Supplement to *Locke: Ideas and Empiricism, Primary and Secondary Qualities*: Looking ahead (and also a bit behind)

1. Where this empiricism about where we get our ideas and our knowledge is heading…
One benefit Locke anticipates is that, by knowing our limits, we’ll stop trying to exceed them, and will stop “meddling” in matters that are beyond our comprehension: I, 1, 4, p. 5.3. Locke is fairly gentle on meddling here, at least as compared with one of his descendants in the British empiricist tradition. Looking ahead, here’s how Hume closes his *Enquiry*:

> When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

2. Descartes, Locke, and Reid on the Status of Secondary Qualities
I think Descartes, Locke, and Reid are all agreed on what bodies are like, and, more to the point, are not like, with respect to their supposed secondary qualities. Positively, they viewed bodies as straightforwardly possessing the primary qualities we thought of them as having, and with respect to these primary qualities, being pretty much as we supposed them to be. And in virtue of how their primary qualities were arranged (often in terms of their very fine structure), bodies possess powers and dispositions, including dispositions to affect us in various ways, including causing us to be in sensory states tied to our thinking of the bodies as having secondary qualities. Negatively, to use Adams’s words, “they agreed that there is nothing in bodies resembling the qualities immediately present to our minds in the perception of secondary qualities.”

Yet, despite this agreement on what bodies are really like wrt their secondary qualities, these three still disagreed on the status of secondary qualities, due to differences in what they thought bodies would have to be like in order to count as having secondary qualities, and differences in their account of what we are thinking in ordinary life when we think of bodies as having secondary qualities.

I read Descartes as an eliminativist: though we naturally think of bodies as having secondary qualities, they don’t. The chair is not brown. These are just properties of our ideas, that we mistakenly think bodies also have. Though I take this to be Descartes’s position, I don’t think this is an easy call. On the status of 2°
qualities, probably the most helpful passage, at least in the Meditations, is the 19th paragraph of Meditation Three – which is on 29-30 of our book; pp. 43-44 of AT VII; the paragraph begins with something like (using our translation here): “As to the ideas of corporeal things, there is nothing in them that is so great…."

I’m reading Locke as a reductionist: bodies have secondary qualities; the chair is brown; but its being brown turns out to be just its having the power, in virtue of its primary qualities, to produce brown ideas in us. But though, at least on how I read him, Locke thinks the chair is brown, and so, when you think, “The chair is brown,” you’re thinking a true thought, there is still some error associated with your thinking about the chair here: it’s not enough to make your thought that the chair is brown go false, but the chair’s being brown isn’t the kind of fact you think it is. You think that the chair is brown, and that this is a matter of it being somehow like your sensory idea of brown. You’re right about the first part, but not about the second. The chair is brown, but its brownness isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.

Reid will come around and really put a happy face on our thought about the secondary qualities of bodies: Not only are we right in thinking that the chair is brown, but we’re making no mistake in our ordinary thought about the chair’s being brown. It’s a mistaken account of ordinary thought to think we ever thought of objects, with respect to their secondary qualities, as being like our ideas of them.

3. Representationalism: Descartes, Locke, and Reid on Ideas:
- I,1,8(p. 5): sloppy def. of idea: “whatever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks”
- but, Locke seems to use “idea” such that ideas are in the mind. The definition above would seem to imply that we can only think about things in our own mind.
- II,8,8 (p. 12): more careful statement: “whatever the mind perceives in itself or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding” (emphasis added)
- compare Descartes:

    Considering the ideas of all these qualities which presented themselves to my thought, although the ideas were, strictly speaking, the only immediate objects of my sensory awareness, it was not unreasonable for me to think that the items which I was perceiving through the senses were things quite distinct from my thought, namely bodies which produced the ideas.

    –6th par. of M6, emph added, Cottingham translation; compare our tr., p. 49.7
- coming: a Reidian alternative