LOCKE’S IDEATIONAL ACCOUNT OF CAUSATION

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Abstract
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Locke’s Ideational Account of Causation
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Commentators have long alleged that Locke has no consistent or coherent account of causation. My purpose in this paper is to challenge this claim and present a new interpretation of Locke on causation. The key feature of my interpretation is that it situates Locke’s account of causation squarely within his theory of ideas. First, I will discuss the work of previous commentators and explain why they found Locke’s account to be a failure. Then, primarily through a close examination of Book II Chapter 26 of the Essay, I will offer an alternative account of Locke’s view of causation. I will spend considerable time demonstrating and defending the ideational nature of this account. Finally, I will consider the implications my reading has for Lockeian perception and an objection which pertains to the nature of real ideas.
Acknowledgements

Above all I would like to thank Alan Nelson for his help at every stage of this thesis. I am also grateful to Cathay Liu and Luke Elson for numerous helpful discussions. Those familiar with the work of Ken Brown will understand the depth of my indebtedness to him and his strict interpretation of Locke. Finally, I would like to thank the librarians in Special Collections at the Duke University Libraries for allowing me to examine original copies of Lee’s book and Sergeant’s book. Although both books are available in facsimile and online these are dull substitutes for being allowed to actually sit down with such treasures.
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Commentators have long alleged that Locke has no consistent or coherent account of causation. My purpose in this paper is to challenge this claim and present a new interpretation of Locke on causation. The key feature of my interpretation is that it situates Locke’s account of causation squarely within his theory of ideas. I will proceed as follows. First, I will discuss the work of previous commentators and explain why they found Locke’s account to be a failure. Then, primarily through a close examination of Book II Chapter 26 of the *Essay*, I will offer an alternative account of Locke’s view of causation. I will spend considerable time demonstrating and defending the ideational nature of this account. Historical evidence from Locke’s drafts and early critics will be used to defend the plausibility of my reading. Finally, I will consider the implications my reading has for Lockean perception and an objection which pertains to the nature of real ideas.

Locke’s account of causation has received little attention in the secondary literature. Compared to more popular topics like substance, abstraction, personal identity, and the primary-secondary quality distinction causation has been largely ignored. Discussions of causation in the early modern period tend to be discussions about Hume. Hume’s analysis of causation is much more sophisticated than those found in his predecessors. And Hume’s views have had significant historical resonance. So, in a sense, it is unsurprising that Locke’s account would go overlooked, or would be examined not on its own merits and in the context of the *Essay*, but rather in comparison to or as a predecessor to Hume’s account.¹

¹ Cf. Coventry 2003 pages 97-99 for citations to those concerned with making the comparison.
What little reception Locke’s account has enjoyed, however, has been largely negative. As far back as 1937 R. I. Aaron called the language in II.26 “laborious and unsatisfactory” and concludes that “Locke’s theory of causality fails because his analysis of our experience of the causal relation fails.”2 D. J. O’Connor says that Locke’s account of causation is “one of the least satisfying features of the Essay.”3 Michael Ayers writes that the account of cause and effect is “unemphatic”, “unsatisfying” and “hardly more than an appendix to the chapter on ideas of relations.”4 Much more recently, Angela Coventry notes previous negative reviews and concurs, claiming that the account is “brief and lacking in depth.”5

The source of discontent for most of these commentators is the same. The complaint most often voiced is that Locke, though he tries to be a realist about causation, simply fails to provide an account of causation between bodies or causation between bodies and minds. The consensus is that Locke believes we experience real causal powers in the mind but that when he tries to extrapolate out and claim that we experience real causal powers in bodies he fails. Collins sums this perspective up as nicely as anyone when he writes that: “Locke is not content to let the analysis [of causation] remain only within the realm of ideas. His examination of alteration among ideas is intended to lead to the affirmation of real causal agents and operations.”6 The complaint is that Locke fails in his intentions and “the

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2 Aaron 1937, pages 182, 187.
3 O’Connor 1967, page 94.
5 Coventry 2003, page 96.
transition from ideal to real causation is not adequately made.”\(^7\) Aaron echoes the same point by claiming that at the most crucial moment in his account of causation Locke fails to deliver and instead he merely “lapses into his accustomed agnosticism about the external world.”\(^8\)

If these commentators are right that Locke’s purpose was to describe real causation between external world objects then they are absolutely correct. The account given by Locke can do nothing of the kind. Indeed, causation would be a low point of the *Essay* and would call into question Locke’s philosophical abilities. This alone, merely on grounds of charity, should gives us pause. My proposal is that the complaint that Locke fails to establish real causation between bodies misunderstands his project. I think Locke would allege that these commentators are upset that God failed to give them wings with which to fly and are therefore content to sit still and perish, rather than to use the perfectly good legs God did give them to walk.\(^9\) Put differently, Locke was acutely aware of the severe limitations on human knowledge and this is reflected in his account of causation. I propose we read Locke not as trying but failing to give an account of physical causation, but rather as giving an account of external causation which takes into account our limited epistemic abilities.

Thus, my position is that Locke gives a clear and adequate account of causation. Further, it is one which is in accord with his theory of ideas and epistemic humility about the external world. Before describing this account I have a few preliminary remarks. In this paper I wish to defend the position that Locke is deeply irrealist about causation involving external world objects. I also wish to defend the position that all causal claims involving external world objects can be broken down into claims about ideas. Put negatively, I will

\(^7\) Collins 1967, page 25.
\(^8\) Aaron 1937, page 184.
\(^9\) Cf Locke 1975, Introduction §5.
defend the position that Locke did not intend to demonstrate real causation between objects and he did not intend to claim that we observe causal powers in objects. It is commonly thought that in Book II Chapter 21 of the Essay (‘Of Power’) Locke commits himself to realism about what we might now call mental causation. He is thought to claim that we directly experience causal power in the mental realm. With regard to these two claims about mental causation I am agnostic. My paper will be largely unconcerned with them.

The key text for my interpretation is the section of the Essay specifically devoted to causation: Book II, Chapter 26. This section is entitled “Of Cause and Effect, and other Relations.” Although only two sections of the chapter are devoted to causation, the two sections are tolerably clear and lay a clean foundation for an account of causation. Locke begins by noting that we are aware of the constant changes which occur in our perceptions; our senses pay attention to what he terms “the constant vicissitude of things.” Locke says that it is from the observation of these changes that we come to get our ideas of cause and effect. As he writes, “whatever is considered by us, to conduce or operate, to the producing any particular simple idea, or collection of simple ideas, whether substance, or mode, which did not before exist, hath thereby in our minds the relation of a cause, and so is denominated by us.” Locke next goes on to distinguish between four ways of classifying causation: creation, generation, making, and alternation.

One of Locke’s examples might serve to help illustrate his account. Consider an agent watching the events of a bonfire. Initially, the agent will have a great number of simple ideas combined together to form the complex idea of wood. A complex idea of fire

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10 2.26.1. All Locke references are to the Nidditch edition of Locke’s Essay which is listed as Locke 1975. Spellings and punctuation have been modernized, capitalizations and italics have been removed. Citations will be provided by using the arabic numeral for the book, then the chapter, then the section.

11 2.26.1.
will be introduced to the wood. Slowly, the fire will consume the wood. In observing this process the agent will be struck by the variations in the ideas she is receiving from sensation, by the changes that occur. After the bonfire, there will be a new collection of simple ideas which form the complex idea of substance which the agent recognizes as ash. The ash substance will be located where the wood substance was previous to the introduction of fire. Thus, the agent will come to form ideas about the relations that hold between wood, ash, and fire. Specifically, the agent will come to believe that fire is the cause of ash, and that ashes are the effects of fire. This will be the case because fire was seen to introduce changes to the simple ideas comprising the complex idea of wood and these changes resulted in a new complex idea of ash.

There is one feature of Locke’s account which I take to be of overwhelming importance when constructing an interpretation of II.26. This feature is the ideational nature of Locke’s account. Simply put, whenever Locke is speaking about causation he is speaking about ideas and relations that hold between them. Both causes and actors are ideas and both effects and patients are ideas. The account of causation should be seen in light of Locke’s larger Book II project of developing a theory of ideas; it is a piece of epistemology and not a piece of ontology. Even if we are ignorant of the causal processes in the external world we are still perfectly correct and justified in making the attributions of causation that we do. This is because the proper domain of these attributions is the ideational realm, to which we have access, not the physical realm, to which we do not. And within the ideational real Locke grants great liberty to agents claiming that a cause is just whichever idea we choose.12 If we were to begin talking about causal relations between mind-independent, external world objects then we would be speaking nonsense. Any time a Lockean agent claims that “a red

12 Except in the case of some logical inconsistency. Cf. footnote 58.
billiard ball careened into that blue billiard ball and caused it to move” the agent must be using “red billiard ball” to refer to a complex idea and not to a physical mind-independent object.

In seeking to justify my claim that the account of causation should be understood within the theory of ideas I will seek to offer three kinds of evidence. The first kind is textual, the second is philosophical, and the third is historical. Some of the best textual evidence for my thesis has already been seen. Locke’s initial formulation of causation is highly telling. He writes that a cause is something “considered by us” to be $x$. The “considered by us” phrase is essential.\(^\text{13}\) I think it is rather clear evidence that causation is a matter of attribution by a perceiver, and not a fact about the physical world. Also, Locke has previously told us that all and only ideas can be considered by the mind.\(^\text{14}\) Thus, if a cause is considered by the mind, a cause must be an idea. In this same sentence Locke also suggest that something gets to be a cause not in virtue of a relation it bears to something in the external world, but rather in virtue of a relation it has “in our minds.”

Locke uses great care in constructing the two examples he gives in the chapter. He uses the example of heat causing wax to melt and the aforementioned example of fire turning wood to ash.\(^\text{15}\) In the first example, Locke is very careful to mention that the effect, namely fluidity, is a simple idea and that the cause, namely heat, is another simple idea. Similarly in the second example, Locke is very careful to mention that the effects of the fire, namely ashes, are a complex idea composed of simple ideas. And this time Locke also mentions that

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\(^\text{13}\) I think phrases of this type are especially telling in the early modern period. The “considered as” or “conceived as” locutions very often denote that something is dependent on a mental, rather than a physical, entity for its status.

\(^\text{14}\) 1.1.8: an idea is “whatever it is, which the mind can be employed about in thinking.”

\(^\text{15}\) It is interesting that both of Locke’s examples involve heat as a cause.
the substance undergoing a change, namely the wood, is a complex idea formed from a
collection of simple ideas.\footnote{I think this point is of special importance. My position is that whenever Locke uses the word substance, or mentions a specific substance, in a causal context he is talking about our idea or substance, or our idea of that specific substance. Locke’s epistemic concerns about substance are well known, and I take them as supporting my ideational usage.} Locke is much more careful in this passage than he normally is
to highlight the ideational nature of his subject. Normally when Locke wishes to refer to the
idea of \( x \) he will just refer to \( x \) as a kind of shorthand. And he nearly never pauses to remind
his readers that complex ideas are just compounds of simple ideas. My suggestion is that
Locke is being intentionally careful here to avoid giving the impression that he believes in
real causation.

I think the most decisive text for viewing the theory of causation as ideational comes
at the very end of 2.26.2. Locke writes that “the notion of cause and effect, has its rise from
ideas, received by sensation or reflection; and that this relation, how comprehensive soever,
terminates at last in them.”\footnote{2.26.2.} I take this to mean that Locke thinks real causation is never
directly observed, but is rather a product of our ideational structuring. Locke nowhere in the
chapter undertakes an investigation of how causal processes occur or what are necessary and
sufficient conditions for causation. Rather he contents himself with addressing the
connections between ideas. He even writes that “to have the idea of cause and effect it
suffices to consider any simple idea, or substance, as beginning to exist, by the operation of
some other, without knowing the manner of that operation.”\footnote{2.26.2.} I take it that a realist account
of causation, one concerned with examining the causal nature of objects, would care a great
deal about the details of causal operations. But Locke’s claim is that merely perceiving one
idea changing another is sufficient for understanding causation.
There is a passage in the chapter on mixed modes (II.22) which supports my points in the above paragraph. Here Locke is talking about the “efficacy” which produces change and calls it “action.” Locke concludes that whatever action may actually be, he can get no better grasp on it than to claim it is identical with modes of thought and willing in the mental case, and changes in motion in the material case. He claims that any other idea of action is as foreign and mysterious to him as are “the ideas of colors to a blind man.”\textsuperscript{19} Locke thinks there is a general ignorance of true causal processes and highlights this with a linguistic point claiming that “many words, which seem to express some action, signify nothing of the action, or modus operandi at all, but barely the effect, with some circumstances of the subject wrought on, or cause operating.”\textsuperscript{20} Locke goes on to give an example of an instance where we would commonly attribute causation without a full understanding of the processes involved: “when a country-man says, the cold freezes water, though the word freezing seems to import some action, yet truly it signifies nothing, but the effect, viz. that water, that was before fluid, is become hard and consistent, without containing any idea of the action whereby it is done.” I think this is more evidence that Locke is declining to offer an account of real causation. Rather, he is happy to observe phenomenal changes and from these make attributions of causation.

Some things remain to be said about power, and its ideational status in physical causation. As I said above, I am agnostic with regard to whether or not Locke believes we experience real causal powers in instances of mental causation. I am committed to Locke believing that we do not directly experience real causal powers in cases of physical

\textsuperscript{19} 2.22.11.  
\textsuperscript{20} 2.22.11.
What then are the powers which Locke refers to as being in bodies? My answer is that they are constituent ideas in our complex ideas of those bodies.

The first thing to note about Locke’s chapter on power (II.21), other than perhaps its length and complexity, is the deep similarity between its first section and the first section of the chapter on causation. Both chapters are seeking to make sense of the constant changes the mind perceives in its ideas. And in the chapter on powers Locke is once again committed to analyzing this change in our sensations through the theory of ideas: “we cannot observe any alternation to be made in, or operation upon any thing but by the observable change of its sensible ideas; nor conceive any alternation to be made, but by conceiving a change of some of its ideas.”

I think the drive to postulate powers comes from the same source that the drive to denominate something a cause come from; namely the urge to make sense of our changing ideas. Positing powers is a precondition for making sense of experience: “whatever change is observed, the mind must collect a power somewhere, able to make that change, as well as a possibility in the thing itself to receive it.”

In the above paragraph I have indicated that power, like causation, is not observed in physical objects. But there is a further question as to its status in Locke’s ontology. My position is that powers possessed by external objects are just ideas. I think there is sufficient evidence for this in II.21. Firstly, Locke says that power is not something over and above an idea, but rather power is a name for an idea. He claims that power has “a place amongst other simple ideas, and be considered as one of them, being one of those, that make a

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21 Note that this entails that I am agnostic about whether power is a univocal term for Locke.

22 2.21.1.

23 2.21.4.

24 2.21.1: “…and so comes by that idea which we call power.”
principle ingredient in our complex ideas of substances." So my proposal is that when Locke claims that the “sun has a power to blanch was” we read this as saying that one of the simple ideas which forms our complex idea of the sun is a power, and that when he claims that “gold has a power to be melted” by fire we read this as saying that power is one of the simple ideas which is compounded with other simples to form our idea of gold, and so on. So causal powers, as well as causes themselves, are purely ideational for Locke.

Above I have discussed how the text of the *Essay*, in II.26 and elsewhere, supports an ideational reading; below I want to offer some philosophical considerations in favor of the ideational reading. By philosophical reasons I mean reasons having to do with Locke’s philosophical project in the *Essay*. First I want to bring up considerations regarding relations and then considerations regarding knowledge. Cause and effect are, for Locke, relations. The chapter in which cause and effect are discussed is entitled “Of Cause and Effect, and other Relations” and it immediately follows the chapter on “Relation.” The fact that the account of causation is tied so closely to the account of relations should lend support to the ideational reading. This is because for Locke both relations and relata must be ideas. He writes that a relations consists in “bringing two ideas, whether simple or complex, together; and setting them by one another, so as to take a view of them at once, without uniting them into one.” The new idea which is formed when this process occurs is a complex idea of relation. In his discussion of relations Locke uses language similar to the language he uses to

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25 2.21.3.

26 2.21.1 for the examples.

27 2.12.1.
discuss causation claiming that our knowledge of relations terminates in and is concerned only about ideas.\textsuperscript{28}

I think the ideational account of causation also neatly dovetails with the ideational account of knowledge which Locke offers in Book IV. Book II and Book IV of the \textit{Essay} are often seen as being in tension with one another, the concern being that Book II is deeply empiricist and Book IV shows notable strains of rationalism. Whatever the merits of these claims, it seems my interpretation of Lockean causation can provide a nice parallel between the two books. Locke claims that “knowledge . . . seems to me to be nothing but the perception of the connection and agreement, or disagreement, and repugnancy of any of our ideas.”\textsuperscript{29} So whenever a Lockean agent claims that “black is not white” she is merely stating that her ideas of black and of white do not agree.\textsuperscript{30} It is worth noting that at 4.1.5 Locke outlines a species of knowledge having to do with relations. He says that whenever the mind perceives a relation between two of its ideas there is a kind of knowledge. Thus, there seems to be a nice fit between Locke’s ideational conception of relations and knowledge and an ideational reading of causation. I think keeping in mind the vital role of ideas in Locke’s account of knowledge can lend plausibility to my interpretation of Locke on causation.

Finally, I want to offer some historical evidence for the interpretation I am proposing. First, I want to discuss the treatment of causation in the early drafts of the \textit{Essay} and then I want to discuss the treatment of causation given by two early critics. Both Draft A and Draft

\textsuperscript{28} 2.25.9.

\textsuperscript{29} 4.1.2. It is worth noting that some commentators have resisted a strictly ideational account of knowledge, claiming that Locke believes knowledge can be an agreement between an idea and an external world object. For a consideration of and, I think, decisive refutation of these view see Newman 2004, pages 276-282.

\textsuperscript{30} 4.1.2.
B of the *Essay* from 1671 contain discussions of causation. The account in Draft A is sketchy but clearly lays the foundations for an ideational account. Locke writes that cause and effect “is no more than this i.e. that one thing which in my sense of feeling produces that idea which I call heat in that thing which as a certain kind of yellow and sweet whereof I have the settled ideas … [that I] … have learned to call wax doeth cause another sensible idea which I call fluidity.” The account in Draft B bears a strong resemblance to what is found in II.26 of the *Essay*. So the idea of analyzing causation without reference to actual objects has a long history in Locke’s thought.

Also important is a theme which appears in the Drafts, but has no closely corresponding passages in the *Essay*. The Drafts suggest that not only is our causal knowledge quite weak with respect to objects themselves, they suggest that we can have no knowledge with regard to the permanence or regularity of the causal processes. Locke writes about causes that he has “no certain knowledge farther than my senses do or have informed me and so cannot make universal propositions of which I can be assured that they are true unless it be of those powers which I include in the idea of that subject.” This passage prefigures a topic I will discuss in greater detail below; the possibility of using causation to gain knowledge of external objects. Locke here seems to deny that this is a promising endeavor. While this passage is not closely replicated in the final version of the *Essay* there is no reason to think that Locke would make substantial changes to his position.

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31 All references to the drafts are from the monograph edited by Nidditch and Rogers which is listed as Locke 1990. Spellings and punctuations have been modernized, capitalizations and italics have been removed.


33 Draft A §15, page 30. The matching passage in Draft B is at §139, page 257. I take it that this quote supports what I have said above about powers being constituent ideas in our complex ideas of substances.
Two early commentators on the Essay were quick to point out the ideational nature of Locke’s theory of causation. I think this provides another good piece of evidence for interpreting him as I am proposing. The first person I have in mind is John Sergeant whose 1697 book Solid Philosophy Asserted was almost entirely devoted to critiques of Locke.

Sergeant, when discussing cause and effect claims that Locke: “acquaints us very exactly, how we gain the ideas of them by our senses; but he proceeds not to show us, (which yet he often does in other occasions) in what the nature of causality consists.” Invoking a theme which pervades the book he rhetorically asks what good it is to have idea upon idea if we still never “attain to true knowledge of the things, from which we gleaned them.” Locke owned a copy of Sergeant’s book and wrote in it 117 notes, correcting certain misinterpretations and responding to various points. It bears mentioning that Locke does not leave a note objecting to Sergeant’s characterization of his views on causation. Quite the opposite occurs. When Sergeant goes on to proffer his own views of causation, which make reference actual external objects, Locke mocks his position with a simple *reductio* argument.

Henry Lee was another of Locke’s contemporaries who devoted a book to criticisms of the Essay. Lee’s interpretation of Locke on causation, in his 1704 book Anti-Scepticism, is strikingly similar to Sergeant’s. Lee is frustrated when Locke claims that “the simple idea of

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34 This is not to suggest that every early contemporary commentator on the Essay was correct (or even competent) in his or her interpretation of Locke. But early commentators do often have valuable insights and are able to avoid anachronistic thinking.

35 For more on Sergeant see Krook 1993.

36 Sergeant 1697, page 254. Spellings and punctuations have been modernized, capitalizations and italics have been removed.


38 Cf. Yolton 1951 for some analysis of the marginalia.

39 Locke’s marginalia can be see in Sergeant 1984, the note I refer to is on page 255.
heat is the cause, and the simple idea of fluidity in wax is the effect; where as he [Locke] owns, in another place, heat not to be in the fire itself, but only is the name of our perception of a certain motion in its particles.  

40 Lee simply cannot understand how someone would attempt to explain causation without making reference to an external world object as a cause. I want to emphasize an important difference between Sergeant and Lee, on the one hand, and contemporary treatments of Lockean causation, on the other. While both sides express disappointment that Locke fails to provide a satisfactory account of real causation between bodies only the contemporary critics read Locke as attempting such an endeavor. Sergeant and Lee do not claim that Locke’s account tries and fails; they recognize the ideational nature of Locke’s project and realize that he never even tries. In this respect, I am in agreement with Sergeant and Lee.

The central claim of the idealistic interpretation I have been defending is that causal statements have ideas, and only ideas, as their proper subject matter. Any time some $x$ is considered to be either a cause, an effect, or a power in an object, $x$ must be an idea. I have shown that there is textual support for this interpretation, that the interpretation can be motivated by appeal to other aspects of Locke’s system, and that the interpretation is sufficiently historically sensitive. My aim now is to trace out an implication of the interpretation that might be problematic. Specifically I want to discuss causal theories of perception. Locke is commonly seen as holding some version of a causal theory of perception. Yet, such a theory would be incompatible with his position on causation as I have described it. So in the remainder of my paper I want to examine claims that Locke holds a causal theory of perception and see if there is anything to recommend them. If there

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40 Lee 1704, page 118. Spellings and punctuation have been modernized, capitalizations and italics have been removed.
are good motivations for claiming that Locke has a causal theory of perception then it will be my task to deflate them, or to offer an alternate reading.

The biggest problem in contemporary Locke scholarship has been understanding the relationship between objects and ideas. Locke claims that agents can only have epistemic access to ideas. But if this is the case, then how are we ever to know anything about external world objects? And by what manner or mechanism could our ideas be said to represent or resemble objects? Jonathan Bennett has characterized this as the “veil-of-perception” doctrine.41 The consensus is that if Locke does hold such a view then his project is at best of only mild interest, and at worst an abject failure. We will never secure knowledge of the external world and will fall into a deep skepticism.

One popular approach to solving this problem has been to attribute a causal theory of perception to Locke.42 Causal theories of perception claim that to perceive an object the agent must be in a causal relationship with that object. In a Lockean framework this would tie ideas to objects rather neatly by means of a causal chain. The move is sympathetic to Locke because it rescues him from skepticism; we do perceive objects, just indirectly through a causal chain. Many commentators have gone farther than this. Many have alleged that because we know the causal provenance of our ideas is in objects we are licensed in making judgments about the nature of those objects based on the nature of our ideas. Influential Locke scholars who have advanced views like this include J. L. Mackie, Michael Ayers, and Vere Chappell.43

41 Bennett 1971, page 69.

42 This is not to be confused with what Bennett 1971 calls the Causal Theory in Locke, nor with what Cresswell 2004 calls the Causal Principle in Locke.

For my purposes I will focus on two recent papers that make claims about causation central to claims about perception and our knowledge of external objects. Specifically I want to discuss recent papers by Martha Brandt Bolton and Dan Yim. Bolton believes that Lockean perception “testifies regarding structural features of the world: different things, their possession of several qualities, their qualitative similarities and differences.” Her proposal is that Locke is right to assume that our perceptions do, for the most part, give us correct knowledge of the world. This leads to a question about the justification for that knowledge. We are justified in this belief, according to Bolton, because our ideas can be said to represent the objects in the world. Bolton’s position is that ideas represent objects in virtue of i) being directly causally connected to them and ii) providing a marking function by which features of objects can be tracked. It is this causal and representative nature of ideas that grounds our knowledge of the external world. While previous interpreters of Locke have felt that in order to get knowledge about the external world our ideas would have to be images or resemblances of objects, Bolton argues that knowledge of causal connections and a semantic marking function will suffice.

I think that the centerpiece of Bolton’s argument has to do with her analysis of Lockean real ideas. Locke discusses the distinction between real and fantastic ideas in Book II Chapter 30 and Bolton claims that if there is any place where Locke teaches us “how simple ideas contribute to apprehension of external things” it is in this chapter. She quotes from the second section of Chapter 30: “For these several appearances, being designed to be the marks, whereby we are to know, and distinguish things, which we have to do with; our


45 Bolton 2004, pages 312 and 316.

ideas do as well serve us to that purpose…whether they be only constant effects, or else exact resemblances or something in the things themselves: the reality lying in that steady correspondence, they have with the distinct constitutions of real beings.”

Bolton uses this passage as evidence to support her two claims that i) our ideas have a direct causal source in external world objects and ii) our ideas mark or denominate actual features of these external world objects.

Dan Yim also makes causation fundamental to Locke’s theory of perception. Yim’s primary concern is with demonstrating that the resemblance theses from II.8 are at odds with the rest of Locke’s comments on the perception of bodies. So he, like Bolton, thinks that to gain knowledge of bodies from ideas it is not necessary for the ideas to resemble the bodies they represent. Causation, rather than resemblance, is the key to understanding bodies. Like Bolton, a key piece of Yim’s argument has to do with real ideas. For Yim, “all that is required for a given mental content to be real is for that mental content to be the end product of a reliable causal chain from a quality of a body…to the production of the perception.”

Yim is at pains to make Locke’s perceptual theory as pre-theoretic and empiricist as possible, but still falls back on the importance of a concept of causation. Later in his article he reiterates that causation informs us of “real features of a mind-independent external world filled with real objects distinct from [us].”

Hopefully, the broad outlines of my concerns for accounts of Lockean perception like those given by Bolton and Yim should already be clear. The charge I want to level is that these causal theories of perception are incompatible with Locke’s stated account of

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47 2.30.2. Quoted by Bolton 2004 at page 308.


49 Yim 2004, page 142.
causation. Further, any attempt to learn about the nature or features of external world objects by appeal to causation will be problematic. The major problem with trying to learn about the relation of objects to ideas is that there can, strictly speaking, never be such a relation. Relations, for Locke, are only between ideas. Epistemological investigations that concern themselves with causation will remain squarely within the realm of ideas. Understanding representation involves understanding two relata: one an object and one an idea. When thinking about causation this never happens; cause and effect, the two relata, are both ideas. Simply put, we will never get to an object.

There is another way of fleshing out what is wrong with the project proposed by Bolton and Yim. The fundamental problem is that reasoning about causes for Locke is not deductive reasoning, rather it is abductive reasoning. Causes are merely posits used to explain certain phenomena, they are not the actual sources or origins of the phenomena. My perception of a billiard ball on a table will not lead me to the true nature of some external object. Rather, I will form the idea that there is something existing outside of me, and will call that idea a cause. Causation, for Locke, does not exist to give us deep insight into the structure of the universe and the connections between its various pieces. Rather, attributions of causation are a way for us to organize our ideas. In the previous paragraph I was pointing out the fact that in reasoning about causation we will never get access to an object, because we will always reason about further ideas. In this paragraph I am making a different point. The problem is not only that we will never get to an object; the problem is that Locke does not even provide the right kind of apparatus for seeking out real causes.

I think what I have said above fits nicely with another important feature of the Essay, a feature which causes great difficulties for those proposing a causal theory or any
connection between causation, objects, and perception. The feature I am referring to is Locke’s constant reticence to say anything about the manner in which our ideas are produced in us. Of course, this phrasing seems to beg the question against those who support causal theories, but I think a little more discussion will make my point more clear. Locke is often happy to say that God, for our benefit, created the universe such that ideas are produced in us, but Locke is silent about the mechanism God uses for this production. I think Locke takes the manner in which ideas are produced in us to be either beyond the limits of human understanding or a divine mystery.\textsuperscript{50} This theme is prevalent throughout the \textit{Essay}.\textsuperscript{51} Many commentators have noticed this sort of Christian teleology at work in Locke.\textsuperscript{52} Put differently, everything Locke actually writes about the origins of our ideas is both compatible with the interpretation of causation that I have given and suggests that the prospects for learning about the causal origins of our ideas are not good.

There is one more textual point to make before moving on. I think reading Locke as holding a causal theory of perception is especially implausible given that the chapters of Book II which address perception are situated so near Chapter 26, on causation. I take it that the text on causation is fairly insistent on the purely ideational nature of causation. I think it would be difficult to read in an account of real causation. If those pushing the causal theory are right, then Locke must have thought that causation, in some sense, had something to do

\textsuperscript{50} While these two conjuncts are not incompatible, my guess is that Locke believed it was the first. His poignant awareness of the severe limits of human knowledge and general predilection for viewing Christianity as conformable to reason at least seem to point to the first.

\textsuperscript{51} At 1.1.2 Locke claims that the manner in which our ideas are actually produced is outside the scope of the \textit{Essay}. And he eschews the topic at various other places. One might suspect this exact epistemic humility is also in play in §10 of the \textit{Examination of Malebranche}, Locke 1832 volume 9 page 217. Of course, discerning Locke’s true position in such a highly polemical work is a delicate task and it is possible he is only making a negative point.

\textsuperscript{52} Rogers 2004 is a particularly good recent example of this.
with external objects. But if this were the case, it is difficult to understand why he would, just a few chapters later, give the account of causation he gives. Attributing an inconsistency to Locke within just a handful of chapters seems highly uncharitable. Thus, I propose that the texts on perception, which seem more plastic to begin with, should not be read as texts which make causal claims.

As I wrote above, I think that the best arguments offered by Bolton and Yim for their position, and the biggest threat to the ideational theory of causation, have to do with real ideas. Real ideas as interpreted by Bolton and Yim are incompatible with my interpretation, so it seems necessary that I provide a different interpretation which is both plausible and compatible with Lockean causation.

Before giving a positive account of real ideas, however, I want to make a negative point against the reading provided by Bolton and Yim. Locke is very careful to avoid claiming that the relationship between objects and ideas is a causal one. Just after the passage quoted by Bolton he writes “But whether [our ideas] answer to those [bodily] constitutions, as to causes, or patterns, it matters not…”53 Locke here is explicitly claiming that our notion of causation is not fundamental to our notion of a real idea. He is also avoiding the claim that bodies cause our ideas thereby maintaining his aforementioned silence on this point. All of this is, of course, highly amenable to the ideational account of causation. But what should a proponent of the ideational account say about real ideas?

The distinction between real and fantastic ideas is made in just two sentences. They are worth quoting: “By real ideas, I mean such as have a foundation in nature; such as have a conformity with the real being, and existence of things, or with their archetypes. Fantastical or chimerical, I call such as have no foundation in nature, nor have any conformity with that

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53 2.30.2. Emphasis added.
reality of being, to which they are tacitly referred, as to their archetypes.\textsuperscript{54} On an initial reading, Locke does seem to be talking about the external world in these passages, but I think a closer reading will show a clear alternate reading.

The structure of Locke’s commentary on real and fantastic ideas is slightly misleading given the point he is making. Rather than discuss which ideas are real and then discuss which are fantastic, Locke proceeds by discussing the realness of simple ideas and then the realness and fantasticness of complex ideas. The criterion of reality, however, is the same for both. Ideas are real just in case they are presented as unified to an agent in sensation, they are fantastic just in case they are complex ideas which are not presented as unified to an agent in sensation, but are assembled by the mind from ideas taken from the unified ideas given by sensation. Thus, when Locke speaks of a real idea having a “foundation in nature” I take nature not to be the external world, but natural, ordinary perception.\textsuperscript{55} This naturalness is in opposition to the artificiality of fantastic ideas which are invented or cooked up by the mind.

Locke says that all simple ideas are real. This is in perfect accord with my explanation above. A simple idea must be real because the mind is incapable of producing simple ideas. Simple ideas must come from experience. To use one of Locke’s favorite examples, my simple idea of the taste of a pineapple is real because there is no way I could have that idea apart from having actually tasting a pineapple, I could never invent such an

\textsuperscript{54} 2.30.1.

\textsuperscript{55} I think the Oxford English Dictionary can help support my usage of ‘nature’ here. The word as most often used today refers to something like OED 11a: “The phenomena of the physical world collectively; \textit{esp}. plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations.” But there is a much older and more widespread strand of usage with relates it closely to humans. The usage I have in mind for Locke here is something like OED 4a “The power or force which is fundamental to the physical and mental functioning of a human being.”
experience.\textsuperscript{56} Locke next say that my ideas of relations and mixed modes are all real because they are products of my mind. As Locke says quite bluntly, they have “no other reality, but what they have in the minds of men.”\textsuperscript{57} It is worth pausing to note that our idea of causation is, for Locke, a relation. So every time I identify a pair of things [C,E] as cause and effect, my idea of C as a cause and my idea of E as an effect qualify as real ideas.\textsuperscript{58}

Locke’s distinction between real and fantastic ideas, as I am interpreting it, becomes slightly more difficult with regard to our complex ideas of substances. Locke believes that some complex ideas come to us from experience, but that we are also capable of conjoining simple ideas or complex ideas to create new complex ideas. Those ideas in the first group are real ideas, and those in the second group are fantastic ideas. Consider, for example, the ideas of Secretariat and of Pegasus. The first of these ideas is real and the second is fantastic. Secretariat is a real idea because we have come across all of the simples that comprise Secretariat all unified in perception: chestnut color, speediness, long nose, carrot-eating, etc. What is it that disqualifies Pegasus from being a real idea? The problem is that Pegasus is somehow gerrymandered. We have never seen all of his simples unified in perception; perhaps we have seen wings, and we have seen horses, but we have never perceived the two conjoined. Rather, when thinking about Pegasus our mind joins together simples from various other experiences. Thus, Pegasus is fantastic.

Above I have given an account of real ideas which does not appeal to external objects or to causation. Thus, I take it that I have given an account which is both compatible with an

\textsuperscript{56} Cf. 2.1.6.

\textsuperscript{57} 2.30.4.

\textsuperscript{58} This is true unless there is an internal inconsistency in my idea. This would be the case if, for example, C was a round square, or E was God, an complex idea which contains the ideas of being eternal and uncaused.
ideational theory of causation and which will not lend support to reading Locke as a causal theorist about perception. My account is purely experiential in so far as what matters is not external objects producing ideas, but rather which ideas we have had associated in our sensations. I think there is one more very good piece of evidence for this interpretation at the end of the chapter. Here Locke is considering possible complex ideas of substance that we could have perceptions of. Specifically, Locke is considering possible things like a centaur or a metal like gold, but lighter than water. He says that “whether such substances…can possibly exist, or not, ’tis probable we do not know: but be that as it will, these ideas of substances, being made conformable to no pattern existing, that we know; and consisting of such collections of ideas, as no substance ever showed us united together, they ought to pass with us for barely imaginary.”⁵⁹ I take it that here Locke is saying that what matters are our experiences in sensation, not external objects and the ideas they might produce in us.

There is one more issue I wish to bring up with regard to causal theories. In this section I have been considering whether or not causation could provide any information about external world objects. Many commentators have claimed that it can, and I have disagreed. One might think I am straightforwardly wrong. The text of the Essay claims over and over again that if we merely examine our ideas we can learn all about the powers and qualities that the bodies which cause them have.⁶⁰ So we have learned something substantive about objects in the external world, specifically, we have learned which powers and qualities they have.

I think this line of reasoning is deeply confused and that the confusion arises because of the slightly misleading language used by Locke. The words ‘power’ and ‘quality’ seem

⁵⁹ 2.30.5. Emphasis added.

⁶⁰ I am here thinking especially of Book II, Chapter 8.
substantive. To modern ears it seems as though we have learned about the intrinsic properties of the bodies. I think, however, that a brief examination of what Locke means by the words ‘power’ and ‘quality’ will expose my concerns. The problem is that quality is a causal notion for Locke and powers that pertain to objects are strictly ideational. He defines quality as “the power to produce any idea in the mind.” Discussion of an object’s qualities fails to explain anything about that object. Rather, talk of an object’s qualities is only informative about something extrinsic to that object, namely our own minds and the ideas in them. Similarly, for reasons discussed at greater length above, when discussing an object’s powers (passive or active) one will never get beyond ideas to objects; “For we cannot observe any alternation to be made in, or operation upon any thing, but by the observable change of its sensible ideas; nor conceive any alternation to be made, but by conceiving a change of some of its ideas.” So discussions of power will also fail to penetrate beyond our sensations and ideas. So it seems that if we learn about powers and qualities of bodies, we have not actually learned anything about bodies at all.

In this paper I have claimed that Locke held an ideational account of causation. While I do think Locke’s work on causation is of intrinsic interest I think it is also interesting in the context of his larger project. Above, I have tried to trace out some of the implications of Lockean causation for Lockean perception. I think understanding Lockean causation will also be useful for understanding a number of other topics in the Essay. Specifically, I think there is good future work to be done on causation and Locke’s commitment to mechanism, on causation and Lockean methodology, and on causation and sensitive knowledge.

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61 2.8.8.
62 2.21.1


