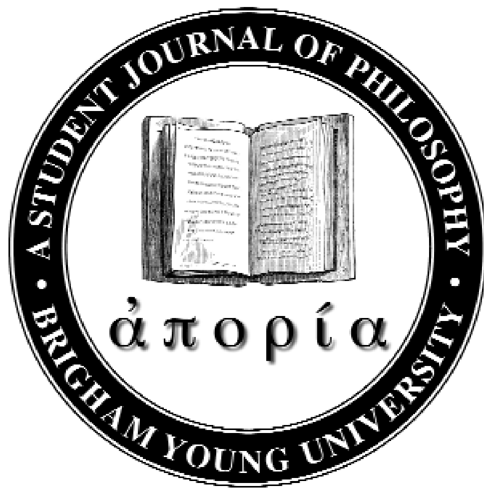
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Absolute Simplicity in Locke's Theory of Ideas

João Paulo Alves Pereira

Issues pertaining to the distinction between the simple and the complex are crucial in philosophy. Philosophers of the early modern period are notorious for using this distinction when building their philosophical programs. They generally classify certain things as simple and others as complex and then explain whatever is complex in terms of whatever is simple. What one takes as simple, as fundamental, defines the type of philosophical program one will build. Sometimes, different choices about what is to be considered as fundamental result in radically different philosophical programs. For instance, Leibniz starts his *Monadology* by making the simple/complex distinction. He claims that since there are composites, they must be composed of simple substances (monads). These substances, then, are the basis of explanation for Leibniz. Differing from this view, we have Locke's take on substance. He claims that our ideas of substances are inherently complex and that there must be simples which account for such ideas. Because Leibniz takes the notion of substance as simple and Locke does not, their programs will inevitably be different—for Leibniz substance does the explaining whereas for Locke the idea of substance itself must be explained. Thus, misunderstandings regarding both what the simples are and the nature of those simples can mislead one in the interpretation of a

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philosophical system. It is very important, then, that we correctly understand the nature of the simple.

When it comes to Locke's theory of ideas, the nature of the simples has proven to be a particularly controversial issue in secondary literature. Different interpretations of the nature of the simples lead to different interpretations of other aspects of his theory, such as compositionalism. "Compositionalism" is a name given to Locke's classification of some ideas as simple (e.g., colors, smells, and sounds) and others as complex (e.g., a rose), and his explanation of complex ideas in terms of simple ideas: complex ideas are composed of simple ideas. For instance, a combination of certain colors, a certain smell, and a certain tactile feel composes the idea of, say, a rose. However, the extent to which Locke is committed to compositionalism is a controversial issue. Some claim that Locke's program is compositionalist in the strong sense. According to this view, there are only two types of ideas: simple and complex. Also, these two classes are exclusive and exhaustive. Let us call this version "strong compositionalism". Others believe that Locke is not fully committed to compositionalism. Such commentators claim that after some revisions of the *Essay* Locke came to hold a weakened version of compositionalism in which ideas do not have to be so rigidly classified as either simple or complex. According to this view, not all non-simple ideas have to be complex. Let us call this version "weak compositionalism."[1]

As I suggested above, one of the reasons why this longstanding controversy about the extent of Locke's commitment to compositionalism still lingers is because commentators have different views about the nature of the simple ideas. One such commentator is Nicholas Jolley, who believes that Locke holds weak compositionalism. This belief is related to Jolley's understanding of simple ideas. He believes that Lockean simple ideas are "relatively" simple; in other words, simple ideas are divisible. We will soon see that this interpretation of the simple ideas is consistent with a weak version of compositionalism. The question, though, is whether simple ideas are relatively simple or absolutely simple—having no separable parts.

[1] This weakened version of compositionalism adopted by Nicholas Jolley is suggested by R. I. Aaron.

Why does Jolley think simple ideas are relatively simple? One of Jolley's main goals in his discussion of Locke's theory of ideas is to defend him against the unfair treatment of other philosophers. Jolley says that others have unfairly regarded Locke's theory of ideas "as a series of muddles" (*Locke: His Philosophical Life* 29).[2] In order to save Locke from a damaging objection raised by another commentator, D. J. O'Connor, Jolley attributes to Locke the thesis of relative simplicity, the view that simple ideas have parts.

However, Jolley's position is problematic because relative simplicity is inconsistent with his own views regarding the origin of complex ideas. More importantly, the adoption of relative simplicity leads Locke to difficulties regarding the distinction between simple and complex ideas. Such a distinction is essential to a compositionalist system because one must be able to distinguish simple and complex ideas before one can explain how the former accounts for the latter. In order to avoid these problems, I propose the adoption of absolute simplicity, the view that simple ideas do not have parts. Absolute simplicity not only avoids confusions regarding the so important distinction between simple and complex ideas but is also more consistent with Locke's own claims in the *Essay*.

This paper is organized as follows: in Section I, I will discuss both Jolley's view on the origin of complex ideas and his reasons for adopting relative simplicity. Then, in the light of this discussion, three arguments will be provided that refute the viability of attributing relative simplicity to Locke. In Section II, an alternative way of dealing with O'Connor's objection, one that avoids the erroneous adoption of relative simplicity, will be provided. In Section III, I will consider the consequences of rejecting relative simplicity for Jolley's account of compositionalism and abstract ideas. In Section IV, I will consider some concluding thoughts regarding a possible revision of Jolley's interpretation that would be beneficial.

[2] Further references to this work will be cited simply as "Jolley" followed by the page number. Similarly, all other works will be referred to initially by their full title and subsequently by only the name of their author followed by the number of the page cited.

I. Refutation of the Relative Simplicity Thesis

Jolley claims that simple ideas are the only ones that are given to us directly from either sensation or reflection. All complex ideas are the result of the mind processing the simple ideas, the raw materials from sensation or reflection, through various operations. In other words, the mind is passive with respect to all and only its simple ideas and active with respect to complex ideas, which are formed by the various operations of the mind on the simple ideas (Jolley 46). The result of this is that all and only simple ideas are furnished by sensation. Complex ideas are *not* given in sensation; they are the result of the activity of the mind.

Other commentators, like Vere Chappell, have a different view of the origin of complex ideas. Chappell implicitly asserts that there are two types of complex ideas: those coming from sensation (e.g., a rose) and those coming from reflection (e.g., fictions). He claims that complex ideas from sensation come into our minds ready-made and that the mind does not have to employ any of its operations to form them. According to Chappell, the mind only has to employ its operations in the production of complex ideas from reflection. Thus, the mind is passive with respect to some complex ideas. Sensation, then, furnishes us with some complex ideas ("Locke's Theory of Ideas" 37–8). As we have seen above, Jolley holds the competing view that the mind is active with respect to all of its complex ideas. Sensation, then, does not furnish us with complex ideas, as Chappell claims. Jolley's view is more compatible with what Locke says in the *Essay* about the origin of ideas than Chappell's view, as will be argued below.

Now that we have a better understanding of Jolley's view on the origin of complex ideas, let us see what he means by a relatively simple idea in light of what motivated him to attribute relative simplicity to Locke. Jolley adopts the thesis of relative simplicity in order to defend Locke against a criticism raised by O'Connor. In his objection, O'Connor claims that the examples Locke provides for simple ideas do not fit the main criterion Locke gives us for what a simple idea is. According to Jolley, Locke thinks that the main criterion for the classification of ideas into simple ones is based on experience: "simple ideas contain in themselves nothing but one uniform appearance or conception in the mind" (45). O'Connor's objection not only says that the examples provided by Locke for simple

ideas do not fit this criterion, but, as Jolley himself recognizes, it implies that "perhaps nothing in our experience strictly does so" (46). Let us consider O'Connor's attack on Locke and Jolley's response to it, respectively.

First, O'Connor considers the examples Locke gives when simple ideas are first discussed in the *Essay*. Locke says that the coldness and hardness of a piece of ice, the smell and whiteness of a lily, the taste of sugar, and the smell of a rose are all simple ideas because they have "*one uniform appearance*," the criterion for simplicity (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II.ii.1). Here is where O'Connor disagrees. O'Connor finds that experience shows us that "simple sense data such as these [examples]…rarely present one uniform character indistinguishable into parts which differ sensibly one from another, be it ever so slightly" (*John Locke* 47). Second, O'Connor implies that perhaps nothing, not only Locke's examples, present such a character. He says that even if there was a certain colored patch completely uniform in hue, which O'Connor probably believes cannot be experienced, this patch would not be uncompounded because it would be made up of smaller patches and, in that sense, would be spatially compounded (47). Jolley focuses on this latter aspect of the objection.

If O'Connor's objection holds, Locke's simple ideas simply do not exist. Even ideas that are uniform in appearance are spatially compounded. If this were true, it would be devastating for Locke's position; without simples, any compositionalist program becomes fatally jeopardized, as one clearly cannot build something (the complex) out of nothing (the nonexistent simple). As Jolley recognizes, though, compositionalism is extremely important for Locke's program because it enables him to explain how we arrive at ideas that are supposedly innate (e.g., triangles). "In terms of [his compositionalism Locke] can explain how the mind is not limited to receiving what is given in experience…it can frame radically new content by combining or otherwise processing its simple ideas" (Jolley 48).

In order to save Locke from O'Connor, Jolley suggests that perhaps Locke does not think that simple ideas are absolutely simple. Perhaps, Jolley says, Locke considers simple ideas to be relatively simple. Let us see what this relative simplicity amounts to and how Jolley thinks it could save Locke from O'Connor's objection. Absolute simplicity with respect to simple ideas would take them to be indivisible, uncompounded, foundational units out of which complex ideas are made. Relative simplicity, on the other hand, would take them to be divisible and compounded units, but

nevertheless units that form complex ideas. As Jolley says, a relatively simple idea is to a complex idea as a brick is to a wall. We consider the brick to be a unit with respect to the wall even though the brick is composed of smaller parts (Jolley 46). Relative simplicity, then, would save Locke from O'Connor's objection because the colored patch could still be considered a simple idea even though it is spatially compounded. This solution is ingenious, but it is not one without its own difficulties.

This view is inconsistent with Jolley's denial of Chappell. In order to elucidate this inconsistency, let us consider the following argument: just like Chappell's complex ideas from sensation, any given relatively simple idea must be composed of parts (or else it would be absolutely simple). According to Jolley, "to speak of a complex idea is to speak of a single, unified idea, and Locke is clear that it is the mind which imposes the unity on elements which are given in experience" (47). Thus, the mind is active in the production of complex ideas. Now, given that Jolley himself claims that the mind is passive with respect to all and only its simple ideas, relatively simple ideas are multipart ideas that are not unified by the mind. What about Chappell's complex ideas from sensation, what are they? They are also multipart ideas that are not unified by the mind in that they come in ready-made from sensation. Thus, we can see that Jolley's relatively simple ideas are tantamount to Chappell's complex ideas from sensation. They differ in name alone. Jolley cannot hold the thesis of relative simplicity if he wants to reject Chappell's complex ideas from sensation. The only way we can refute Chappell is by adopting the thesis of absolute simplicity. By doing so, one can say that the mind is active with respect to ideas that have parts (complex ideas) and passive with respect to ideas that do not have parts (absolutely simple ideas). Thus, the thesis of relative simplicity and Jolley's rejection of Chappell are incompatible.

The choice, then, is between refuting Chappell's view that complex ideas come from sensation or keeping Jolley's idea of relative simplicity. The former course of action fits better with certain passages in Locke's *Essay*. For instance, Locke says that by compounding (which is an operation of the mind) "*all* complex ideas are made" (II.xii.1, emphasis added). Additionally, Locke states that "Though the mind be wholly passive, in respect of its simple ideas...it is *not* so in respect of its complex ideas" (II.xxx.3, emphasis added). These two passages make it clear that Locke holds that the mind is indeed active with respect to all of its complex ideas.

Thus, we see that we should refute Chappell if we have any intentions to be truthful to the text, which forces us to give up relative simplicity.

The second problem with attributing relative simplicity to Locke is that it conflicts with a reasonable interpretation of some of what Locke says in his discussion of simple ideas. For instance, Locke says that simple ideas are "each in itself *uncompounded*" (II.ii.1, emphasis added). He also says that "the ideas [that the qualities that affect our senses] produce in the mind, enter by the senses simple and *unmixed*" (ibid., emphasis added). In both passages, the italicized words suggest absolute simplicity. If ideas are uncompounded and unmixed, then they do not have parts. Any idea that does not have parts cannot be relatively simple. Furthermore, Locke says at one point that one's mind can neither destroy nor invent simple ideas (II.ii.2). In saying this, Locke draws a parallel with the physical world. He says that man's "power…reaches no further, than to compound and divide the materials, that are made to his hand; but can do nothing towards the making the least particle of new matter, or destroying one *atom* of what is already in being" (ibid., emphasis added). This comparison between our inability to destroy simple ideas and our alleged inability to destroy atoms cries out for absolute simplicity. Simple ideas are to the mind as atoms are to the physical world. Our simple ideas are, like atoms—at least as Locke understood them—indivisible and uncompounded, and, for this reason, they are indestructible by the effect of the mind.

The third problem created by the adoption of relative simplicity is a conceptual problem in Locke's theory. As we have seen, in order to save Locke from the objection that his view does not match how we actually experience things, Jolley attributes to him relative simplicity. However, in doing so, Jolley leads Locke's view to an internal conceptual problem. If Locke holds relative simplicity, then any given simple idea can be subdivided into and is composed of an infinite number of smaller ideas, for if such subdivision had an end point, then the end point would be absolutely simple; as a result, we would have absolute simplicity. Now, consider a complex idea that has relatively simple ideas as parts. Given that relatively simple ideas can be subdivided ad infinitum, this complex idea would be composed of an infinite number of ideas. However, any given simple idea that composes it would also be composed of an infinite number of ideas. How, then, could we differentiate these two ideas in terms of which one composes which? There would be no criterion for doing so if both contained the

same infinite number of ideas. Why should we consider the one idea foundational with respect to the other? How can the part have the same amount of parts as the whole? This would make simple and complex ideas indistinguishable. But simple and complex ideas must be distinguishable for compositionalism to make any sense.

As we see, the attribution of relative simplicity to Locke is not a good interpretation. First, such a move is inconsistent with another view that Jolley himself holds, namely his refutation of Chappell's claim that some complex ideas are given in sensation. Second, relative simplicity conflicts with a reasonable interpretation of some of Locke's claims in the *Essay*. Third, relative simplicity needlessly draws Locke into a conceptual problem regarding the distinction between simple and complex ideas. Simple ideas must be absolutely simple.

II. Is Locke Doomed?

I believe sufficient reasons were provided for attributing the doctrine of absolute simplicity to Locke. However, relative simplicity was Jolley's way of saving Locke from O'Connor's objection. After rejecting Jolley's solution, must we automatically conclude that O'Connor's objection works? Does adopting absolute simplicity entail that Locke is susceptible to O'Connor? I think the answer is no. I believe that Jolley needlessly tried to solve a pseudo-problem arising from O'Connor's objection. Consequently, a rejection of Jolley does not entail a rejection of Locke.

O' Connor says that a patch of red (even if it is uniform in appearance) cannot be simple because it is spatially compounded. Let us look closely at what a patch of red would be in terms of Locke's distinction of ideas. A patch of red is made out of at least two ideas: extension and the color red. Thus, we have two ideas forming a new idea: a red patch. Since, then, the red patch is formed by at least these two distinct ideas, it cannot be simple (in the absolute sense). This idea is instead complex. O'Connor, however, asserts that a red patch is a simple idea. If we accept this claim, then it seems that the only way we can account for how a red patch can be spatially compounded and still be a simple idea is by attributing relative simplicity to Locke. However, if one adopts absolute simplicity, one does not even have to address this problem. We would say to ourselves: "of course a patch of red is compounded; after all, it is a complex idea. It is the

character of complex ideas to be compounded and to be able to be subdivided. This," we would say, "is not a real problem."

One could say that I should not consider a patch of red as composed of two distinct ideas. "If that is the case," one would say, "we would never experience a simple idea of red by itself because we always experience the color red spread out in space. A patch of red, then, is better conceived as one idea," the objector would conclude. Let us see what Locke has to say about this: "'Tis true, solidity cannot exist without extension, neither can scarlet colour exist without extension; but this hinders not, but that they are distinct ideas. Many ideas require others as necessary to their existence or conception, which yet are very distinct ideas" (II.xiii.11).

In short, O'Connor erroneously claims that a patch of red is one simple idea. Jolley accepts that claim and, in order to account for how it is compounded, attributes relative simplicity to Locke. In doing so, Jolley draws himself and Locke into problems. If Jolley had not accepted O'Connor's claim that a patch of red is one simple idea, then he would not have to go through the pains of attributing relative simplicity to Locke. He would rightly refuse to recognize O'Connor's objection as a real problem in the first place.[3]

[3] Perhaps one who sympathizes with O'Connor might want to carry his objection against Locke to a further level. "Let us agree," the objector would say, "that a patch of red is indeed a complex idea and that O'Connor made a mistake in thinking that it is a simple idea. This, however, does not mean that there are simple ideas as Locke claims. A patch of red," he would add, "is composed of the simple idea of extension plus that of the color red. Even though extension is taken as simple here, it is spatially compounded. As a matter of fact, " he would notice, "any given portion of extension is spatially compounded. Extension, then, cannot be a simple idea since it is always compounded. Therefore," he would conclude, "O'Connor's objection against Locke still holds when applied to extension instead of the patch of red." Locke provides us with an answer to this objection in an important footnote where he discusses duration and extension. A simple idea is said to be uncompounded. However, the term "composition" in this definition means "composition of different ideas in the

III. Absolute Simplicity and a Strong Version of Compositionalism

Upon reading Jolley's discussion of O'Connor's objection, one will come to realize that Jolley only suggests that Locke might hold the thesis of relative simplicity. Jolley does not explicitly assert that he is convinced that Locke in fact holds that view. Based on this, one might accuse me of arguing against a view to which Jolley is not even fully committed. It seems as though I am imposing the thesis of relative simplicity on Jolley just because he suggests its possibility. However, I believe that behind what appears to be a mere suggestion is a full commitment on Jolley's part to relative simplicity. This is the case because Jolley's interpretation of other issues in the *Essay*, particularly his account of compositionalism and abstract ideas, shows an underlying assumption of relative simplicity. Jolley's interpretation of such issues cannot be maintained unless relative simplicity is also maintained. Let us examine his account of such issues and why his interpretation must be rejected by those who adopt the thesis of absolute simplicity.

Let us start with the notion of compositionalism. Strong compositionalism would maintain that all ideas are either simple or complex, with the complex ideas composed of the simple ones. Jolley thinks that Locke held this view in the first editions of the *Essay* but then gave it up in the fourth edition and adopted a weak form of compositionalism (45). As Jolley has it, this form of weak compositionalism divides ideas into two categories: simple and non-simple. However, not all non-simple ideas are complex, as is the

mind, and not a composition of the same kind in a thing whose essence consists in having parts of the same kind, where you can never come to a part entirely exempted from this composition" (Locke II.xv.9). The idea of extension does not contain any idea of a different kind in it; it only has parts that are of the same kind. Extension, then, is not compounded in Locke's signification of the word. It is, therefore, a simple idea. Even if we consider a portion of extension to be complex, it does not follow that there are no simples. In this case, Locke says that the least portion of extension that we could have a clear and distinct idea of would be considered the simple out of which our idea of a bigger portion of extension would be made. Even though extension can indeed be conceptually subdivided indefinitely, it cannot, according to Locke, be so subdivided when it comes to perception (Locke II.xv.9).

case in strong compositionalism. Non-simple ideas can be classified as complex ideas, abstract ideas, or relations. This type of compositionalism, however, can only be held if one holds the thesis of relative simplicity. This view is not compatible with the thesis of absolute simplicity because, given that only the simples are indivisible, any non-simple is necessarily divisible and therefore complex. Absolute simplicity necessarily takes any non-simple as complex. Thus, we cannot hold absolute simplicity and weak compositionalism at the same time. The adoption of absolute simplicity forces us to reject weak compositionalism. We must, then, adopt strong compositionalism if we are to hold absolute simplicity at all as I have argued.

Let us now consider Jolley's account of abstract ideas. Jolley claims that "ideas at the highest level of abstraction have something in common with simple ideas; they are free from complexity—they are not strictly compounded from simpler elements" (54). Jolley makes this assertion because, according to him, Locke gives us two different accounts for how abstract ideas are formed, the selective attention account and the elimination account. In Jolley's view, the elimination account consists of considering a group of objects and forging an idea that represents an element that is common among them. For example, from a lion, an elephant, and a duck we can forge the abstract idea of animal. In this case, the abstract idea is complex since it is "a product, of a number of various particular ideas" (Jolley 51). The process of selective attention, according to him, consists of focusing our attention on a particular characteristic of a thing, e.g., the color white in a piece of chalk, and using that idea (that particular white) as a representative for all similar ideas in other objects, e.g., the white in a flower. When we use the white of the piece of chalk in this way, we create an abstract idea. This shows why Jolley makes the assertion that some abstract ideas lack complexity (white, for instance, is simple). If Jolley's account of what he calls "the selective attention account" is correct, then it seems that some abstract ideas are in fact similar to simple ideas, at least in the sense that they lack complexity. It seems that what determines the classification of some ideas as abstract or simple is whether or not they are functioning to represent other ideas. In this view, there is no difference of the idea *as* idea. This, however, leads to some problems for those who hold the absolute simplicity thesis. As we have seen, we cannot hold weak compositionalism if we hold absolute simplicity. Since all ideas must be either simple or complex, abstract ideas cannot be considered as a separate category

besides these two. If they are to be considered as non-simple as Jolley asserts, then they must necessarily be complex.

What about Jolley's explanation of the selective attention account? Did he not show us that some abstract ideas do in fact lack complexity when they are forged by selective attention? Jolley might have overlooked something in his interpretation of the selective attention account. I believe that selective attention does not result in an abstract idea that lacks complexity. The end product of this process is an abstract idea that is complex. Locke gives us an important hint that this is the case right after his discussion of the selective attention account. There, he considers whether or not animals abstract. He says the following: "If it may be doubted, whether *beasts* compound and enlarge their ideas that way, to any degree: This, I think, I may be positive in, that the power of *abstracting* is not at all in them" (II.xi.10). Since this passage follows his discussion of abstraction by selective attention, we must believe the words "that way" refer to the operation of abstraction. This passage suggests that abstraction either involves or is itself a type of enlarging and compounding. This process, then, must produce complex ideas.

Unfortunately, Locke does not explicitly tell us how compounding and enlarging are involved in this process. Nevertheless, there is certainly one thing that differentiates simple ideas from abstract ones. An abstract idea has a certain relation with the other ideas that it represents—namely, the relation of being a representative of such ideas—while a simple idea does not have that relation. What differentiates simple and abstract ideas, then, is a relation. Thus, it seems reasonable to think that some abstract ideas that seem to lack complexity are composed of at least two elements: a simple idea plus a relation. This is a reasonable interpretation that is compatible with both Locke's tacit claim that abstraction involves compounding (which makes abstract ideas complex) and with strong compositionalism. Abstract ideas, then, are not considered as a separate class. Instead, they are classified as complex ideas. However, it is unclear whether Locke believed abstract ideas to have other elements besides the ones mentioned above.

IV. Conclusion

Jolley is correct in refuting Chappell's claim that some complex ideas come into our minds ready-made from sensation. As Jolley said, Locke is

clear that only simple ideas are given in sensation and that the mind imposes the unity of all complex ideas (46–7). For this reason, he should change his approach for answering O'Connor's objection. As we have seen, adopting relative simplicity ultimately forces us to agree with Chappell's view. I have demonstrated how Jolley could adopt the thesis of absolute simplicity and yet be able to respond to (or, rather, dismiss) O'Connor's objection against Locke. In doing so, however, Jolley would have to revise his account of compositionalism and some aspects of his account of abstraction. Nevertheless, this revision would be beneficial for Jolley because it would allow his objections against Chappell and against O'Connor to cohere. Ultimately, Jolley can either keep his views about simple ideas, compositionalism, and abstraction as they are and accept Chappell's claim or revise some aspects of his views so he can properly refute Chappell. Since certain passages in the *Essay* make Chappell's view very unlikely, my recommendation is the adoption of absolute simplicity. As we have seen, this adoption settles the controversy about Locke's commitment to compositionalism. Ultimately, this better understanding of the nature of the simples leads us to a strong compositionalist interpretation of the *Essay*.

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