Simple and Complex Ideas

In "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding", John Locke defines ideas as, "whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding."[1] A particular subject has a quality for Locke when it possesses the ability to "produce any idea in our minds."[2] Locke explains that a snowball has quality when it produces for us the ideas of coldness and roundness, whereas it is an idea when we comprehend it through the senses and perceive its aspects. All ideas, according to Locke, are arrived at through experience involving sensation and reflection. Simple ideas are those ideas which first enter the mind through the senses, pure and uncomplicated. Locke claims that simple ideas are also capable of reflecting about other ideas which enter its realm. He refers to these simple ideas as "the operation of the mind about its other ideas."[3] Simple ideas, when compared, united, and extenuated through the process of reflection, become for Locke complex ideas. The mind has the power of linking and uniting several simple ideas so as to produce one idea. This idea is a complex idea for Locke. Gratitude, for example, can consist of united simple ideas or even complex ideas, yet can be conceived as a singular idea, and so, while Locke explains that simple ideas can unite to form complex ideas, the mind can attribute a name to an idea in its completeness.

Locke outlines the power of the mind in its working with simple ideas:

> 1) Combining several simple ideas into one compound one; and thus all complex ideas are made.
> 2) 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; by which way it gets all its ideas of relations.
> 3) Separating them from all other ideas that accompany them in their real existence: this is called abstraction: and thus all its general ideas are made.[4]

There are three types of complex ideas for Locke, consisting of "modes, substances,and relations." Modes are those complex ideas which are dependent on other ideas. Simple modes are those complex ideas made up of varying combinations of one simple idea. Mixed modes are those complex ideas which consist of many different simple ideas.

Substances are those complex ideas which exist independently. A single substance for Locke would be a man or a sheep, while a collective substance would be an army or a flock. Although an army is made up of several single substances, it can exist as a single complex idea.

Relations are those complex ideas which make comparisons and contrasts between ideas.

In Chapter Five, Episode Two of *Pixie,* a notion of space and time is suddenly revealed to Pixie. During a discussion of space and time, Miranda had been trying to express the two concepts in terms of relationships. Pixie claims that time and space are just words. As Miranda runs off to school she shouts, "When we talk about time, we mean earlier than and later than. When we talk about space, we mean near and far." 31/12-14. "Oh!" Pixie says, "now I see what you mean. Now I understand what makes space and time. Space is made up of space relationships and time is made up of time relationships. Isn't that what you're telling me?" 31/15-19.

The complex ideas of space and time seem, for Pixie, to consist of those space and time relationships referred to by Miranda. Pixie has been struggling with a search for a clear definition of space and time. As Locke suggests, perhaps, the united simple ideas compare and form those relations of which complex ideas exist. In this case, the relationship of one distance to another and of one time to another are the simple ideas, compounded and compared into the complex ideas of space and time.

Locke states that the mind has the power to combine simple ideas into complex ones and, while fully realizing that an idea is comprised of even complex ideas, can attribute a name to a notion as though it were a singular idea. Thus, while space and time are names that the mind assigns to ideas, those ideas are comprised of simple and complex ones. Abstraction for Locke is the separating of ideas from their associate ideas in reality. Again, the mind separates the notions of space or time from their referrents and labels them abstractions. While space and time relationships exist as simple or complex ideas combined, their mother labels, space and time, also may exist as complex ideas consisting of the simple and complex ideas of their relationships. Pixie has indeed made a revelation. Simple ideas are to complex ideas what space and time relationships are to space and time.

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Footnotes

1. John Locke, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding", *The Empiricists,* Anchor/Doubleday, New York, 1974, p. 24.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid, p. 21.
4. Ibid, p. 37.

Bibliography

Lipman, M. *Pixie.* New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1981.

Locke, J. "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," *The Empiricists.* New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1974, p. 24.