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# Locke, Simplicity, and Extension

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to clarify Locke’s distinction between simple and complex ideas. I argue that Locke accepts what I call the “compositional criterion of simplicity.” According to this criterion, an idea is simple just in case it does not have another idea as a proper part. This criterion is *prima facie* inconsistent with Locke’s view that there are simple ideas of extension. This objection was presented to Locke by his French translator, Pierre Coste, on behalf of Jean Barbeyrac. Locke responded to Barbeyrac’s objection, but his response, along with a passage from Chapter XV of Book II of the *Essay*, “*Of Duration and Expansion, considered together*,” has been taken to show that he did not accept the compositional criterion. I examine these passages and argue that they are not in tension with but rather affirm that criterion.

## 1 Introduction

The system of Locke’s *Essay* is a theory of cognitive content: a theory of *ideas*. Central to this system is the distinction between simple and complex ideas. All ideas, according to Locke, fall into one of these two categories. Scholars agree that the distinction between simple and complex ideas is central to Locke’s project, in that it plays some role in virtually every topic his *Essay* touches.<sup>1</sup> But there is little consensus as to what, exactly, the distinction amounts to. What, according to Locke, is it for an idea to be simple? What, in other words, is Locke’s criterion of simplicity? My aim is to evaluate several interpretations of Locke’s criterion of simplicity. According to the interpretation for which I argue, Locke holds the *compositional criterion of simplicity*: an idea is simple just in case the idea does not have other ideas as proper parts.

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<sup>1</sup> As Matthew Stuart remarks in discussing Locke’s theory of ideas: “The notions of simplicity, complexity, and parthood do so much work in Locke’s theory that if he fumbles them, it almost does not matter what his ‘ideas’ are” (Stuart 2010, 43).

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The interpretation according to which Locke holds the compositional criterion is not without proponents.<sup>2</sup> But it faces a challenge that has yet to be met. The compositional criterion of simplicity is *prima facie* in tension with Locke's claim that there are at least some simple ideas of extension.<sup>3</sup> All extension is complex. If something is extended, then it has *partes extra partes*. One might think, therefore, that any idea of extension must also be complex: just as a piece of extension is composed of *material* parts, so too an idea of extension is composed of *ideational* parts. Something like this argument was presented to Locke by his friend and translator, Pierre Coste, on behalf of one of Locke's French readers, Jean Barbeyrac.<sup>4</sup> Locke responded to Barbeyrac's objection, but his response, along with a passage from Chapter XV of Book II of the Essay, "*Of Duration and Expansion, considered together*," has been taken to show that he did not accept the compositional criterion. I examine these passages and argue that they are not in tension with but rather affirm that criterion. Moreover, I argue that Locke's response to Barbeyrac's objection is successful. I do not aim here to offer a full defense of Locke's commitment to the compositional criterion. I do not aim to show that this commitment is consistent with his claim that there are, for example, simple ideas of power and motion. I argue that Locke's commitment to simple ideas of extension is consistent with his commitment to the compositional criterion.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 2, I discuss three criteria of simplicity that have been attributed to Locke: the logical criterion, the passivity criterion, and the phenomenal criterion. None of these criteria, I argue, is Locke's primary criterion of simplicity. Each criterion either is extensionally inadequate, failing to classify as simple ideas that Locke so classifies, or derives from Locke's commitment to the compositional criterion. In Section 3, I turn to the compositional criterion. I disambiguate two readings of this criterion and present textual evidence that favors one of these readings. In Section 4, I turn to extension. I provide an interpretation of passages in which Locke addresses the objection that his compositional criterion is inconsistent with his holding that there are simple ideas of extension. Section 5 gives some concluding remarks.

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<sup>2</sup> Those who attribute (at least in part) the compositional criterion to Locke include: Hamou 2018, Rickless 2014, Connolly 2017, and Priselac 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The tension also arises with regard to ideas of duration, at least some of which Locke holds are simple. Locke's treatment of these ideas with respect to their simplicity is analogous. Thus, while I focus on simple ideas of extension in this paper, my defense can perhaps also be extended to include Locke's claim that at least some ideas of duration are simple.

<sup>4</sup> Coste seems to have served as an intermediary between Locke and Barbeyrac. But the latter two did have some direct correspondence. In one letter, Barbeyrac mentions "une difficulté qui m'est venuë dans l'esprit, au sujet des Idées Simples." See *Corresp.* #3141 (vol. 7 of Locke 1981).

## 2 Criteria of Simplicity

Several criteria of simplicity have been attributed to Locke. How are we to evaluate these criteria? An adequate criterion should classify as simple all ideas that Locke so classifies; it should be extensionally adequate. Further, our aim is to identify Locke's *primary* or *fundamental* criterion of simplicity. We are interested in determining what, according to Locke, *makes* an idea simple. We are not interested merely in features that all simple ideas have in common. If one criterion of simplicity derives from any other criterion, then the former criterion is secondary to the latter and, hence, is not Locke's primary criterion of simplicity.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1 The Logical Criterion

One criterion of simplicity that has been attributed to Locke is the *logical criterion* (Chappell 1994, 36).<sup>6</sup> In the chapter "*Of the Names of simple Ideas*," Locke claims that names which signify simple ideas are not amenable to definition (*E* III.iv.4, 421).<sup>7</sup> We can understand the logical criterion as follows: an idea is simple just in case the name by which the idea is signified cannot be defined. Locke surely accepts the biconditional expressed by the logical criterion. But does the biconditional capture what, in Locke's view, *makes* an idea simple? Consider his reasons for holding that names of simple ideas cannot be defined. Locke holds that to define a word is to show "*the meaning of one Word by several other not synonymous terms*" (*E* III.iv.6, 422). The meaning of a word is an idea. A definition of a word consists in several words. These words stand for ideas, which ideas show the meaning of the *definiendum*. For example, one's definition of "zebra" might be "striped horse." This definition is adequate insofar as the ideas signified by "striped" and "horse" "represent" one's complex idea of a zebra and neither "striped" nor "horse" is syn-

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5 Perhaps there is no one criterion that adequately captures Locke's view of simple ideas. I do not wish to rule out immediately this interpretive option. But I will argue that Locke should be understood as taking a single criterion as primary.

6 While Vere Chappell does attribute the logical criterion to Locke, he also holds that Locke accepts the phenomenal criterion discussed below. Chappell does not seem to regard either of these criteria as primary. What is more, Chappell gives some indication that he is sympathetic with attributing the compositional criterion to Locke: he speaks of Locke holding that simple ideas cannot be "analyzed." However, he perhaps simply takes this to be another way of saying that simple ideas cannot be defined. See Chappell 1994, 36.

7 This claim also appears in Draft A of the *Essay*. See Locke 1990, 6.

onymous with “zebra” (E III.iv.7, 422; III.iv.9, 423).<sup>8</sup> As Locke says, this theory of definition implies that simple ideas cannot be defined *because they are incomposite*:

This being premised, I say, that *the Names of Simple Ideas*, and those only, *are incapable of being defined*. The reason whereof is this, That the several Terms of a Definition, signifying several *Ideas*, they can altogether by no means represent an *Idea*, which has no Composition at all: And therefore a Definition, which is properly nothing but the shewing the meaning of one Word by several others not signifying each the same thing, can in the Names of simple *Ideas* have no Place (E III.iv.7, 422).

Consider the name “scarlet.” Stipulate that this name signifies the simple idea of a particular shade of red. If “scarlet” could be defined, it could be defined in one of two ways: (i) using several names that each signify ideas none of which is the idea of scarlet but which, collectively, represent the idea of scarlet, or (ii) using one name that signifies the idea of scarlet. As for (i), in the quoted passage, Locke accepts the following principle: no combination of simple or complex ideas could represent an idea that is not itself composed of other ideas. The idea of scarlet is not composed out of other ideas: it “has no Composition at all.” Thus, there is no set of names – no “several Terms of a Definition” – which signify ideas the combination of which could represent the simple idea of scarlet. As for (ii), this way of defining “scarlet” violates Locke’s principle that a *definiens* must not be synonymous with its *definiendum*. “Scarlet” cannot be defined by means of (i) or (ii), and so is incapable of definition *tout court*. Names of simple ideas cannot be defined. That names of simple ideas are incapable of definition is explained, in part, by the fact that the ideas they signify do not have other ideas as proper parts. Locke’s holding the compositional criterion explains his holding the logical criterion. The logical criterion is not Locke’s primary criterion of simplicity.

## 2.2 The Passivity Criterion

A second criterion of simplicity sometimes attributed to Locke is the *passivity criterion* (Connolly 2017, 2; Lennon 1983, 6; LoLordo 2008, 722; Priselac 2017, 16; Soles 2016, 143).<sup>9</sup> As David Soles says: “simple ideas are those that cannot be

<sup>8</sup> Locke’s talk of “representing” is somewhat obscure. His considered view seems to be this: an adequate definition of “zebra” consists of several names the significations of which are all and only the ideas of which the idea of zebra is composed.

<sup>9</sup> LoLordo and Soles also endorse the phenomenal criterion discussed below. Priselac and Connolly also endorse the compositional criterion. Priselac, however, holds that “simple ideas are primarily characterized by Locke as passively received.” See Priselac 2017, 16.

created by the mind, but must be acquired as givens of sensation or reflection” (Soles 2016, 143). We can understand the passivity criterion as follows: an idea is simple just in case it is received passively by means of sensation or reflection.

Locke accepts that simple ideas are received passively by means of sensation and reflection. He says that “simple *Ideas*, the Materials of all our Knowledge, are suggested and furnished to the Mind, only by those two ways above mentioned, viz. *Sensation* and *Reflection*” (*E* II.ii.2, 119). And also: “it is not in the power of the most exalted Wit, or enlarged Understanding, by any quickness or variety of Thought, to *invent or frame one new simple* Idea in the mind, not taken in by the ways before mentioned,” which ways are sensation and reflection (*E* II.ii.2, 119 f.). Would he accept that, necessarily, an idea is simple just in case it is received passively by means of sensation or reflection? There is evidence that he would not. In Book IV, Locke considers a “Species of Creatures,” the members of which are endowed with a sixth sense not possessed by humans (*E* IV.xviii.3, 690). Locke claims that God could “imprint” in one’s mind a simple idea of the kind conveyed to creatures of the other species by their sixth sense. Evidently, he holds that the imprinted idea could be a simple idea. Thus, Locke implies that an idea may be simple even if it is not received passively by means of sensation or reflection.<sup>10</sup>

We might revise the criterion as follows: an idea is simple just in case it is received passively by any means whatsoever. The revised passivity criterion (hereafter: just “passivity criterion”) is perhaps not vulnerable to the counterexample.<sup>11</sup> But there is a related problem. The counterexample stems from the passivity criterion’s rendering simplicity an extrinsic property or feature of ideas. An idea is simple not in virtue of a feature intrinsic to the idea. What makes an idea simple is a relation the idea bears to the subject whose idea it is. But Locke’s characterization of simple ideas suggests that he thinks that there is something about ideas themselves in virtue of which they are simple. When introducing simple ideas, he appears to claim that there are two features that adequately characterize simple ideas: a simple idea “contains in it nothing but *one uniform Appearance*” and is “in it self uncompounded” (*E* II.ii.1: 119). I will discuss these criteria below; for now, it suffices to say that these criteria suggest that there is some feature of ideas themselves in virtue of which they are simple. This suggests that the passivity criterion fails to capture the feature in virtue of which simple ideas are simple.

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<sup>10</sup> Some commentators have thought that at least some ideas received by means of sensation are complex. See Chappell 1994, 37. Alexander 1985 suggests that all ideas received immediately by sensation are complex. See Alexander 1985, 106 f. This would be another counterexample to the biconditional in view. Stuart 2008 gives persuasive criticisms of this claim. See Stuart 2008, 513 f.

<sup>11</sup> Locke would perhaps allow that God could imprint a *complex* idea in one’s mind. If so, then the revised passivity criterion, as stated, is also vulnerable to counterexample.

The passivity criterion can be derived from the conjunction of the compositional criterion and several assumptions to which Locke is committed. In the chapter “*Of Complex Ideas*,” Locke describes the ways whereby we make complex ideas out of simple ideas:

The Acts of the Mind wherein it exerts its Power over its simple *Ideas* are chiefly these three, I. Combining several simple *Ideas* into one compound one, and thus all Complex *Ideas* are made. 2. The *2d.* is 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. The *3d.* is separating them from all other *Ideas* that accompany them in their real existence; this is called *Abstraction* [...]” (*E* II.xii.1, 163).

Locke identifies three processes whereby we make complex ideas out of simple ideas: combination, comparison, and abstraction. These are the processes whereby we actively produce ideas.<sup>12</sup> If each of these processes cannot create ideas that are incomposite, then ideas that are incomposite cannot be actively produced. If the three processes Locke identifies cannot produce simple ideas as understood by the compositional criterion, then the passivity of simple ideas can be derived from the compositional criterion. The compositional criterion entails the passivity criterion, given Locke’s view with respect to the creative processes of the understanding. To show this, let us consider each process individually.

First, combination. Combination is the process whereby the understanding joins at least two ideas into a “compound one” (*E* II.xii.1, 163; II.xi.6, 158). One’s idea of a particular apple is formed by one’s putting together the ideas of red, sweet, round, etc. Since this process produces ideas that are “compound” in the sense of their being composed of other ideas, this process cannot produce ideas that are compositionally simple.

Second, comparison. Comparison produces only ideas of relation (*E* II.xi.4, 157). If ideas of relation cannot be incomposite, then comparison cannot produce incomposite ideas. Locke holds that relation “consists in the referring, or comparing two things, one to another; from which comparison, one or both comes to be denominated” (*E* II.xxv.5, 321). Crucially, he claims that there “must always be in relation two *Ideas*” and that they “terminate at last in simple *Ideas*” (*E* II.xxv.6, 321; II.xxv.11, 324).<sup>13</sup> Ideas of relation must be composite. Incomposite ideas cannot be produced by means of comparison.

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<sup>12</sup> There is controversy as to whether this fits with the rest of the *Essay*. For discussion, see Rickless 2014, 51–54. For a detailed discussion of these operations, see Stuart 2008.

<sup>13</sup> On this point, I am in agreement with Walter Ott and Samuel Rickless. See Ott 2017, 317 f., and Rickless 2014, 51–53.

Third, abstraction. Locke's views on abstraction are complex and controversial. We need not enter into this controversy here in order to see that Locke denies that abstraction could produce incomposite ideas. He first defines abstraction as follows:

[...] the Mind makes the particular *Ideas*, received from particular Objects, to become general; which is done by considering them as they are in the Mind such Appearances, separate from all other Existences, and the circumstances of real Existence, as Time, Place, or any other concomitant *Ideas*. This is called *ABSTRACTION*, whereby *Ideas* taken from particular Beings, become general Representatives of all of the same kind [...] (*E* II.xi.9, 159).

Locke understands abstraction as a process whereby an idea is separated from other ideas. This is echoed in a later discussion, where he claims that abstraction involves “separating [ideas] from all other *Ideas* that accompany them in their real existence” (*E* II.xii.1, 163). Abstraction, Locke indicates, does not create ideas but rather decomposes or isolates them. When one abstracts, one may separate a (composite or incomposite) idea from an idea of which it is a proper part.<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, one may separate a (composite or incomposite) idea from concomitant ideas of which it is not a proper part. For example, as the above passage suggests, one may separate an idea from its original context. The ideas that result from either form of abstraction may be incomposite. But this does not amount to the mind's producing incomposite ideas. To separate one idea from another is not to bring into existence the former idea. All incomposite ideas are received passively; they may become abstract ideas by virtue of their being isolated from other ideas via the process of abstraction.<sup>15</sup> When subjects abstract, “they make nothing new” (*E* III.iii.7, 411). None of the three mental operations acknowledged by Locke actively produces incomposite ideas. The compositional criterion can explain Locke's holding that all simple ideas are received passively.

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<sup>14</sup> Locke seems to think that some instances of abstraction involve separating an idea from multiple complex ideas of which it is a proper part. See his discussion of the abstract idea of whiteness in II.xi.9, 159.

<sup>15</sup> The account of Lockean abstraction here is in general agreement with Stuart 2008 and Rickless 2014. See Stuart 2008, 519–27, and Rickless 2014, 57. For a different view, see Chappell 1994, 38–44. In my view, Locke holds that ideas arrived at by means of abstraction may be either composite or incomposite and, hence, either complex or simple. The claim that abstraction does not produce incomposite ideas is also consistent with a selective attention interpretation of Lockean abstraction. See Mackie 1976, 110–12.

### 2.3 The Phenomenal Criterion

A third criterion attributed to Locke is the *phenomenal criterion* (Ayers 1986, 19; LoLordo 2008, 722).<sup>16</sup> According to this criterion, simple ideas are simple in virtue of their appearance or phenomenal character: an idea is simple just in case the idea appears as though it contains no parts.<sup>17</sup> The phenomenal criterion takes as its textual motivation a passage (previously quoted) from the chapter “*Of simple Ideas*”:

[...] And there is nothing can be plainer to a Man, than the clear and distinct Perception he has of those simple *Ideas*; which being each in it self uncompounded, [i] contains in it nothing but *one uniform Appearance*, or Conception in the mind, and [ii] is not distinguishable into different *Ideas* (*E* II.ii.1, 119).

Locke seems to give two non-equivalent criteria of simplicity. Clause (i) suggests the phenomenal criterion; clause (ii) suggests the compositional criterion. Proponents of the phenomenal criterion read (i) as Locke’s making a claim about the appearance of ideas (Ayers 1986, 19; LoLordo 2008, 722). They take the passage to provide grounds for attributing the phenomenal criterion to Locke. But Locke’s use of the terms “appearance” and “conception” suggests an alternative reading of (i). In the early modern period, both terms are used as rough synonyms for what Locke calls “ideas.” Thomas Hobbes, for example, uses both “appearance” and “conception” as names for the immediate objects of our cognitive operations (Hobbes 1994, 6).<sup>18</sup> Locke himself sometimes uses “appearance” in this way. In the Epistle to the Reader, he says: “By *determinate*, when applied to a *simple* idea, I mean that simple appearance which the mind has in its view, or perceives in itself, when that Idea is said to be in it” (*E* Epistle, 13, italics removed). Here, Locke uses “simple appearance” to refer to a simple idea. Likewise, he claims that, when the understanding abstracts an idea of a particular shade of white, “it considers that *Appearance* alone, makes it a representative” of all other things

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**16** Matthew Stuart 2010 attributes to Locke a related criterion, namely, that simple ideas are those that have a homogeneous appearance. Stuart’s interpretation is textually plausible. It does, however, commit Locke to the unfortunate claim that simple ideas of reflection have an appearance; moreover, it is quite difficult to understand how an idea of reflection might appear homogeneous. The compositional criterion, it seems to me, both enjoys considerable textual support and renders the simplicity of ideas of reflection more readily intelligible. I discuss some putative textual evidence for Stuart’s interpretation below.

**17** This phrasing is taken from Antonia LoLordo. See LoLordo 2008, 722.

**18** I do not mean to suggest that Hobbesian ideas are perfectly analogous to Lockean ideas. The point is terminological.



that possess that color (*E* II.xi.9, 159, emphasis added).<sup>19</sup> Thus, it is plausible that when Locke says that simple ideas contain “nothing but one uniform Appearance,” he is not making a claim about the appearance of simple ideas; rather, he is claiming that simple ideas are ideas that do not contain other ideas.<sup>20</sup> On this reading, clause (ii) simply expands on clause (i). Locke may seem, in this passage, to suggest two different criteria of simplicity. But he may be plausibly understood to suggest the compositional criterion in both (i) and (ii).

This reading of the passage is motivated by the extensional inadequacy of the phenomenal criterion. Locke holds that all simple ideas fall into one of three categories: simple ideas received only by sensation, simple ideas received only by reflection, and simple ideas received by both sensation and reflection. In each of these categories, there are simple ideas that Locke identifies as simple yet are not so classified by the phenomenal criterion. First, as Thomas Lennon notes, Locke would count at least some ideas of extension and figure as simple, none of which appears as though it lacks parts (Lennon 1984, 6). Second, the phenomenal criterion cannot account for Locke’s claim that there are ideas received only by means of reflection that are simple. Simple ideas of reflection, according to Locke, are ideas of our own cognitive operations: our perceiving, remembering, discerning, etc. Such ideas may have an appearance, perhaps one that derives from the phenomenology of the cognitive operation that they represent. But they do not seem to have an appearance of being either composite or incomposite. The phenomenal criterion does not classify *any* ideas of reflection as simple.<sup>21</sup> Third, Locke identifies several ideas received by means of both sensation and reflection that are simple. Included in this class of ideas are the idea of existence and the idea of unity (*E* II.vii.7, 131). Neither of these ideas has an appearance, and so neither appears as though it has no parts. The phenomenal criterion of simplicity fails to classify as simple many ideas that Locke explicitly so classifies.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Locke often uses “appearance” as a synonym for “ideas” in the section headings of *Essay*. For example, see *E* II.xxxii.3: “No *Idea* as an appearance in the Mind true or false.” And *E* II.i.1: “Uncompounded Appearances,” referring to simple ideas.

<sup>20</sup> “Uniform,” in clause (i), can be understood as “lacking variety or diversity.” See the *Oxford English Dictionary* for this definition of “uniform.”

<sup>21</sup> Rickless 2014 also makes this point. See Rickless 2014, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Soles 2016 notices some of these problems for the phenomenal criterion.

### 3 The Compositional Criterion

Neither the logical criterion nor the passivity criterion nor the phenomenal criterion is Locke's primary criterion of simplicity. Locke accepts both the logical criterion and the passivity criterion, but his accepting these criteria can be explained by his commitment to the compositional criterion. The phenomenal criterion is extensionally inadequate; it is doubtful that Locke accepted it. We now turn to evidence for Locke's holding the compositional criterion.

Recall the compositional criterion: an idea is simple just in case the idea does not have ideas as proper parts. Any idea that does not have an idea as a proper part is *simple in structure*. Thus, the compositional criterion holds that an idea's being simple in structure is necessary and sufficient for its being a simple idea. This criterion is distinct from another, the *compositional\* criterion*, according to which an idea is simple just in case the idea does not have other ideas as proper parts *and* does not have content as of something composite. The compositional\* criterion agrees that an idea's being simple in structure is a necessary condition for its being a simple idea. But it denies that an idea's being simple in structure is individually sufficient for an idea's being a simple idea. In addition, the compositional\* criterion holds that an idea is simple only if no composite thing is included in the content of the idea. In other words, according to the compositional\* criterion, an idea is simple only if the idea does not represent something that is itself composite. According to the compositional\* criterion, a simple idea must be both simple in structure and *simple in content*.

Locke accepts the compositional criterion and denies the compositional\* criterion. Textual evidence for the latter claim occurs in Locke's discussion of the idea of power.<sup>23</sup> Locke holds that the idea of power "may well have a place amongst other simple *Ideas*" (E II.xxi.3, 234). Nonetheless, he claims that "*Power includes in it some kind of relation*, (a Relation to Action or Change,) as indeed which of our *Ideas*, of what kind so ever, when attentively considered, does not?" (E II.xxi.3, 234). He goes on to list several other ideas, including ideas of color, smell, and motion, that he has identified as simple. What these ideas have in common, Locke repeats, is that they "include some kind of relation in them" (E II.xxi.3, 234). Ideas of color are simple but nonetheless include some relation in their content; these ideas are complex in content. If Locke held the compositional\* criterion, then he would hold that these ideas are not simple ideas. Because Locke

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<sup>23</sup> Connolly 2017 argues that there are several ideas of power but agrees that one such idea is simple.

does not deny that such ideas are simple, the passage is evidence that Locke did not hold the compositional\* criterion.<sup>24</sup>

Textual evidence for Locke's holding the compositional criterion is substantial. When introducing simple ideas, he claims that "those simple *Ideas*" are "each in it self uncompounded" and "not distinguishable into different *Ideas*" (*E* II.ii.1: 119). He argues that the names of simple ideas are incapable of definition, due to their signifying ideas that have "no Composition at all" (*E* III.iv.7, 422). The sort of "Composition" salient in that discussion is that which is ruled out by the compositional criterion: composition in virtue of which an idea is not simple in structure. Further evidence comes in a note dictated by Locke to Pierre Coste, added in the fifth English edition of the *Essay* published in 1706.<sup>25</sup> In the note, Locke repeats his definition of simple ideas given in his previously quoted introduction of simple ideas. He clarifies his definition of simple ideas, claiming that the "Composition which he designed to exclude in that definition was a Composition of different ideas in the Mind" (*E* II.xv.9, 201 n1).<sup>26</sup> This suggests that Locke held simple ideas to be ideas that are simple in structure. Additional textual support is found in another discussion of the names of simple ideas. Locke claims that while names of simple ideas cannot be defined, their signification is often "*less doubtful and uncertain*" than those of ideas of substances and mixed modes (*E* III.iv.15, 427). While the the name "scarlet" cannot be defined, what idea "scarlet" signifies is "known at once" (*E* III.iv.15, 427). This is so, Locke claims, because the "whole signification" of the name of a simple idea "consists not of parts, whereof more or less being put in, the *Idea* may be varied, and so the signification of its Name, be obscure, or uncertain" (*E* III.iv.15, 427). The signification of a name may be obscured if that which the name signifies is susceptible to variation by means of the addition or removal of parts. Since simple ideas are ideas that are simple in structure, the ideas signified by names of simple ideas are not susceptible to such variation. Hence, names that signify simple ideas are not obscure in their signification.

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<sup>24</sup> Martha Brandt Bolton appears to notice that Locke, in the passage under discussion, rejects the compositional\* criterion, although she does not use these terms. See Bolton 2007, 74 f.

<sup>25</sup> The footnote was also added in the second French edition of the *Essay* published in 1729. In that edition, Coste explains that the note originated in response to a objection from Barbeyrac: "C'est M. Barbeyrac, à présent Professeur en droit à Groningue, qui me communiqua ces Objections dans une Lettre que je fis voir à M. Locke. Et voici la réponse que M. Locke me dicta peu de jours après."

<sup>26</sup> In the footnote, Coste reports Locke's response to the objection; "he" refers to Locke. We will return to this footnote in more detail below.

The interpretation according to which Locke holds the compositional criterion receives further support from its ability to explain a puzzling passage:

But it is not in the Power of the most exalted Wit, or enlarged Understanding, by any quickness or variety of Thought, to *invent or frame one new simple* Idea in the mind, not taken in by the ways before mentioned: nor can any force of the Understanding, *destroy* those that are there. The Dominion of Man, in this little World of his own Understanding, being muchwhat the same, as it is in the great World of visible things; wherein his Power, however Managed by Art and Skill, reaches no farther, 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 Atome of what is already in Being (*E II.iii.2*, 120 f.).

The human understanding is incapable of “invent[ing]” new simple ideas; the understanding is also incapable of “destroy[ing]” any simple ideas already received by means of sensation or reflection. As argued above, Locke’s commitment to the compositional criterion, coupled with assumptions with respect to with what cognitive processes the understanding is endowed, explains his commitment to the former claim. His commitment to the compositional criterion, I suggest, also explains his commitment to the latter claim. That incomposite things are not subject to destruction is an old idea. In the *Phaedo*, for example, Socrates asks: “Is not anything that is composite and a compound by nature liable to be split up into its component parts, and only that which is noncomposite, if anything, is not likely to be split up?” (Plato 1997, 68). In the spirit of Socrates’ suggestion, Locke’s position might be understood in terms of the following argument:

- (1) If simple ideas could be destroyed by the understanding, then simple ideas could be destroyed by means of either annihilation or corruption.
- (2) The understanding is incapable of destroying simple ideas by means of annihilation.
- (3) If simple ideas could be destroyed by means of corruption, then simple ideas would be capable of being broken into parts.
- (4) Simple ideas cannot be broken into parts.
- (5) Simple ideas cannot be destroyed by means of corruption. [3,4]
- (6) Therefore, simple ideas cannot be destroyed by the understanding. [1, 2, 5]

(1) treats as exhaustive a distinction between two forms of destruction.<sup>27</sup> When an object is *annihilated*, all of its (proper or improper) parts are caused to go out

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<sup>27</sup> The distinction, it seems to me, is not actually exhaustive, insofar as it seems that there could be forms of destruction that is not an instance of either annihilation or corruption. Because it is doubtful that Locke was sensitive to this complication, I set it aside here.

of existence simultaneously, leaving nothing where there was once something.<sup>28</sup> When an object is *corrupted*, the object is caused to go out of existence while its (proper) parts continue to exist (Pasnau 2011, 20). Locke does not acknowledge the process of corruption explicitly in the *Essay*. But he has the process in mind in his discussion of the identity condition for bodies. He claims that if one of the “Atoms” of which a body is composed is removed, then the body ceases to be (*E* II.xxvii.3: 330). Locke and his contemporaries would accept (2). In the early modern period, the power of annihilation is usually reserved for God. Just as no finite being could create another being from nothing, so too no finite being could annihilate another being. That Locke reserves the power of annihilation for God is perhaps confirmed by the fact that the only example of annihilation in the *Essay* is one in which God annihilates a material body (*E* II.xiii.21, 176). This is also suggested by his claim that a person can “do nothing towards [...] destroying one Atome of what is already in Being.” (3) follows from the definition of corruption. (4) relies on Locke’s commitment to the compositional criterion of simplicity. If, as the compositional criterion claims, simple ideas are simple in structure, then they are not composed of idea parts and, hence, are not divisible into such parts.<sup>29</sup> Further, if simple ideas are not divisible into idea parts, then they are indivisible *tout court*. From (3) and (4), (5) follows. Thus, if simple ideas are simple in structure, then they cannot be destroyed by the understanding. Locke’s holding the compositional criterion of simplicity explains his holding that simple ideas are incapable of destruction.

## 4 Extension

Locke seems to think that there are simple ideas of extension. In the chapter “*Of simple Ideas of divers Senses*,” extension is said to make “perceivable impressions on both the Eyes and Touch” (*E* II.v.1, 127). In the chapter “*Some farther Considerations concerning our simple Ideas*,” extension is listed among the primary qualities “which I think we may observe to produce simple *Ideas* in us” (*E* II.viii.9, 135). While Locke clearly wishes to include ideas of extension among our simple

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<sup>28</sup> Locke acknowledges this process in the *Essay* and seems to understand it as I have presented it here. In his discussion of space, he uses the possibility of an object’s being annihilated by God to argue for the possibility of a vacuum. See *E* II.xii.21, 176.

<sup>29</sup> This inference holds only assuming what Thomas Holden calls the “actual parts doctrine,” according to which a body is divisible into a number of parts  $n$  just in case the body has  $n$  parts. See Holden 2004, 78.

ideas, it is unclear that his so classifying ideas of extension is consistent with his holding the compositional criterion of simplicity.

The fifteenth chapter of Book II of the *Essay*, “*Of Duration and Expansion, considered together*,” is a comparison of expansion and duration.<sup>30</sup> Locke coins the term “expansion” as an alternative to the traditional “extension.” He does so because “extension” is sometimes used “to express [...] distance only as it is in the solid parts of Matter, and so includes, or at least intimates the *Idea* of Body” (*E* II.xv.1, 196). “Expansion,” by contrast, refers to the extension of body and the extension of space. That is, “expansion” refers to both “the cohesion or continuity of solid, separable movable Parts” and “the continuity of unsolid, inseparable, and immovable Parts” (*E* II.vi.5, 126).<sup>31</sup> (Hereafter, I will continue to use the more familiar “extension,” as Locke sometimes does, taking it to be equivalent to Locke’s “space” and “expansion.”) In § 9 of Chapter XV, Locke considers the simplicity of our ideas of extension and duration:

T1

There is one thing more, wherein <i>Space and Duration</i> have a great Conformity,	1
and that is, though they are justly reckoned amongst our <i>simple Ideas</i> : Yet none	2
of the distinct <i>Ideas</i> we have of either is without all manner of <i>Composition</i> , it	3
is the very nature of both of them to consist of Parts: But their Parts being all	4
of the same kind, and without the mixture of any other <i>Idea</i> , hinder them not	5
from having a Place amongst simple <i>Ideas</i> ( <i>E</i> II.xv.9, 201 f.).	6

Call this passage “T1.” Ideas of extension and ideas of duration are “justly reckoned” to be simple ideas. They are simple despite their not being “without all manner of *Composition*.” But why are such ideas simple? Does Locke hold that his commitment to the simplicity of these ideas is consistent with his commitment to the compositional criterion? And are these two commitments, in fact, consistent?

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**30** I sideline duration in the following discussion, emphasizing extension. This emphasis reflects Locke’s own. While extension and duration are considered together in the body of Chapter XV of Book II, Locke only discusses extension in the Coste footnote, which, as we will see, is crucial to the argument of this paper.

**31** In “*Of Duration and Expansion, considered together*,” Locke explicates expansion (and the extension of body) in terms of the *distance* between parts and not in terms of their continuity. See *E* II.xv.1, 196. For more on Locke’s account of extension, see Stuart 2013, 53–65.

## 4.1 The Standard Reading of T1

T1 is often taken to be inconsistent with the compositional criterion. Richard Aaron and R. S. Woolhouse both accept this view (Aaron 1971, 112; Woolhouse 1970, 313 f.). More recently, it has been accepted by Matthew Stuart and Samuel Rickless.<sup>32</sup> Stuart understands Locke as claiming, in T1, that “the idea of space [here: extension] has parts,” where such parts are also ideas (Stuart 2010, 51 f.). He thinks that Locke “generally takes it for granted that there is a certain correspondence between the parts of ideas and the parts of their objects” (Stuart 2010, 52). Rickless also takes T1 to support an interpretation according to which the answer to our latter two questions is negative (Rickless 2014, 42). Rickless and Stuart seem to understand the passage roughly as follows. In lines 2–3, Locke concedes that ideas of extension and duration are not “without all manner of *Composition*.” Locke means by this that ideas of extension and duration are not simple in structure: they have ideas as proper parts. Locke then claims, in lines 3–4, that it is in the very nature of “both of them,” referring to *ideas* of extension and duration, to be composite: to have other ideas as proper parts. However, in lines 4–5, Locke claims that “their Parts,” referring to the *idea parts* of the ideas of extension and duration, are of the same kind and “without mixture of any other Idea.” That ideas of extension and duration have ideas as proper parts does not preclude their being simple ideas because their respective idea parts are of the same kind.

I will propose an alternative reading of T1 below. Let us first consider an alternative to the compositional criterion that Rickless develops in order to accommodate T1, as he understands it. According to Rickless, Locke denies that the simplicity of ideas of extension is consistent with the compositional criterion. Locke “notices that the parts of which the ideas of space and duration are composed are themselves ideas [...]” (Rickless 2014, 42). Rickless reads Locke, in T1, as abandoning the compositional criterion in favor of another, which we might call the *different kinds criterion*: an idea is simple just in case *either* the idea does not have ideas as proper parts *or* the ideas it has as proper parts are not of different kinds.<sup>33</sup> According to the different kinds criterion, an idea may be simple despite its not being simple in structure. An idea that is complex in structure is simple if the ideas out of which it is composed do not differ in kind. Ideas of

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<sup>32</sup> Martha Brandt Bolton seems to concur. See Bolton 2007, 75.

<sup>33</sup> Rickless calls this criterion the “No-Idea-Parts of One Kind” criterion. Because this name is somewhat confusing – the criterion holds that ideas that do not have idea parts of *different kinds* are simple ideas – I opt to call it the “different kinds criterion.”

extension are simple because the ideas out of which they are composed are all ideas of extension.

Rickless' interpretation faces two problems. The first is that it is lacking in textual support. Rickless cites two passages that he takes to support Locke's abandoning the compositional criterion in favor of the different kinds criterion: T1 and Locke's note to Coste. Note line 5 of the former. According to Rickless, Locke claims there that ideas of extension and ideas of duration are "without the mixture of any other *Idea*." Notice that Locke says "any other *Idea*," not "any other *kind of Idea*." The passage would support attributing to Locke the different kinds criterion rather than the compositional criterion only if Locke had said the latter and not the former. Below, I will argue that T1 need not be read as Rickless suggests. Moreover, Locke's note to Coste suggests a commitment to the compositional criterion and not the different kinds criterion. Locke claims that the

[...] Composition which he designed to exclude in that definition [i.e. his definition of simple ideas] was a Composition of different *Ideas* in 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 intirely exempted from this Composition (*E II.xv.9*: 201n).

His definition of simple ideas excludes "a composition of different *Ideas* in the Mind." Locke does not indicate that he means a composition of different kinds of ideas.<sup>34</sup> In my view, he claims that his definition of simple ideas entails that no simple idea is structurally complex. Nonetheless, Locke says, we have simple ideas of extension, "a Thing whose Essence consists in having Parts of the same kind." Further, the Coste note suggests that Locke takes himself to have affirmed, in T1, the same criterion of simplicity that he affirmed in Chapter II of Book II, "*Of simple Ideas*." I have argued that the latter affirms the compositional criterion. The Coste note suggests that Locke did not change his mind about the compositional criterion.<sup>35</sup>

The second problem concerns the different kinds criterion. Included in Locke's taxonomy of ideas is the category of mode. Mode ideas are complex ideas that "contain not in them the supposition of subsisting by themselves" (*E II.xii.4*,

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<sup>34</sup> In *E II.xii*, Locke uses "the same simple *Idea*" when he means the same *kind* of simple idea. See *E II.xii.5*, 165. Because he uses "same" to refer to specific sameness and not to numerical sameness in that passage, one might think that he uses "different," in the Coste footnote and T1, to refer to specific difference and not to numerical difference. Whatever one thinks of this, it does not avoid the more serious issue with the different kinds criterion that I raise in the next paragraph. In Section 4.2, I give an alternative reading of T1 that avoids the problem.

<sup>35</sup> This would not move Stuart 2010, who thinks that Locke does not accept the compositional criterion in *E.II.ii*. See Stuart 2010, 51.



165). Modes are considered as being dependent on substances. Locke distinguishes between ideas of simple modes and ideas of complex modes. Ideas of simple modes are those which “are only variations, or different combinations of the same simple Idea, without the mixture of any other”; ideas of complex modes are mode ideas that do not satisfy this description (*E* II.xii.5, 165). An example of an idea of a simple mode is the idea of a dozen, which is the idea of unity repeated twelve times (*E* II.xii.5, 165). The problem for the different kinds criterion is that it entails that all ideas of simple modes are simple ideas. But Locke holds that ideas of simple modes are complex ideas (*E* II.xii.3–4, 164 f.). Locke could consistently accept the different kinds criterion only with substantial revision to the *Essay*’s taxonomy of ideas.

## 4.2 An Alternative Reading of T1

I believe that T1 has been misunderstood. T1 neither suggests Locke’s rejecting the compositional criterion nor commits Locke to the problematic different kinds criterion. Here, in my view, is how the passage should be understood. In lines 2–4, Locke claims that ideas of extension (and duration) are not entirely incomposite. *Pace* Rickless and Stuart, when Locke says “it is the very nature of both of them to consist of Parts,” “them” refers not to ideas of extension and duration, but rather to extension and duration themselves. What is extended has *partes extra partes*: it has numerically distinct parts located at numerically distinct places. Ideas of extension are not “without all manner of Composition” because they represent extension, all instances of which are composite. Locke’s claim is not that all ideas of extension are composed of other ideas of extension. His claim is not that all ideas of extension are complex in structure. His claim is that all ideas of extension are complex in content.

Recall lines 4–6 of T1:

[...] is the very nature of both of them to consist of Parts: But their Parts being all	4
of the same kind, and without the mixture of any other <i>Idea</i> , hinder them not	5
from having a Place amongst simple <i>Ideas</i> ( <i>E</i> II.xv.9: 201 f.).	6

On the present reading, Locke makes two points in this passage. The first concerns extension itself. All the parts out of which an instance of extension is composed are themselves instances of extension. This follows from Locke’s commitment to the infinite divisibility of matter: “every part of Extension is Extension” (*E* II.xv.9, 202). Thus, the parts of extension are all of the same kind: they are all instances of extension. The second point concerns our conception of extension.

When we conceive of extension, we conceive of it by means of an incomposite idea and our conception of that extension is not mixed with any other idea.<sup>36</sup> If Locke holds the compositional criterion of simplicity, then the simplicity of ideas of extension follows directly from the second point. Why mention the first point? I suggest that Locke has in mind the relationship between complexity of structure and complexity of content. If what ideas of extension represent were composed of different kinds of things, then no idea of extension could be structurally simple. Locke's claim is that structural simplicity is consistent with complexity of content only insofar as the complexity of content involved is complexity *within a kind*. An idea that represents a multiplicity of things that are all of the same kind can be structurally simple. An idea that represents a multiplicity of things some of which are of different kinds cannot be structurally simple. Since ideas of extension represent instances of extension, and all instances of extension contain further instances of extension, the complexity of what ideas of extension represent is consistent with those ideas' being structurally simple. In T1, then, Locke implies a limit imposed on simplicity of structure by complexity of content; the structural simplicity of (at least some) ideas of extension is consistent with this limit. On this reading of T1, Locke does not commit himself to the different kinds criterion. Instead, he insists on the structural simplicity of ideas of extension, while acknowledging that such ideas do involve an element of complexity. T1 does not undermine but rather supports Locke's holding the compositional criterion.

This reading of T1 holds that "their" (line 4) and "them" (line 5) refer to space (i. e. extension) and duration and not to ideas of extension and duration. If those referred to *ideas* of space and duration, then Locke would be claiming, in T1, that ideas of extension have ideas as proper parts but are nonetheless simple. T1 would *deny* the compositional criterion. Now, my reading of lines 4–6 may appear problematic. One might think that "their" (line 4) and "them" (line 5) must refer to ideas of space and duration: Locke says that the referent of those terms has "a Place amongst simple *Ideas*." But, plausibly, *x* is among our simple ideas only if *x* is itself a simple idea. In response, consider again lines 1–3:

There is one thing more, wherein <i>Space and Duration</i> have a great Conformity,	1
and that is, though they are justly reckoned amongst our <i>simple Ideas</i> : Yet none	2
of the distinct <i>Ideas</i> we have of either is without all manner of <i>Composition</i> [...]	3
( <i>E</i> II.xv.9, 201f.).	

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<sup>36</sup> As I explain below, Locke goes on to qualify this claim.

“Either” (line 3) picks up “Space and Duration” (line 1); they have the same referents. If “either” refers to ideas of space and duration, then line 3 would be saying that *the ideas of our ideas* of space and duration are not without all manner of composition. Line 3 cannot be saying that. “Either” must refer to space and duration themselves. Because “either” refers to space and duration themselves, so do “Space and Duration.” Thus, in line 2, Locke says that space and duration themselves are justly included among our simple ideas. Against the objection in view, it is not the case that if  $x$  is among our simple ideas, then  $x$  is itself a simple idea. In my view, line 6 says that space and duration themselves are among our simple ideas because we have simple ideas of them. Insofar as we conceive them, space and duration are among our simple ideas. Locke’s claim, in lines 4–6, is this: we have simple ideas of extension and duration because the parts of extension and duration, respectively, are all of the same kind and because extension and duration, as we conceive of them, are not mixed with any additional idea.

T1 should be understood as consistent with the compositional criterion. Yet we have not yet considered another important aspect of Locke’s position in “*Of Duration and Expansion, considered together*.” Locke is committed to the existence of ideas of *sensible points*. This commitment seems to lead to an inconsistent triad:

- All ideas of extension are simple.
- An idea of extension is simple just in case it does not have any idea as a proper part. [The Compositional Criterion]
- At least some ideas of extension have ideas of sensible points as proper parts.

I will show that Locke recognizes this tension and effectively resolves it. But first we should consider his neglected theory of sensible points.<sup>37</sup>

### 4.3 Sensible Points

Locke says that sensible points are “the least Particle of Matter or Space we can discern” (*E* II.xv.9: 203). Sensible points are not themselves ideas, but rather are portions of extension (bodies) of which we have ideas. Locke also says that a sensible point is the least amount of extension of which can form a clear and distinct idea. Clear ideas are those which are “full and evident” and “such as the Objects themselves, from whence they were taken, did or might, in a well-ordered Sensation or Perception, present them” (*E* II.xxix.4, 364; II.xxix.2, 363). An idea

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<sup>37</sup> The theory is not entirely neglected. See Stuart 2010 for discussion.

is distinct if it is “sufficiently distinguishable from another, from which it ought to be different” (*E* II.xxix.4, 364).<sup>38</sup> Thus, if ideas of sensible points are distinct, then one can distinguish them from other ideas. According to Locke’s account of the mental operation of discerning, it is the operation whereby we perceive “two *Ideas* to be the same, or different” (*E* II.xi.1, 156). In the passage in view, however, Locke speaks not of discerning an *idea* of a sensible point, but rather of discerning a sensible point itself. One might think that Locke here confuses an idea with that which it represents, saying “the least Particle of Matter or Space we can discern” when he means “the least Particle of Matter or Space *the idea of which* we can discern” (*E* II.xv.9, 203). Ideas of sensible points would then be the least ideas of extension such that we can discern any one from any other. For two ideas of sensible points, one can discern that these are ideas of the same amount of extension. For two ideas each of which are ideas of an amount of extension that is less than a sensible point, one cannot discern whether these ideas represent the same amount of extension. However, the note to Coste suggests that ideas of sensible points are not only the least *clear and distinct* ideas of extension; they are the least ideas of extension *simpliciter*. Locke says that an idea of a sensible point is “the least *Idea* of Space that the Mind can form to itself” (*E* II.xv.9, 201 n1). When Locke says that sensible points are the “the least Particle of Matter or Space we can discern,” he seems to mean that they are ideas of the smallest portion of extension of which we can form an idea (*E* II.xv.9, 203).

Locke gives an approximation of the size of a sensible point in terms of the area a sensible point occupies in the visual field. For ordinary subjects, each sensible point occupies “about a Minute” of the visual field (*E* II.xv.9: 203). For subjects with especially good vision, the same amount of extension which occupies a minute of the visual field occupies “thirty Seconds of a Circle” (*E* II.xv.9, 203). At least two features of this discussion are puzzling. First, Locke seems to hold that a sensible point is a particular unit of extension: if  $x$  is a sensible point and  $y$  is a sensible point, then  $x$  and  $y$  are equivalent in size. But his understanding of the size of sensible points in terms of the area they occupy in the visual field might suggest that some sensible points are larger than others. Take a piece of extension  $e$ . Let  $e$  occupy a “Minute” of the visual field when perceived visually by a typical human subject from some distance  $d_1$ . Let the subject move toward  $e$ , such that she is now at a distance  $d_2$  from  $e$ , where  $d_2$  is half of  $d_1$ .  $e$  now occupies several minutes of the subject’s visual field. Moreover,  $e$  is extended and, hence, is com-

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<sup>38</sup> Locke’s account of distinctness is, in fact, more complicated than this. He holds that the distinctness and obscurity of ideas involve the names we use to signify our ideas. I set this issue aside here.

posed of discernible portions of extension some of which occupy a minute of the subject's visual field and each of which is smaller in size than  $e$ . From distance  $d_1$ ,  $e$  is a sensible point; from the closer distance  $d_2$ ,  $e$  is merely a portion of extension that is composed of sensible points. Two responses suggest themselves. First, Locke might deny that if  $x$  and  $y$  are sensible points, then  $x$  and  $y$  are the same size. A sensible point just is whatever amount of extension, on a particular occasion, is the least amount of extension one can discern. If the Louvre occupies, from a certain distance, a minute of the visual field, then the Louvre is a sensible point, from that perspective. Second, and more plausibly, Locke might avoid the problem by stipulating that a sensible point is a portion of extension that, *when viewed from a certain (stipulated) distance*, is the smallest portion of extension that can be discerned by the subject. That Locke accepts second response rather than the first is suggested by his qualification that sensible points only "ordinarily" occupy a minute of the visual field (*E* II.xv.9, 203). A sensible point, this suggests, can occupy greater or less than a minute of the visual field, a possibility denied by the first response.

The second puzzling feature is the standard of measurement Locke uses to describe the size of a sensible point: what does it mean for a portion of extension to occupy a "Minute" or "thirty seconds" of a "Circle, whereof the eye is the center?" (*E* II.xv.9, 203). Locke might think the following. Take a circle (of an unspecified diameter) and a human subject. Place the circle such that it lies parallel to the sagittal plane of the subject, and such that the center of the circle lies on one of the subject's eyes. The subject's field of vision, with respect to that eye, is the interior of the circle. On the present proposal, Locke holds that a sensible point is equivalent to the amount of extension that could fit in the arc created by a sector the interior angle of which is  $6^\circ$  ( $1/60$  of  $360^\circ$ ). For the keen-sighted subject, a sensible point is equivalent to the amount of extension that could fit in the arc created by a sector the interior angle of which is  $3^\circ$ .<sup>39</sup>

Here is Locke's crucial claim about sensible points, for present purposes:

But the least Portions of [extension and duration], whereof we have clear and distinct *Ideas* may perhaps be fittest to be considered by us, as the simple *Ideas* of that kind, out of which our complex modes of Space, Extension, and Duration, are made up, and into which they can again be distinctly resolved (*E* II.xv.9, 202).

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<sup>39</sup> Locke's explanation of sensible points is given in terms of visual ideas of a sensible point. Because he holds that we can receive ideas of extension by means of both vision and touch, he, presumably, would hold that we can receive ideas of sensible points by means of both vision and touch. So it is puzzling that Locke uses a purely visual standard of measurement. Moreover, this standard of measurement is itself puzzling. If the standard of measurement is to be precise, it seems that Locke must hold to a fixed diameter of the circle.

Ideas of sensible points are “fittest to be considered” the simple ideas we have of extension. Locke’s position is the following. We have many ideas of extension. Some have ideas of extension as proper parts. These include “our complex modes of Space and Extension.” Such ideas can be “resolved” into lesser ideas of extension. The least ideas of extension we have are ideas of sensible points. These ideas cannot be resolved into further ideas of extension; they, while themselves ideas of extension, do not have as proper parts further ideas of extension. Ideas of sensible points are simple in structure but complex in content. They are ideas of extension and, hence, represent something that is essentially composite. But because they are simple in structure, they are, by the compositional criterion, simple ideas. Moreover, ideas of sensible points are, strictly speaking, the only genuinely simple ideas of extension. All other ideas of extension can be decomposed into ideas of sensible points; all other ideas of extension are complex in structure and, hence, by the compositional criterion, complex ideas.<sup>40</sup>

This, I propose, is Locke’s considered position in the *Essay*. How does it square with Chapter V of Book II, in which Locke identifies ideas of extension as simple ideas that are received by more than one sense? That identification might suggest that Locke takes all ideas of extension to be simple. This is not Locke’s view. For one, he holds that we can form simple *mode* ideas of extension, by combining many ideas of extension into one complex idea. Since mode ideas are complex ideas, such mode ideas are complex ideas of extension. So Locke does not mean, in Chapter V, to claim that all ideas of extension are simple. We can thus understand Locke, in Chapter V, as claiming merely that *some* ideas of extension are simple ideas. Whereas there he is silent about which ideas of extension count as genuinely simple, he takes a more definitive view in the later chapter on expansion: simple ideas of extension are ideas of sensible points. Chapter XV of Book II is not in tension with Locke’s discussion in Chapter V of Book II.

## 5 Conclusion

The conclusions of this paper are as follows. Locke’s primary criterion of simplicity is the compositional criterion: an idea is simple just in case it does not have ideas as proper parts. Locke’s commitment to this criterion explains his commit-

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<sup>40</sup> It is open to Locke to hold that there is a privileged class of ideas of extension that are neither composed of ideas of sensible points nor themselves ideas of sensible points. While there is logical space for this view, it is unclear what would motivate it, and I see no indication in the text that Locke accepts it.

ment to other criteria of simplicity that have been attributed to him. Barbeyrac notes that the simplicity of some ideas of extension is *prima facie* in tension with the compositional criterion. Locke's considered response to this apparent tension, I have argued, is that the only genuinely simple ideas of extension are ideas of sensible points. Ideas of sensible points, according to the present interpretation, are ideas of extension that are not composed of other ideas of extension: they are simple in structure but complex in content.

I conclude with three clarifications. The first clarification concerns Locke's positive resemblance thesis. Locke holds that simple ideas of primary qualities *resemble* the quality of which they are an idea: ideas of extension resemble extension, ideas of solidity resemble solidity. Thus, if ideas of sensible points are ideas of extension, then ideas of sensible points resemble extension. This claim might appear inconsistent with the structural simplicity of ideas of sensible points: extension itself is essentially complex; only ideas that are complex in structure could resemble extension.

The sense in which ideas of primary qualities "resemble" primary qualities is controversial. Some understand the resemblance weakly. Jonathan Bennett, for example, holds that ideas of primary qualities resemble primary qualities just insofar as primary qualities explain the production of those ideas (Bennett 1971, 106). Clearly, the structural simplicity of ideas of sensible points is consistent with the positive resemblance thesis as understood by Bennett. Perhaps the strongest reading of the thesis is that of Michael Jacovides, according to whom ideas of extension, for example, resemble extension insofar as ideas of extension are literally extended (Jacovides 1999, 469). Is the structural simplicity of ideas of sensible points consistent with the positive resemblance thesis as understood by Jacovides? Ideas of sensible points are ideas of extension and, hence, according to Jacovides' reading, are themselves extended. That ideas of sensible points are extended does not, however, entail that they are complex in structure. That ideas of sensible points are extended does not entail that they have *ideas* as proper parts; such ideas could be *materially* extended without their thereby being *ideationally* extended.<sup>41</sup> According to the above understanding of complexity of structure, an idea is complex in structure just in case it has ideas as proper parts. Even according to Jacovides' (exceptionally strong) understanding of the positive resemblance thesis, the thesis is consistent with the structural

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<sup>41</sup> Locke generally refuses to speculate about the metaphysics of ideas. But suppose one were to pair Locke's theory of ideas with Hobbesian materialism. (This position might turn out inconsistent, but it is not obviously so.) On such a position, each idea has material parts. From this, it does not seem to immediately follow that each idea is composed of other ideas. The material complexity of an idea does not seem to entail that the idea is structurally complex.

simplicity of ideas of sensible points. There seems, then, no obvious conflict between the structural simplicity of ideas of sensible points and Locke's positive resemblance thesis.

The second clarification concerns representation. Genuinely simple ideas are simple in structure. Ideas of sensible points, I have argued, allow Locke to render this criterion consistent with the claim that there exist simple ideas of extension. Ideas of sensible points represent a multiplicity of material bodies and yet are not themselves composed of a multiplicity of ideas. How is the simplicity of the structure of ideas of sensible points consistent with the complexity of their content? A full answer to this question would require an account of how, exactly, simple ideas of primary qualities represent that by which they are caused; such an account is beyond the scope of the present paper. However this issue is resolved, this paper has provided evidence that Locke recognizes no inconsistency between complexity of content and simplicity of structure: between the simplicity of that which represents and the multiplicity of that which is represented.

The third clarification concerns the stakes of the issue raised by Barbeyrac. At the end of the Coste footnote, Locke says:

But if this is not sufficient to clear the Difficulty, Mr. *Locke* hath nothing more to add, but that if the *Idea* of extension is so peculiar, that it cannot exactly agree with the Definition that he has given of those *Simple Ideas*, so that it differs in some manner from all others of that kind, he thinks 'tis better to leave it there expos'd to this Difficulty than to make a new Division in his Favour. 'Tis enough for Mr. *Locke* that his Meaning be understood (*E* II.xv.9, 201f. n1).

Locke's position, I have argued, is that simple ideas of extension are not simple in some *sui generis* way: they are simple because they are simple in structure. Barbeyrac's objection does not threaten Locke's compositional criterion. His concessive tone in this passage does not indicate a worry about the adequacy of his response; it is rather an instance of the intellectual humility present throughout much of the *Essay*. Locke says that if simple ideas of extension were *sui generis*, he would not wish to make a new distinction in order to remedy the issue. He thinks that this would only obscure his position (*E* II.xv.9, 202 n1). Locke perhaps also thinks that the issue does not matter very much. This assessment of the stakes is correct in an important respect. The *Essay* aims "to enquire into the Original Certainty, and Extent of humane Knowledge; together, with the Grounds and Degrees of Belief, Opinion, and Assent" (*E* I.i.2, 43). Were simple ideas of extension *sui generis*, this would not spoil the inquiry with which the *Essay* is primarily concerned. But the *Essay* has another, subsidiary aim. Book II aims to give a comprehensive and systematic theory of ideas. The distinction between complex and simple ideas is at the heart of this theory. If Locke's general account of simple



ideas – the compositional criterion – turned out to be incorrect with respect to ideas of extension, Locke’s theory of ideas would still be comprehensive but perhaps less systematic. This paper has argued that simple ideas of extension do not threaten the systematic character of Locke’s theory of ideas.<sup>42</sup>

Corresp. *The Correspondence of John Locke*  
E *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

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