 18, 573.*

<sup>29</sup> *E. IV. iv. 1, 563.* A treatment of Locke's answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>30</sup> Sergeant (1984: 20). Henceforth: *SP* page.

In order to establish whether or not a mental image is veridical, I would have to compare extramental reality with the world of ideas in my mind. They have to be ‘both of them in our *Comparing Power* (...) and there view’d and *compar’d together*’.<sup>31</sup> But this requires that I have access to extramental reality in a way that is not dependent on images in the mind. As this is precisely what the way of ideas denies, the ideist will have to rely on his very mental images in his attempt to establish the conformity of the ideal world in the mind to the physical world outside of it. Obviously, this is a circular procedure. Indeed, the ideists face a dilemma: either they must allow for another source of knowledge than images in the mind, or they must beg the question:

[T]hey must either prove, by *other* Grounds [than ideas in the mind], that *Similitudes* can give us Knowledge of the Things, or they do *petere Principium*, beg the Question, and prove *idem per idem*.<sup>32</sup>

But Sergeant thinks that in order to have knowledge of the world on the basis of the ideas in my mind, we must ‘know certainly that those *Ideas* are *Right Resemblances*’<sup>33</sup> of the extramental realm. Since—as we have just seen—the ideas in our mind cannot be shown to be veridical, knowledge of the world seems beyond reach. Schematically, Sergeant’s Sceptical Argument (SA) runs as follows:

(SA1) 1. All knowledge must be based on ideas in the mind.

<sup>31</sup> *SP* 32, cf. 340.

<sup>32</sup> *SP* 351.

<sup>33</sup> *SP* 30. To ‘certainly know’ something in Sergeant’s sense was no easy feat. He once wrote that ‘nothing can in perfect reason be *held* by one who penetrates difficulties, but either Self-evident Principles, or Conclusions necessarily deduced by intrinsecal mediums from those Principles, (...) and what is not seen to be thus connected is *unknown*’. Sergeant (1665: 8). Cf. also Sergeant (1696: 137).

2. Ideas can give us knowledge only if we can ascertain their veridicality.<sup>34</sup>
3. Their veridicality can be established only by means of circular reasoning.
4. Circular reasoning does not give us knowledge.
5. Hence, we cannot know that ideas are veridical. (4,3)
6. Therefore, they are not a source of knowledge. (5,2)
7. We know nothing about the world. (6,1)

The conclusion that Sergeant drew from SA1 was that Locke's representationalism must be mistaken. It cannot be true that that all our knowledge must be gleaned from ideas in the mind, which 'Gay and Florid Pictures' are all we ever have direct epistemic access to. Sergeant seized this opportunity to propose a return to the Aristotelian theory of cognition instead.

According to this theory, to cognize an object is for the mind 'to become' that object: when I cognize an F-object, the very form 'F-ness' is immaterially instantiated in my intellectual soul. In general, Sergeant believes that contrary to the ideists, 'those who follow'd *Aristotle's* Principles (as the great *Aquinas* constantly endeavoured) did generally discourse (...) very *solidly*'.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, he approvingly

<sup>34</sup> Strictly speaking, Sergeant's requirement here is stronger than Locke's, which only stated that we must be *assured* of the correspondence. For Locke, 'assurance' refers to a very high probability, not knowledge. However, this need not pose a serious problem for Sergeant's argument. After all, Locke explains that we are 'assured' that it froze in England last winter when someone tells us so because we have often experienced frost in wintry England. But Sergeant's argument shows that we can never establish any correspondence between ideas and external objects (after all, that would involve comparing the world with one's ideas.). Hence, it also seems to show that we cannot claim to have 'assurance' that idea-world correspondence obtains. Moreover, it is not crystal-clear whether Locke was using 'assurance' as a technical term in his presentation of the concept of 'real knowledge'. After all, the problem that he proceeded to raise for it was framed in knowledge-language: 'How shall the Mind (...) *know* that they agree with Things themselves?'. Moreover, the technical meaning of 'assurance' is not introduced until much later, in *E. IV. xvi. 6, 661-2*.

<sup>35</sup> *SP* Epistle dedicatory, A3.

quotes the Aristotelian dictum that *anima intelligendo fit omnia*<sup>36</sup> and moulds his own theory of cognition after the Aristotelian example. When I cognize an object, my intellectual soul receives a 'notion' of that object. Although he contends that such notions are the direct objects of all our beliefs and other cognitive acts,<sup>37</sup> our minds are not therefore cut off from access to external reality, because a notion is nothing other than 'the very thing it self existing in my understanding'.<sup>38</sup>

Does Sergeant's 'way of notions' successfully avoid the problems that Sergeant had raised for Locke's way of ideas? Sergeant felt that Locke's 'ideism' made him vulnerable to scepticism concerning our knowledge of extramental reality. But it is doubtful whether Sergeant is any better off in this respect. He contends that the direct objects of our cognitive acts are 'notions', which by definition correctly represent external objects: they are those very objects themselves, immaterially instantiated in the mind. At this point, a sceptic might well ask how Sergeant knows that the direct objects of our cognitive acts are indeed such notions or reliable representations. Might they not be mental occurrences that look reliable but in fact are not? Sergeant himself appears to nourish this worry when he writes that reliable notions are very easily mistaken for deceptive 'Phantasms' or 'Fancies'.<sup>39</sup> It would seem that in order to verify whether the direct objects of our cognitive

<sup>36</sup> SP 39. For a good discussion of how this principle took shape in the philosophy of Aquinas, see Perler (2004: 31–89).

<sup>37</sup> Which is an important difference with Aquinas, who in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 85, a. 2 had pointed out that the intelligible *species* (mental representations) were the *id quo*, not the *id quod* of cognition.

<sup>38</sup> SP 27.

<sup>39</sup> SP 347. Robert Pasnau formulates a similar objection against commentators according to whom Aquinas's view that the mental representation of *x* is an immaterial instantiation of *x* itself in the mind safeguards him from sceptical worries about external reality. Cf. Pasnau (1997: 298).

acts are indeed reliable notions rather than deceptive fancies we must compare them with the external world. But then, we have access to the latter by means of the direct cognitive objects in our minds only. Thus, it is hard to see how Sergeant can ascertain that the direct objects of his mind's contemplation are reliable representations (notions) of the world without begging the question. At this point, the sceptic might proceed to point out that (2') the direct objects of our cognitive acts can give us knowledge of the world only if we can ascertain that they are reliable representations. As this is a requirement that Sergeant apparently cannot meet, scepticism concerning our knowledge of external reality looms large for him after all.

As it turns out, authors such as Thomas Reid, whose critique of Locke is not unlike Sergeant's, have invited similar comments. Like Sergeant, Reid believed that representationalists cannot ascertain the veridicality of their mental images. Thus, Reid concluded, representationalism was a highway to scepticism. The only way to avoid such scepticism was to embrace the direct realism of 'the vulgar'. But again, it is doubtful whether endorsing such direct realism will safeguard one from scepticism. After all, even direct realists must grant that some of our perceptual experiences are hallucinatory.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, it is not clear how a direct realist can verify of any given perceptual experience whether it is veridical rather than hallucinatory. Therefore, an argument much like SA1 can be launched against the direct realist by deploying a principle like (2''): perceptual experiences can only give us knowledge of the world if we can ascertain that they are not deceptive.

It is now time to turn to Lee's sceptical critique of Locke. As we shall see, Lee agrees with Sergeant that Locke cannot ascertain that the ideas in his mind are veridical. As we will see in section 3.1, however, for Lee this conclusion is independent of a representationalist reading of Locke. Consequently, although Lee finds that

<sup>40</sup> Nadler (1989: 133), cf. Greco (1995: 291).

Locke invites a sceptical argument much like SA1, he does not seek to solve it by presenting an alternative for Locke's account of cognition. As will be argued in section 3.2, he believes that principles such as (2), (2') or (2'') are fundamentally misguided. In the light of the problem that I have just sketched for Sergeant, this makes for a philosophically salient difference between Lee and Sergeant.

### 3.1 Lee's Sceptical Critique

Near the end of *Anti-Scepticism*, Lee reviews Locke's definition of 'real knowledge', according to which real knowledge is available only if we can have the assurance that our ideas have extramental referents:

[H]is Notion of Truth is as obnoxious to an Objection as that of Knowledge is according to his Definition, namely, that after all we shall want a Criterion or standing measure by which to try whether *Ideas* be real or Chimerical and only Nominal'.<sup>41</sup>

In spite of Locke's optimism, Lee believes that we can never ascertain that our ideas have extramental correlates: 'there can be no certainty by the Way of *Ideas* only, so much as of the *real Existence* of those things which are the Subjects and Predicates of (...) propositions'; 'real Existence can never be proved meerly by Ideas', or again: 'that supposition [of the real existence of external correlates of our ideas] can never be proved by the way of *Ideas*'.<sup>42</sup> As a consequence, Locke 'cannot be any way assured of the Truth

<sup>41</sup> *AS* 266.

<sup>42</sup> *AS* preface, 238 and 321. Also *AS* 266.

of [any] Proposition, which concerns things without him'.<sup>43</sup>  
Schematically:

- (SA2)
1. Knowledge of the world is based on our ideas.
  2. Ideas can give us knowledge only if we can ascertain their veridicality.
  3. But their veridicality cannot be ascertained.
  4. Therefore, ideas are not a source of knowledge. (3,2)
  5. We know nothing about the world. (4,1)

Although Lee does not explicitly mention Sergeant, SA2 is of course similar in outline to Sergeant's SA1. The similarity goes even farther: like Sergeant, Lee often understood ideas as iconic representations which are the immediate objects of our cognitive activities. He writes: 'I am very sensible that the Word *Idea* has been much used of late to express other immediate Objects of the Understanding [as well], besides such as are visible'.<sup>44</sup> Or again: 'every *Idea*, is the Image or Resemblance of some Object out of the Mind'.<sup>45</sup>

There are, however, major differences between Lee and Sergeant. To begin with, although Lee often thinks of ideas as mental images, on other occasions he takes 'idea' to simply stand for 'Thought' or 'Perception', not for a mental image that is the direct object of our cognitive attention:

He uses ['idea'] sometimes for the Act of Perception; sometimes for the immediate Objects of that Perception (...). This seems not fair Dealing. (...) That which my Author calls *Ideas* are meer Nothings or meer Words, or the Perceptions themselves. (...) By simple Ideas of sensation he understands

<sup>43</sup> AS 240.

<sup>44</sup> AS 4. Cf. 322.

<sup>45</sup> AS 316.

such Perceptions or Notions which are produc'd in us by the *Impressions* upon the Organs of our *Body*'.<sup>46</sup>

A 'Perception' in Lee's sense is a perceptual experience that is not normally mediated by any kind of mental image. Such perceptual experiences may either be veridical or hallucinatory.

More importantly, Lee's arguments for (3) do not at all hinge on a representationalist interpretation of Locke. Thus, his first major argument for (3) goes as follows:

How can it appear to me so much as in any Degree probable that there is such a Place as the *Indies*, if I don't suppose or am not certain, that my Senses of hearing or of seeing (...) be true. And that again cannot be prov'd by the way of *Ideas*, for there is no Connexion in Nature between that which is wholly within us, as *Ideas* are, and that which is wholly without us.<sup>47</sup>

The argument rests on two premises: (a) mental occurrences are completely independent of extramental ones. That is, we could in principle live the same mental life that we do now even if we were born in a world which is radically different from the one which we currently inhabit. (b) Ideas are mental occurrences. The argument's conclusion is that (c) the realm of ideas in our minds does not give us information about the extramental world. Note that nothing in the argument hinges on a reading of 'ideas' as referring to mental images that are the direct object of perception, thought, or other cognitive processes. All it requires is that ideas be mental occurrences of some kind. And in fact, Lee on the very same page uses 'idea' and 'thought' as if they were synonymous: 'As to the

<sup>46</sup> *AS* 230, 291, 53. Cf. *AS* 77, 324. It appears that by 1705, the concept of an idea had become notoriously controversial and ambiguous. Cf. the judgement of the anonymous author of *A Philosophick Essay Concerning Ideas According to Dr. Sherlock's Principles* (1996: 4): 'there is hardly any Topick we shall meet with that the Learned have differ'd more about than this of Ideas'.

<sup>47</sup> *AS* 303. Cf. also the preface.

Perception of our own *Ideas* or Thoughts, that again is impossible, unless we cou'd have *Ideas* or Thoughts abstracted from the things of which we are said to have *Ideas* or Thoughts'.<sup>48</sup>

Lee's second argument is that an attempt to prove the correspondence between ideas and extramental objects invites an infinite regress. If you appeal to *x* in order to show that your current idea is veridical, you will have to prove the existence of *x* by appealing to, say, *y*. But then, you will have to prove the existence of *y* by invoking *z*, 'and so on *in infinitum*'.<sup>49</sup> Nothing in the argument requires that the idea at stake be some kind of *tertium quid* between your perceptual act and an external object. It would work equally well if 'idea' simply stood for a perceptual experience that does not involve any kind of intermediary mental object. What is more, the language in which Lee couches his argument actually reflects this. Thus, nowhere in the presentation of his argument does he suggest that ideas are mental images that are contemplated by the mind's eye. On the contrary, he explicitly speaks of ideas as 'perceptions', by which—as I have pointed out—he meant perceptual experiences that are not normally mediated by any kind of mental image:

That which my Author calls *Ideas* are meer Nothings or meer Words, or the Perceptions themselves; and he can never, I say, prove these Perceptions, have any real Cause without him, because that middle Term (...) will stand as much in need of another Term to prove its own existence, as that does which its brought to prove, and so *in infinitum*.<sup>50</sup>

Lee illustrates the problem as follows: suppose I wanted to prove that the perceptual experience of the pen in my hand is veridical. I might try to do this by pointing to 'its Writing, its visible effect'.

<sup>48</sup> *AS* 303.

<sup>49</sup> *AS* preface.

<sup>50</sup> *AS* 291.

However, this would miss the mark, because ‘if I don’t trust my Eye-sight in seeing the Pen, why should I trust it in seeing the Letters which are made by the drawing it’? Likewise, if I would try to argue that my writings must really exist, because I observe that others can read them out loud, I will have to offer yet another proof to the effect that the sounds I seem to hear and the men I appear to see actually exist. As this procedure may proceed *ad infinitum*, I will never be able to offer a definitive proof that my initial ‘Perception’ or ‘Idea’ of the pen was veridical.

These two arguments suggest that for Lee, the truth of (3) is not dependent on a representationalist reading of Locke. That of course means that according to Lee, Locke cannot steer clear of the sceptical problematic of SA2 by replacing representationalism for another account of cognition. This observation raises the question how Lee *does* think that Locke could have avoided the sceptical conclusion of SA2. His answer is that the veridicality of our cognitive states (ideas, thoughts, perceptual experiences) is principally not amenable to rational proof. Consequently, principles such as (2) are unreasonable and demand the impossible in principle. Recognizing this unreasonableness, Lee thinks, is ultimately the best remedy against arguments like SA2.

### **3.2. Locke’s ‘fear of wrong principles’**

Prior to 1688, authors such as Herbert of Cherbury and Robert Ferguson had assigned a foundational status to several innate speculative principles. Standard examples of such principles were the law of excluded middle, the maxim that the whole is greater than its part, and the proposition that nothing has no attributes.<sup>51</sup> These foundational principles, it was often believed, were somehow beyond rational scrutiny. Thus, Lord Herbert repeatedly referred to

<sup>51</sup> Cf. e.g. Herbert of Cherbury (1654: 70) and Ferguson (1696: 24).

them as ‘sacrosanct principles that may not be disputed’ and Ferguson held that ‘these are the Foundations and Measures of all Sciences, Knowledge and Discourse; being in themselves certain and incontestable. Nor is there any other proof to be Assigned to them besides their Consonancy to the Rational Faculty’.<sup>52</sup> In 1675, Joseph Glanvill added a more surprising example to his otherwise traditional list of speculative principles that ‘result out of the nature of our Minds’, namely, ‘*That our Faculties are true*’. This principle, he said ‘we *believe* firmly; but *cannot prove*, for all proof, and reasoning supposeth it’.<sup>53</sup>

In book I and chapter seven of book IV, Locke made it clear that he was no friend of such sacrosanct ‘Maxims’ or ‘*praecognita et praeconcessa*’.<sup>54</sup> Indeed they

eased the lazy from the pains of search, and stopp’d the enquiry of the doubtful, concerning all that was once stiled innate: And it was of no small advantage to those who affected to be Masters and Teachers, to make this the Principle of *Principles*, That Principles must not be questioned.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Herbert of Cherbury (1654: 60) (*principia illa sacro sancta contra quae disputare nefas*). Cf. also Herbert of Cherbury (1654: 54, 77) and Ferguson (1696: 23).

<sup>53</sup> Glanvill (1675: 48).

<sup>54</sup> These latter terms have an Aristotelian origin: Aristotle had said that ‘all teaching and learning of an intellectual kind proceed from pre-existent knowledge’ and had cited the law of excluded middle as an example of such knowledge. *Posterior Analytics* 71a1–2, 10–15; Aristotle (1994: 1). In seventeenth-century logic manuals, this ‘pre-existent knowledge’ was often referred to as ‘precognition’. E.g. Burgersdijck (1637: 225–57) (‘*De Praecognitionibus*’) and Smiglecius (1658: 491–2). Smiglecius cites the law of excluded middle as a ‘*communissimum & primum principium*’. There is a major difference between these logicians and the nativists Locke targets: though both countenance foundational principles, the latter ‘in accordance with the famous scholastic dictum *nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu* (...) denied that these maxims were innate’. Rickless (2007: 33).

<sup>55</sup> *E. I.* iv. 24, 101.

Locke's opposition to maxims was an important stumbling block for many of his readers. Thus, Lowde emphasized the importance of both innate moral and innate speculative principles ('the whole is greater than its part') and Sergeant, even though he applauded Locke's critique of nativism, felt that maxims such as 'what is, is' were the foundations of all our rational arguments.<sup>56</sup>

According to Lee, Locke had gone so far in his critique of maxims as to embrace the view that everything must be subjected to rational enquiry. Out of his fear of 'being imposed upon by Principles, by *Praecognita* and *Praeconcessa*', Locke was 'for supposing nothing, proving every thing'.<sup>57</sup> Lee thought this zeal fundamentally wrongheaded. According to him, God had implanted in our minds several speculative principles, principles which the mind 'in *all* its Reasonings, Arguings and Judgments *always* and *necessarily* supposes true'.<sup>58</sup> Among them were the usual candidates: 'It's impossible to be and not to be', 'The whole of any thing is bigger than its part' and 'Every Effect must have a Cause'.<sup>59</sup> Lee thought that such principles were not amenable to a rational proof. Our 'reason would fail' if we would try to prove rationally a principle that would of necessity have to be presupposed in the proof itself:

Our Reason fails when we go upon wrong Principles; for this often involves us in Contradictions. This concerns those that suppose what needs Proof, but not those that suppose nothing but what every Man does and must in all his

<sup>56</sup> Lowde (1694: 55, 79), Lowde (1699: 29), *SP* 363–79. Cf. Yolton (1993: 80–5).

<sup>57</sup> *AS* 299.

<sup>58</sup> *AS* 7. Thus, Yolton sees Sergeant, Lee, and Leibniz as providing a rationalist counterweight to Locke's empiricism. Yolton (1993: 80–6).

<sup>59</sup> *AS* 7.

Reasonings; and them also that out of a groundless fear of wrong Principles will pretend to prove every thing.<sup>60</sup>

Apart from the usual ones, Lee also listed a rather unusual example of an innate speculative principle: 'by *innate speculative* Principles, I mean only such *general* Truths, as the Mind in *all* its Reasonings, Arguings and Judgments *always* and *necessarily* supposes true, as it does the truth of its own Faculties'.<sup>61</sup> But if the 'truth of our faculties' is necessarily presupposed in all rational activity, it is not amenable to a rational proof:

the Mind does in all and every one of its Transactions unavoidably, whether it will or not, make that tacit Supposition; it does not require the least Proof of it, or indeed is capable of it, because it supposes it in all proofs in all its rational or deliberate acts whatever.<sup>62</sup>

Or again, regarding the veridicality of our perceptual experiences and thoughts: 'as the mind does never require any Proof it, so neither is it capable of any if it shou'd.' Anyone who nevertheless tries to buttress rationally the veridicality of his thoughts, perceptual experiences or ideas will ultimately have to suppose what he set out to prove. This, Lee believes, happened to Locke when the latter sought to show that 'we cannot be but assured, that they [*Ideas*] come in by the Organs of that Sense, and no other way'<sup>63</sup> on the basis of the premise that we cannot have ideas of roses, pineapples,

<sup>60</sup> AS 318.

<sup>61</sup> AS 7.

<sup>62</sup> AS 267. The similarity with Glanvill is striking (though quantitatively Glanvill's brief remark stands in no proportion to the emphasis that Lee lays on this point throughout *Anti-Scepticism*). Yet apart from this and Lee's avowed sympathy with the Royal Society (of which Glanvill was an eminent member), there is no evidence that Lee read Glanvill. Cf. AS 300.

<sup>63</sup> E. IV. xi. 4, 632.

or colours when there are none. Faced with this argument, Lee indignantly rebutted that if you want to prove that your ideas are veridical, you may not already presuppose a premise according to which you have *x*-ideas only when there actually are *x*'s around:

If he be for proving, I must take the liberty of denying; for I will be so bold as to say, that a Man may see Colours in the dark, smell Roses in Winter, or tast Pine-Apples in *England*, unless he'll suppose the truth of his Eye-sight smell and tast, and if he supposes that, he begs the Question again.<sup>64</sup>

To Lee, the fundamental unprovability of the veridicality of our cognitive acts meant that it was misguided to insist on proofs showing that our thoughts and perceptual experiences have external correlates. This comes to the fore in his treatment of SA2. This argument was based upon Locke's account of real knowledge as the agreement of two ideas of which we are assured that they have external referents. Since the veridicality of our ideas could never be established, the argument went on, real knowledge was an unattainable ideal. Having reached this sceptical conclusion, Lee wrote that 'it will be pertinently asked me, if we cannot know a real Truth by the way of *Ideas*; by what other way can we come to (...) Knowledge'. His answer was that philosophers ought to throw off their 'groundless fear of wrong principles', and accept that ultimately, our body of knowledge rests on an unproven assumption: that our faculties are 'true' and that our perceptual experiences and thoughts have genuine external correlates:

To which I give these plain and obvious Answers. We suppose the Truth of our Senses and other Faculties; and this I say is no precarious Supposition, because the Mind does in all and every one of its Transactions unavoidably, whether it will or not, make that tacit Supposition; it does not require the least Proof of it, or indeed is capable of it, because it supposes it in all proofs in all its rational or deliberate acts whatever. (...) Again, as to things without us,

<sup>64</sup> *AS* 289. Cf. also 289–90.

we do unavoidably suppose their Existence: as the mind does never require any Proof of it, so neither is it capable of any if it shou'd.<sup>65</sup>

Philosophers who are 'for supposing nothing, proving every thing' will inevitably fail to live up to their own principles, so that a refusal to make these assumptions will only lead to scepticism:

I cannot conceive how we should have either intuitive or rational Knowledge without supposing the existence of things without us (...) If the Existence of things without us be not first suppos'd, there can neither be any intuitive Knowledge, or any real Certainty at all.

Or again: 'Unless that sensitive Knowledge be first suppos'd to be real (...) all other sort of Knowledge is imaginary and groundless'.<sup>66</sup>

To take stock, we have seen that for Lee, the truth of (3)—the veridicality of ideas cannot be ascertained—did not hinge on a representationalist reading of Locke. Consequently, he did not think that the sceptical problem of SA2 could be solved by substituting representationalism for something else, like Sergeant's way of notions or Reid's direct realism. Instead, he thought that principles such as (2)—ideas can only give us knowledge when we can ascertain their veridicality – ought to be rejected. They formulate a demand that can in principle not be met. Philosophers like Locke ought to shake off their 'fear of groundless principles', and accept that our knowledge ultimately rests on a fundamentally unprovable assumption: our faculties are 'true', and our cognitive states are veridical. This is of course again an important difference with Sergeant, who had used (2) to criticize Locke. Lee's approach is widely different from Descartes's as well. This difference has not always been appreciated. Thus, Yolton believed that Lee, like Descartes, grounded the veridicality of our cognitive states on the

<sup>65</sup> AS 267.

<sup>66</sup> AS 289, 334, 335.

veracity of a benign God.<sup>67</sup> Yet a closer look at Lee's text reveals that he did not so much appeal to the veracity of God, as to the 'supposed veracity of God'.<sup>68</sup> And it looks as if, for Lee, the supposed veracity of God is nothing different from the supposed veracity of our senses. He writes that the 'Truth of our Senses and other Natural Faculties' and the 'veracity of the Author of Nature' are 'in the last result (...) much the same'.<sup>69</sup> Elsewhere he speaks of 'a presupposition of the Truth of our Faculties, or in other Words, the veracity of the Author of Nature'.<sup>70</sup>

But Lee's argument raises an important question. Is it really fair to immunize the veridicality of our cognitive states from rational enquiry by elevating it to the ranks of 'such *general* Truths, as the Mind in *all* its Reasonings, Arguings and Judgments *always* and *necessarily* supposes true'? It seems that Lee owes his reader an account of why he thinks the principle that our perceptual experiences and thoughts have extramental correlates plays such a fundamental role in all our rational activities. In section 3.3, I suggest that *Anti-Scepticism* offers an interesting answer to that question.

### 3.3. Truth, Falsity, and Veridicality

At one point in *Anti-Scepticism*, Lee wrote: 'I suppose the real Existence of things without me, and that they are such as by my own Senses and the use of my natural Faculties they are represented; for this is the Ground and Foundation of all Reasonings. And 'tis to no Purpose to talk of Reason, of Truth or

<sup>67</sup> Yolton (1993: 113).

<sup>68</sup> *AS* 268, emphasis added.

<sup>69</sup> *AS* 322.

<sup>70</sup> *AS* 249, emphasis added.

Falshood, but on that Supposal'.<sup>71</sup> But why would Lee say that 'tis to no Purpose to talk of Reason, of Truth or Falshood' but on the assumption that our perceptual experiences and thoughts are veridical? In order to answer that question, we must look at how Lee understands the concepts of 'true', and 'false'. In *Anti-Scepticism*, we read that 'Truth is the Connexion or Disjunction of things really so related, as they are connected in affirmative, and disjoin'd in negative Propositions'.<sup>72</sup> This definition is by no means original: in Franco Burgersdijck's popular logic handbook<sup>73</sup> one reads the following:

*Ax. 1.* A true Enunciation is that which conjoyns things which are of their own Nature conjoyn'd, or divides those things which are of their own Nature divided. *Ax. 2.* A False, that conjoyns those things which are divided as before, or divides those things which are conjoyn'd.<sup>74</sup>

Presumably, this definition was at the back of Lee's mind. There is, however, one element on which Lee lays more stress than Burgersdijck had done: according to Lee, the concept of 'truth' is applicable only to propositions whose subject- and predicate-terms refer to real things:

Truth is the Conjunction or Disjunction of Words that are terminated in things.<sup>75</sup>

Clearly, if 'truth' is defined in this way, it becomes problematic to say of propositions whose terms fail to refer (e.g. 'chimeras are

<sup>71</sup> *AS* 336.

<sup>72</sup> *AS* 293.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Feingold (1993).

<sup>74</sup> Burgersdijck (1701: 119–20).

<sup>75</sup> *AS* 240.

monsters', 'the perfect circle has such or such properties') that they are true. Lee is fully prepared to accept this consequence. Thus, he disagrees with Locke's view that the moral rules of Cicero's *De Officiis* would be true even in case there were no humans to live up to them:<sup>76</sup>

But I say they [Cicero's rules] are no farther true than 'tis possible for Persons to observe them (...). But still my Author has another Fetch; he says that those (...) are general Propositions, in which *Existence* is not concerned. But surely in that he has taken wrong Measures; for (...) it would not be a true real or certain Proposition, *that the whole was equal to all its parts*, if there be not, or ever was a Body in the World that is, or was a whole, or had or has parts; nor that *Two Parallel Lines will never meet*, but upon Supposition that there are or were Parallel Lines...<sup>77</sup>

Or again:

[T]he Mind does, and must suppose the existence of those things which it compares, else it could never make Affirmations or Negations; it could never judge Twenty more then Ten, or one Line, Angle or Figure bigger than another, if it did not suppose the Existence of things numerable and Quantities mensurable.<sup>78</sup>

Although the former passages leave open the possibility that 'the whole is equal to all its parts' or '20>10' are false in case there are no wholes and parts or quantities of ten and twenty, what Lee actually wants to say is that such propositions are neither true nor false when their subjects or predicates do not refer to extramentally existing objects:

<sup>76</sup> E. IV. iv. 8, 566.

<sup>77</sup> AS 259.

<sup>78</sup> AS 289, cf. 311.

'tis not, I say, a true or indeed a false Proposition in *Idea* only, that the Three Angles of a Triangle are equal to Two right ones; for if there be not, or cannot be out of the Mind, *in rerum natura*, Two right Angles, there can be no true Proposition form'd about them; because Truth is nothing else but connecting things that are really connected, or disjoyning things really disjoyn'd.<sup>79</sup>

Let me note in passing that what Lee is saying here is not strange in the light of what seventeenth-century handbooks on logic had to say about truth. Many of the logic handbooks widely used in early modern England—like those of Burgersdijck, Heereboord Wallis, and Smiglecius—were of an outspokenly scholastic imprint,<sup>80</sup> as can be seen from their rather stepmotherly treatment of propositions whose terms fail to refer. For instance, in his *Institutio Logicae*, John Wallis writes that the sentence 'a goat-stag is something composed of a goat and a stag' is true in so far as the concepts 'goat-stag' and 'something composed of a goat and a stag' are in harmony, but false in so far as there are no goat-stags.<sup>81</sup> In Martin Smiglecius' *Logica* we find an example that is even more pertinent to Lee. There, we learn that propositions about mental constructions or impossible things (*enunciationes quae sunt de entibus rationis, aut de entibus impossibilibus*) can only derivatively be said to be 'true' or 'false' (*tantum proportionaliter et similitudinariae*).<sup>82</sup>

We are now in a position to return to the problem raised at the end of section 3.2. There it was asked whether Lee was not illegitimately immunizing the veridicality of our cognitive acts from rational scrutiny by declaring it to be a foundational principle that,

<sup>79</sup> AS 242.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Ashworth (1989), Nuchelmans (1998). This is nicely illustrated by Henry Aldrich's *Artis Logicae Compendium* (1691): the work's frontispiece featured a bust of Aristotle, and the preface ends with a list of 23 important scholastic logicians, including Peter of Spain and William of Ockham.

<sup>81</sup> Wallis (1687: 219).

<sup>82</sup> Smiglecius (1658: 458).

since it is presupposed in all rational activity, is not liable to rational justification. It seemed Lee must answer the question why he thinks the principle that our perceptual experiences and thoughts have extramental correlates plays such a fundamental role in all our rational activities. We can now see what that answer is. According to Lee, saying of a sentence that it is either true or false makes no sense if its terms fail to refer. 'Ravens are black' or ' $2+2=4$ ' are true or false only if there are ravens, black objects, pairs and quadruples. In other words: the cognitive acts expressed in the sentences of which we say that they are either true or false<sup>83</sup> must have external correlates. They must be veridical, that is. Since the concepts of 'truth' and 'falsity' indeed seem fundamental to rational activity, it appears reasonable to hold that the assumption that our cognitive acts are veridical crucially underlies the rational acts that we engage in.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have seen that although Sergeant and Lee agreed that Locke's *Essay* harboured a pernicious scepticism about our knowledge of external reality, they disagreed about its source and the consequent way of coping with it. Sergeant believed that Locke's representationalism caused the harm and sought to avoid Locke's scepticism by restoring an Aristotelian theory of cognition. We have suggested that it is doubtful whether this attempt (not unlike that undertaken by Thomas Reid) was successful. Thus, the difference between Sergeant and Lee gains philosophical salience. After all, Lee's charge of scepticism did not hinge upon a representationalist reading of Locke. Lee thought that the source of Locke's sceptical problems was the latter's zeal to prove everything rationally. This

<sup>83</sup> According to Lee, 'Ideas are the signs of the things, as Words are the signs of the *Ideas* or Thoughts'. *AS* 240.

was misguided, Lee believed. Ultimately, the best remedy to steer clear of sceptical worries was to realize that our body of knowledge rests on an assumption that is fundamentally unprovable: our faculties are 'true' and our thoughts and perceptual experiences are veridical. To insist on a rational proof for this assumption, Lee contended, is to misunderstand the fundamental role they play in all our rational activities. Indeed, Lee was among those thinkers who, like Glanvill and Hume, felt that

our 'beliefs' in the existence of body (...) are not grounded beliefs and at the same time are not open to serious doubt. They are, one might say, outside our critical and rational competence in the sense that they define, or help to define, the area in which that competence is exercised. To attempt to confront the professional sceptical doubt with arguments in support of these beliefs, with rational justifications, is simply to show a total misunderstanding of the role they actually play in our belief-systems.<sup>84</sup>

This result once more brings to our notice that, even though Lee's name is not widely known, his was an interesting voice in the Early Modern philosophical debate.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Strawson (2008: 15).

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