CHAPTER TWO

The Problem of Objective Being (I) - This chapter will look at the ‘problem of the external world’ in the philosophies of Locke, Berkeley and Hume. I will argue that because these philosophers accepted the ‘ideas thesis’ and the notion of subjective object to which it gave rise they were unable to give an adequate account of material objects and hence of the external world.

We saw in the last chapter that by the time of Frege and Moore the problem of the external world had become acute; we also saw that, while the problem had its origins in Descartes’ recognition that the certainty principle could not ground the extra-mental, it remained alive in the writings of Locke, Berkeley and Hume. In regard to Berkeley and Hume the problem arises directly out of the reduction of being to ideas, a reduction in terms of which all objects, whether of perception or thought, are subjective and internal to the mind of the knowing subject. Within the context of the theory of ideas, then, all objects, including external or corporeal objects, are subjective.

It is important to understand what is at issue here since it is precisely on this question of external or corporeal objects that later writers like Frege and Moore took issue with the ontology of ideas. Both realized that for any ontology to be object-based it had to be able to give an account of external objects that didn’t merely reduce the latter to subjective impressions.
The empiricists Berkeley and Hume, however, both thought that external objects could be adequately accounted for within the context of the ontology of ideas. In this chapter I will look at the respective accounts of external or corporeal objects given by Berkeley and Hume with a view to assessing their adequacy.

Before proceeding further, however, some mention needs to be made of how the problem of the external world manifests itself in Locke's philosophy. Although Locke accepts the principal claim of the ontology of ideas, namely, that the mind is only acquainted with its own ideas, he doesn't reduce being to ideas and hence is not a phenomenalist in the manner of Berkeley and Hume.

Locke holds a representative theory of perception and reality, the problems of which are well documented in the literature (Mackie 1976, pp.37-70).

Locke’s conception of an idea seems to differ markedly from that of Berkeley and Hume. For the latter an idea is essentially a passive, inert entity the chief function of which is to represent the mind to itself. This view is compatible with both a substance/properties and a property/bundle, ontology.
Locke, however, seems to envisage an idea as a *relational* entity that performs a ‘bridging’ function between the mind and what is beyond it. His view of ideas contains a strong teleological element, as is evident from the following passage taken from the chapter in the *Essay* on the reality of knowledge. Locke, having stated that the mind can only acquire knowledge by means of ideas and that the objectivity of such knowledge consists in its conformity between ideas and things, states further that:

...... *simple* Ideas are not fictions of our Fancies, but the natural and regular productions of Things without us, really operating upon us; and so carry with them all the conformity which is intended; or which our state requires: For they represent to us Things under those appearances which they are fitted to produce in us: whereby we are enabled to distinguish the sorts of particular Substances, to discern the states they are in, and so to take them for our Necessities, and apply them to our Uses. Thus the *Idea* of Whiteness, or Bitterness, as it is in the Mind, exactly answering that Power which is in any Body to produce it there, has all the real conformity it can, or ought to have, with Things without us. And this conformity between our simple *Ideas*, and the existence of Things, is sufficient for real Knowledge. (Locke 1982, p.564)

In this scheme of things the cause of an idea is not what is represented by the idea. To use Locke’s own example, the idea which *represents* bitterness, although caused by a power in the object to which this property is ascribed, will not represent that property as a power but rather as a quality inhering in the object. Thus the conscious perception of the quality, or the way it is experienced, (in the case of bitterness, the bitter taste) differs both
qualitatively and actually from its cause, which is not directly perceived. This
is why Locke can say that secondary qualities do not resemble their objects.
(However, this only applies to secondary qualities. Locke claims that primary
qualities do inhere in objects and that such qualities are truly represented by
the ideas we have of them).

This puts Locke on the side of Berkeley and Hume in one respect but
against them in another. Locke would agree with them in asserting that the
common-sense view that secondary qualities inhere in external objects in
conformity with our experience of them as qualities of such objects is
incorrect, but he would disagree that all that is involved in the perception of
such objects is a mind and its ideas. As Ayers notes, the external world for
Locke is essentially a world of powers; without such powers our perceptions
wouldn’t take place at all (Ayers 1991, pp.207-217).

Locke believed his position on primary and secondary qualities to be in
accordance with the best science of his day, and it is his belief in the
corpuscularian theory of matter which underlies his causal theory of
perception which in turn underpins his view of reality. To hold the view, as
does Locke, that in the case of the primary qualities a real conformity exists
between such qualities and the way they are represented by our ideas of them, is to assume that such qualities really exist in the external world.

Secondary qualities, on the other hand, while they really exist at the level of subjective apprehension, only apparently exist in the external world.

However, since Locke, like Berkeley and Hume, thought of ideas as the only things immediately known by the mind (that is, they all accepted the main premise of the ontology of ideas) what would be the basis, at the level of ideas, for discriminating between the two sets of qualities?

One approach would be to maintain that some ideas are markers for reality whilst others are not. In Locke’s case it would be the ideas of the primary qualities. The problem with this, however, is that discrimination between the two sets of qualities at the level of scientific explanation can only be made subsequent to the subjective experience of them on the pre-scientific level. Locke is putting us in a dilemma by asking us to accept that our belief in the existence of primary qualities as properties of objects is true, whereas the same belief in relation to secondary qualities is false.

Since phenomenologically we do not experience any discontinuity between the two that would serve to confirm the truth of this, we must of
necessity appeal to science to underpin it. Indeed, on the phenomenological level both sorts of qualities are experienced in essentially the same way, that is, as properties of objects. To maintain that some properties, namely those of shape and extension, are more real than others such as colour, seems to be non-sensical within a phenomenological context.

Yet this is what Locke's adherence to the ideas theory, in conjunction with his distinction between primary and secondary qualities, commits him to. As ideas both sets of qualities are on an equal footing but as realities they are not.

As I mentioned earlier, both Berkeley and Hume tried to account for corporeal or external objects within the context of the ontology of ideas. However, it is Hume who has the greater success here, not because he gives a better account of such objects, but because he sees more clearly than either Berkeley or Locke what such an account requires. He also has a much better insight into the limitations imposed by the ontology of ideas in meeting these requirements. I will discuss Hume's account later in this chapter.

As my consideration of Berkeley and Hume will show, the ontology of ideas can only account for corporeal or external objects as subjective objects.
However, an adequate theory of external reality must include an account of external objects as non-mental entities. As non-mental entities we experience such objects as being contingently (rather than necessarily) related to us.

Non-mental entities are different to mental entities. Consequently, a successful theory of external objects must also be able to give an account of this difference as it is experienced. In the ontology of ideas the relation between the mind and its objects is one of necessity. It cannot, therefore, account for the contingency of experience. Further, because as ideas or subjective objects, material objects are construed as modifications of immaterial substance or bundles of perceived sensible qualities, they can only be accounted for as mental entities.

In so far as Berkeley, Locke and Hume all adopted the ontology of ideas none were successful in providing a theory of external objects that could account for such objects as being anything other than mental entities. I will now turn to a consideration of their respective accounts.

The most complete attempt by Berkeley to account for corporeal or external objects within the context of the ontology of ideas occurs in the *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* where Philonous, representing the
immaterialist position of Berkeley, mounts a series of arguments of varying
degrees of credibility against Hylas, who maintains that matter, understood as
the substratum in which sensible qualities inhere and of which corporeal
objects are ultimately composed, constitutes an ultimate or fundamental
component of the real. To quote Hylas:

I acknowledge, Philonous, that upon a fair observation of what passes in
my mind, I can discover nothing else, but that I am a thinking being,
affected with a variety of sensations: neither is it possible to conceive how
a sensation should exist in an unperceiving substance. But then on the
other hand, when I look on sensible things in a different view, considering
them as so many modes and qualities, I find it necessary to suppose a
material *substratum*, without which they cannot be conceived to exist
(Berkeley 1901, p.408).

And again:

The reality of things cannot be maintained without supposing the
existence of matter. And is not this, think you, a good reason why I
should be earnest in its defence? (Berkeley 1901, p.439).

Although in the first passage there are two apparently conflicting views of
‘sensible things’, one based on immaterial and the other based on material
substance, the model informing them both is the same substance/modification
paradigm that we find in Descartes.

The mind, as thinking substance, takes sensations (ideas) as its
objects and the latter are conceived as its properties. Although Berkeley
claims that sensible qualities do not exist as properties in the substratum of
spirit it is difficult to understand how they could be thought of in any other way
since they stand in a necessary and internal relation to the mind and their

*esse est percipi* (Berkeley 1901, p.455).

Whereas in Descartes, however, we have a triadic logical structure with a dualism within the subject category itself, in Berkeley we have *only* the dualism of the subject category. This is due to Berkeley’s abandonment of the concept of matter which in Cartesian dualism serves as the opposing, although on a phenomenological level, empty, object category.

Against Hylas’ proposition that matter is the substratum in which sensible qualities inhere as the properties of corporeal objects. Berkeley opposes several arguments. His master argument is that thinking implies the having of ideas and ideas can only be ascribed as properties to *thinking* substance since to have ideas just is to perceive or to think¹ (Smith 1985, pp.38-39).

Matter, understood as unthinking or inert substance, is thus an incoherent notion since it would involve the ascription to corporeal substances of ideas, which would be absurd. To have an *idea* of unthinking substance is thus a contradiction in terms.

Viewed in this way the conception of thinking substance seems to function in Berkeley’s discourse in an analytic sense. For if, by definition, immaterial substance logically contains within it the property of thinking, then equally, by definition, the concept of material substance would be incoherent since it would involve the attribution of a contradictory property, thinking, to something that logically cannot have that property. This line of argument is evident in the following passage:

I say in the first place, that I do not deny the existence of material substance, merely because I have no notion of it, but because the notion of it is inconsistent, or in other words, because it is repugnant that there should be a notion of it. Many things, for ought I know, may exist, whereof neither I nor any other man hath or can have any idea or notion whatsoever. But then those things must be possible, that is, nothing inconsistent must be included in their definition. I say secondly, that although we believe things to exist which we do not perceive; yet we may not believe that any particular thing exists, without some reason for such belief: but I have no reason for believing the existence of matter. I have no immediate intuition thereof: neither can I mediatly from my sensations, ideas, notions, actions or passions, infer an unthinking, unperceiving, inactive substance, either by probable deduction, or necessary consequence. Whereas the being of myself, that is, my own soul, mind or thinking principle, I evidently know by reflexion (Berkeley 1901, p.449).

In this regard it would not matter how many good or bad arguments one marshaled in favour of the materialist viewpoint since Berkeley would reply, as he does in the Three Dialogues, that, since the conception of matter itself is incoherent, any argument based on it premises must of necessity be false, as the following reply to Hylas indicates:

How often must I repeat, that I know or am conscious of my own being; and that I myself am not my ideas, but somewhat else, a thinking active
principle that perceives, knows, wills, and operates about ideas. I know that I, one and the same self, perceive both colours and sounds: that a colour cannot perceive a sound, nor a sound a colour: that I am therefore an individual principle, distinct from colour and sound: and, for the same reason, from all other sensible things and inert ideas. But I am not in like manner conscious either of the existence or essence of matter. On the contrary, I know that nothing inconsistent can exist, and that the existence of matter implies an inconsistency. Farther, I know what I mean, when I affirm that there is a spiritual substance or support of ideas, that is, that a spirit knows and perceives ideas. But I do not know what is meant, when it is said, that an unperceiving substance hath inherent in it and supports either ideas or the archetypes of ideas. There is therefore upon the whole no parity of case between spirit and matter (Berkeley 1901, pp.450-51).

Rather than it being a question of the rightness or wrongness of immaterialism versus materialism, Berkeley has set things up in such a way that no argument in favour of the latter can get off the ground in the first place.

This being so, we are quite justified in asking after the status of external objects in Berkeley’s universe since, quite clearly, if any conception of matter is incoherent then, by implication, any conception of external objects that views them as combinations of primary and secondary qualities, inhering in a material substratum, which can somehow produce sensory effects in a perceiving subject, must be equally incoherent.

Yet Berkeley claims to want to admit external objects into his ontology and, further, he wants to admit them in the context of what he terms the ‘vulgar’ view, or that which accords with common-sense realism, whereby
'real' things are those which each one of us sees, hears and feels (Berkeley 1901, p.445).

Since the only metaphysical elements Berkeley provides us with here are sensible ideas and the minds to which they appear, our question must be: how can we square such a metaphysic with the so-called 'common-sense' view of external reality? Berkeley, of course, believes that it can be done, but just how credible this belief is needs some assessment.

In his book on Berkeley, A C Grayling claims that the common-sense view of external reality can be regarded as a commitment to the following two propositions:

1. things are just as they are perceived to be, and
2. things exist independently of particular acts or states of perceptual awareness of them (Grayling 1986, p.18).

Grayling further points out that common sense is a species of realism in virtue of the second of these propositions and in virtue of the first it is what philosophers call naïve realism since 'it has it that our perceptual access to the world is direct, suggesting a model in which the eyes are windows we look through onto a world which in itself has the colours, smells, tastes, textures and sounds just as it appears to have' (Grayling 1986, p.18).
Berkeley's position is consistent with common sense realism, according to Grayling, if one significant adjustment is made to the second proposition. The variant of this to which Berkeley is committed, in Grayling's view, is 'things exist independently of any particular finite perceiver's awareness of them' (Grayling 1986, p.21). The reason for this is that Berkeley believed that 'all things are perceived at all times by God' and the second proposition is a step towards this conclusion.

In this respect God serves the crucial metaphysical function of furnishing the continuity of the external world, which in turn informs a large part of its objectivity. In fact, if God did not play the pivotal role in Berkeley's system of providing this element of objectivity in regard to the external world as a whole, we would be left with only a phenomenalism, as Grayling rightly notes (Grayling 1986, p.184).

Against Grayling I would argue that neither of these claims with respect to realism can be substantiated within Berkeley's system, the pivotal role of God as described above notwithstanding.

The claim that things are as they are perceived to be, taken as a principle of naïve realism, rests on two assumptions: (i) that physical objects
understood as entities independent of the subject are the direct *termi* of perceptual acts and (ii) the denial that one's perceptual awareness of the external world involves the awareness of the properties of a subjective, intermediate object through which the perceiver interprets data external to such objects (Honderich 1995, p.602).

In Berkeley’s system it is impossible that physical objects understood in this way be the direct *termi* of perceptual acts since this is the function of ideas construed as sensible qualities. His system would therefore render the first proposition false.

Secondly, although Berkeley would want to claim that the second proposition is true, that is, that one’s perceptual awareness *doesn’t* involve the awareness of the properties of subjective objects, his metaphysics falsifies such a claim. In fact the metaphysics falsifies *both* claims.

The problem arises directly out of Berkeley’s identification of sensible qualities and ideas and the associated claim that ideas are the *only* objects of awareness. This gives rise to a situation in which the objects of one’s perceptual awareness are not even subjective intermediaries but subjective objects *per se*. That is, there is no question here of a reference to something
else beyond the idea itself because the latter is the limiting term of the perceptual act.

The upshot of this is that Berkeley’s reduction of sensible qualities to ideas, coupled with the claim that ideas are the *only* objects of perception, results in a situation in which external objects are nothing over and above complexes of ideas. External objects are construed as mental entities. The problem with this is that the claims we make concerning mental and non-mental entities are not the same and are not transferable from one type of entity to the other.

It makes sense to say, and further it seems to be true, that we *are* directly aware of our own ideas and that every idea is the unique object of a mental act. In this regard Berkeley is right to claim that the word ‘idea’ implies a *necessary* relation to the mind; after all, it is only minds, so far as we know, that can entertain or have ideas (Berkeley 1901, p.453). If ideas are properties of anything, then surely they are properties of minds. Moreover, one can maintain this without also maintaining that as such ideas exist in an immaterial substratum; that is, one isn’t necessarily committed to the substance/modification model that Berkeley seems committed to.
However, it doesn’t make sense to say that we ‘perceive’ our ideas, although it does make sense to say that we perceive external objects.

Berkeley, however, seems to want to say both since in saying that we perceive external objects he is also saying that we perceive ideas. This is clear enough in the following passage:

Wood, stones, fire, water, flesh, iron, and the like things, which I name and discourse of, are things that I know. And I should not have known them, but I perceived them by my senses: and things perceived by the senses are immediately perceived: and things immediately perceived are ideas: and ideas cannot exist without the mind: their existence therefore consists in being perceived: when therefore they are actually perceived, there can be no doubt of their existence. Away then with all that skepticism, all those ridiculous philosophical doubts. What a jest it is for a philosopher to question the existence of sensible things, till he hath it proved to him from the veracity of God: or to pretend our knowledge in this point falls short of intuition or demonstration? I might as well doubt of my own being, as of the being of those things I actually see and feel (Berkeley 1901, p.446).

In Chapter One I mentioned that one of the reasons Descartes doubted the inference to the existence of an external world was because he realized that the certainty principle could not be extended beyond the realm of the mental. Thus, for Descartes, external reality remained a probability the veracity of which was ultimately guaranteed by God. It is interesting to note the move Berkeley makes in this regard in the above passage. By identifying the sensible qualities of external objects with ideas and making them the direct and immediate objects of perception, he does exactly the opposite and brings
the external realm within the scope of the certainty principle. Our knowledge of external objects, understood as sensible qualities, now becomes as certain as our knowledge of our own mental states because the former are now identified with those mental states.

An appeal to the phenomenology of the two, however, shows that what we are dealing with here, namely mental states and external objects, are not qualitatively the same. Whereas we have an immediate and direct relation to our ideas we have only a perspectival, and hence indirect, relation to physical objects. As Sartre so aptly put it, physical objects are opaque to our consciousness or awareness of them:

Une table n'est pas dans la conscience, même a titre de représentation. Une table est dans l'espace, à côté de la fenêtre, etc. L'existence de la table, en effet, est un centre d'opacité pour la conscience; il faudrait un procès infini pour inventorier le contenu total d'une chose (Sartre 1948, p.18).

[A table is not in consciousness, not even as a representation. A table is in space, beside the window, etc. The existence of the table is, in fact, opaque to consciousness; to make an inventory of the total contents of a thing would be an infinite process. Translation my own.]

Sartre claims that such an inventory is infinite precisely because the possible points of view that can be taken of an object are themselves infinite, whereas the viewpoint of the observer is always finite. An object cannot be seen from all points of view at once, and it seems to be to these unseen, but possible
viewpoints, that Sartre is referring when he speaks of an object’s ‘opacity’.

This is in stark contrast to Berkeley’s claim that external objects are agglomerations of sensible qualities, that the latter are objects immediately perceived, and objects immediately perceived are ideas.

Sartre’s account seeks to accommodate both a direct and an indirect element in the phenomenology of our perception of external objects. Direct in so far as our perception from a particular point of view provides us with an immediate aspect of the object, the front of a desk for instance, and indirect in that, while we do not actually see the remainder of the desk, we nonetheless refer to its unseen aspects by speaking of the desk rather than a mere part or aspect of it. Reference is to the whole and not simply to a part or parts. The fact that in cases where more specificity is required we single out a part for reference seems to support the view that reference under normal circumstances is understood to be to the whole or the object in its entirety.

Berkeley’s account, on the other hand, seems to only provide for the direct element by furnishing us with an immediately perceived particular and referring to that as the perceived object. As a consequence reference is only partial, referring to what is directly given within the perceiver’s limited
perspective and excluding what falls outside that perspective. In the next chapter I will discuss the problem Moore had with this when he tried unsuccessfully to reconcile sense-data with parts of material objects.

Because every object in Berkeley’s account is a directly perceived idea, there is no way in which the indirect element (i.e. the unperceived aspects of an object) in the perceptual act can be accounted for. There is no way in which we can relate the perceived idea to the entire or whole object, simultaneous with our perception of it, with the consequence that we cannot take it for granted that, in perceiving an aspect or part of the desk, we are also perceiving the desk.

The aspect or part that we do perceive is only an idea and, whereas we would normally think of the desk as having spatio-temporal continuity, we don’t normally think of ideas as possessing this property. Because in Berkeley’s schema each perceptual object is numerically distinct relative to each perceptual act (that is, one act, one object), spatio-temporal continuity simply doesn’t hold since a Berkeleyan perceptual object, being an idea, has no spatial dimension. It is difficult to see how we could even get to a complex of ideas under these circumstances since a complex implies a whole of which
some ideas would be parts. How, in Berkeley’s scheme of things, could we
perceptually apprehend such a whole in the face of this lack of object-
continuity?

To see this more clearly let us look at the phenomenology of
perception in respect of leaving and re-entering a room. In normal
circumstances it is precisely the assumption of spatio-temporal continuity in
respect of the objects in the room that gives rise to the belief that the objects
that we see upon returning to the room after having left it are *numerically the
same.*

In the context of Berkeley’s account of perceptual objects, however,
where the latter are construed as ideas, a *numerically distinct* object is
associated with each perceptual act. Thus, when I re-enter the room I
encounter a new series of objects which, strictly speaking, can only
*qualitatively resemble*, but are not the same as, those that were there when I
left.

Berkeley’s account gives us no grounds for believing that we are in fact
perceiving the same objects; on the contrary, in terms of his metaphysic such
a belief is quite false. Furthermore, our perceptions would be ‘gappy’ just to
the extent that previously perceived ideas were no longer entertained by the mind.

In the case of leaving and re-entering a room, for example, the ‘gap’ with respect to my perception of the room and its objects would correspond to my absence from the room since this would correspond to an absence of the perception of the ideas that constitute the external objects of the room.

We do not experience such a ‘gap’ in our perceptions, however. When I leave the room I no longer perceive it or the objects in it but I make no assumption that, just because of this, neither the room nor its objects are no longer there. Quite the contrary. I expect them to be there, just as they were when I left them, and would be shocked no doubt to find that this was not the case unless, of course, mitigating circumstances could explain otherwise.

On Berkeley’s account, however, the reasonable assumption to make is that when I perceive neither the room nor its objects they cease to be.

This is why God is so crucial to Berkeley’s account at this point. By positing ideas as objects in God’s mind Berkeley assures their continuity since God sustains every actual and possible point of view on such objects. There
are no gaps in God's perceptions so there are no corresponding discontinuities in the objects perceived.

It is at precisely this point, then, that Berkeley's version of the ideas ontology breaks down. It cannot account for the requirement of spatio-temporal continuity that an ontology of corporeal objects demands and because of this it further cannot account for our re-identification of objects as the same.

That physical objects endure through time, that they exist independently of our perceptions of them and that they occupy space, or are three-dimensional, surely constitute some of our most basic beliefs about them. We attribute none of these characteristics to ideas. It only makes sense to attribute *temporal* continuity to ideas since they exist only for as long as they are contemplated or entertained by the mind whose ideas they are. Since Berkeley claims that the *only* objects of awareness are ideas then it is only this temporal continuity that is available to him.

If Berkeley's metaphysic falsifies the two claims of common-sense realism discussed above, what are we to make of his claim that his philosophy
is consistent with such realism? For he certainly makes this claim at various

places in the *Dialogues*, as the following passages illustrate:

> I am content, Hylas, to appeal to the common sense of the world for the truth of my notion. Ask the gardener, why he thinks yonder cherry-tree exists in the garden, and he shall tell you, because he sees and feels it; in a word, because he perceives it by his senses. Ask him, why he thinks an orange-tree not to be there, and he shall tell you, because he does not perceive it. What he perceives by sense, that he terms a real being, and saith it *is*, or *exists*; but that which is not perceivable, the same, he saith hath no being. (Berkeley 1901, p.451).

> I assure you, Hylas, I do not pretend to frame any hypothesis at all. I am of a vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my senses, and leave things as I find them. To be plain, it is my opinion, that the real things are those very things I see and feel, and perceive by my senses (Berkeley 1901, p.445).

> What a jest it is for a philosopher to question the existence of sensible things, till he hath it proved to him from the veracity of God: or to pretend our knowledge in this point falls short of intuition or demonstration? I might as well doubt of my own being, as of the being of those things I actually see and feel (Berkeley 1901, p.446). 

Edwin Allaire makes the point that the principle of acquaintance, which

Berkeley here invokes, does not lead to idealism *unless* one understands the entities of such acquaintance to be ideas (Allaire 1963, pp.100-101). This is exactly what Berkeley does.

Once we are apprised of his claim that physical objects are a ‘congeries of ideas’ the appeal to common-sense cannot be legitimately sustained since a metaphysical element has been introduced which runs counter to the evidence of common-sense itself.
The only way that I can see open to Berkeley to claim that his philosophy is consistent with common-sense realism is if he makes the claim in conjunction with the suppressed premise that the ‘vulgar’, or non-philosophical, are *unaware* of the subjective status of what they perceive and thus *mistakenly* think that the objects of their perceptions are entities existing independently of their minds and standing in a contingent relation to them when, *in fact*, on Berkeley’s thesis, they are really ideas standing in a necessary relation to the mind.

In this way the metaphysic of the ontology of ideas is brought into the commonsense view of perception to render it compatible with that ontology itself. In terms of this metaphysic ‘things’, insofar as this term refers to external objects, are most definitely *not* as they are perceived to be on the common sense level of perception since, on that level, no-one (except a philosopher in agreement with Berkeley’s views) would imagine that in actually perceiving an external object, or in re-identifying such an object over time, he/she is *in fact* in the presence of an idea. Thus, the fact that the metaphysic of the ontology of ideas falsifies common-sense becomes a reason for introducing that metaphysic into the common-sense view itself as a
corrective to it. It is in this way that Berkeley ultimately renders common-
sense intelligible in terms of the ontology of ideas.

We can see, then, that Berkeley’s metaphysics cannot furnish an
adequate basis for an account of external reality because it cannot provide for
the individuation of external objects, their duration in time or their
independence of individual perceptual acts.

On the contrary if, as Berkeley maintains, sensible objects must be
perceived by minds and further, if sensible objects are ideas, then every
perception must deliver a numerically distinct idea as its object. In that case
no object can exist independently of a perception (although of course it can be
logically distinguished as a separate element in the perceptual act itself); as
object, then, it stands and falls with the perceptual act itself.

Berkeley was not the only thinker to distinguish between the ‘vulgar’ or
common sense view of the perception of external objects and the
philosophical view, with the intention of accounting for such objects within the
context of the latter. Hume also tackled the issue, and with a great deal more
success.
Hume's approach is superior to Berkeley's in at least two important respects: (i) its elucidation of the logical consequences of the ontology of ideas for the common sense view of perception, and (ii) its reformulation of the latter within the context of that ontology itself.

Hume, like Berkeley, accepts ideas as the only objects of perception, but he realises at the outset that our experience of external objects differs qualitatively from our experience of mental objects.

We see this clearly in the following passage where he draws a distinction between those impressions upon which our passions are founded and those impressions which give rise to our belief in the existence of bodies:

Our passions are found by experience to have a mutual connexion with and dependance on each other: but on no occasion is it necessary to suppose, that they have existed and operated, when they were not perceiv'd, in order to preserve the same dependance and connexion, of which we have had experience. The case is not the same with relation to external objects. Those require a continu'd existence, or otherwise lose, in a great measure, the regularity of their operation (Hume 2003, p.126).

In what follows I will elaborate on points (i) and (ii) made above. In many respects Hume’s account can be seen as a corrective to Berkeley’s.

Hume’s most sustained discussion of external or corporeal objects is in Section II of the Treatise, where it is discussed under the head “Of scepticism with regard to the senses” (Hume 2003, pp.119-144).
In the opening paragraphs of this section Hume asserts that it is pointless to ask whether or not body exists, since we have a natural inclination to believe that it does. Our task should be, rather, to enquire into the causes that give rise to this belief (Hume 2003, p.126). He then moves on to consider our attribution of two properties to external objects, namely, their continued existence when not present to the senses and their existence as entities distinct from the mind and perception. Included in this last property is their spatial location. These two properties are necessarily related in Hume's view, the one giving rise to the other:

For if the objects of our senses continue to exist, even when they are not perceiv'd, their existence is of course independent of and distinct from the perception; and vice versa, if their existence be independent of the perception and distinct from it, they must continue to exist, even tho' they be not perceiv'd (Hume 2003, p.120).

Hume then goes on to consider whether this belief arises from the senses, reason or the imagination, examining each of these options in turn. The extent to which the ontology of ideas is an underlying assumption of his thought here can be seen in the fact that the conclusions Hume draws in relation to each option considered are entirely consistent with the claims of that ontology. His assertion, for instance, that it is a contradiction in terms to claim that the senses give rise to the belief in the continued and distinct
existence of physical objects, because such a belief assumes that the senses continue to operate when they have ceased to do so, is compatible with a major premise of the ontology of ideas, namely, that each perception gives rise to its own unique perceptual object. In this regard a Humean idea or impression is similar to a Berkeleyan sensible idea in being the terminus of each perceptual act:

That our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something distinct, or independent, and external, is evident: because they convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of any thing beyond. A single perception can never produce the idea of a double existence, but by some inference either of the reason or imagination (Hume 2003, pp.120-121).

However, whereas Berkeley's external or corporeal objects are comprised wholly of ideas, Hume realises that the inference to something beyond the immediately given, that is involved in our belief in the existence of external objects, cannot be provided by impressions or ideas alone. We see this clearly in the following passage:

When the mind looks farther than what immediately appears to it, its conclusions can never be put to the account of the senses: and it certainly looks farther, when from a single perception it infers a double existence, and supposes the relations of resemblance and causation betwixt them (Hume 2003, p.121).

Impressions, or ideas, alone, then, cannot provide a sufficient basis on which to ground the belief. Yet Hume also recognises that this is all he has to work with from an ontological point of view, as is evident in the following passage:
Upon this head we may observe, that all sensations are felt by the mind, such as they really are, and that when we doubt, whether they present themselves as distinct objects, or as mere impressions, the difficulty is not concerning their nature, but concerning their relations and situation (Hume 2003, p.121).

What Hume seems to be saying here is that there is no distinction that we can make within the class of sensations themselves that will tell us which are related to external objects and which are not since all sensations are, by nature, the same. The ontological material provided by sensations or impressions is insufficient to allow us to discriminate between impressions as internal subjective objects or as external corporeal objects. As a consequence of this our basis for discriminating between them must come from elsewhere. However, since sensations and impressions provide the only ontological underpinning for such objects any other elements involved must be provided, as Hume suggests, either by reason or imagination. There is nothing in all this that is not consistent with the key premise of the ontology of ideas, namely, that ideas are the only objects of perception. What Hume recognises, however, is that our perception of external objects differs fundamentally from that of our apprehension of ideas in that the former involves experiential elements not applicable to the latter. What he ultimately
tries to do is to account for our experience of these elements in such a way that the key premise of the ontology of ideas remains intact.

In turning to a consideration of reason as that which underlies the belief in body, Hume makes the point that our belief in external objects is not based on reason.

If we understand 'reason' here to mean that body of claims that arises out of, and is consistent with, the ontology of ideas then we can understand anything not based on reason to mean anything that is inconsistent with those claims.

Thus, Hume’s assertion that our commonsense belief in external objects is not based on reason is consistent with the claim that the only objects of which we have any awareness are discontinuous and discrete entities, a claim which is itself consistent with the major premise of the ontology of ideas, namely, that the only objects of awareness are ideas. In the light of this the commonsense belief in the continuous and independent existence of external objects is unreasonable since reason, understood in the context of the ontology of ideas, dictates that the attribution of such properties to corporeal objects is contradictory. Taking this into consideration we can
see that Hume’s judgement that the common sense view of the perception of corporeal objects as existing external to, and independent of, perception, is false, is correct since in terms of the ontology of ideas all perceptual objects are discontinuous and perception- or mind-dependent. Hume’s judgement in this regard, then, testifies to his own belief in the truth of the claims of the ontology of ideas relating to perceptual objects.

Georges Dicker also supports this view when he claims that Hume’s appeal to reason rests on his belief that the ‘slightest philosophy “informs us” that they [i.e. corporeal objects] are “dependent on the mind”’ and that ‘it follows that any belief to the contrary must be “entirely unreasonable,” and so not based on reason.’ (Dicker 1998, p.165). It is perhaps worth remarking at this juncture that any consideration of what Hume says regarding body which doesn’t take into account the significance of the ontology of ideas as a fundamental assumption in his thought will fall short in explanatory power. One can see this in respect of Bennett who, in discussing Hume’s examples of the porter and the letter in reference to the application of objectivity concepts, is puzzled by what Hume is referring to when he talks of
‘contradictions’ in connection with these phenomena (Bennett 1971, pp.323-25).

Bennett fails to understand that the phenomena that Hume is citing, namely, hearing the noise of a door opening without actually seeing the door as it opens, the porter arriving without Hume actually having seen him mount the stairs, and Hume himself taking delivery of the letter without actually having overseen its passage from sender to receiver, are contradictory in terms of the assumption that ‘to be is to be perceived’. In terms of that assumption the door, the stairs and the letter’s passage are non-existent because not perceived.

Hume sees right to the heart of the matter and brilliantly, too. For the conclusion to be drawn here is that without the assumption of continuity and independence in respect of external objects we would be in the presence of a non-existent door producing an existent sound, an existent porter mounting non-existent stairs and an existent letter traversing non-existent time and space, and these are indeed contradictions.

Hume’s point is that unless we suppose the distinct and continued existence of corporeal objects we would be forced to live with this
unsatisfactory state of affairs. The supposition that some entities, namely, external objects, exhibit these characteristics allows us to reconcile what would otherwise be seemingly contradictory elements of experience. The relevant passage is:

These observations are contrary, unless I suppose that the door still remains, and that it was open’d without my perceiving it: And this supposition, which was at first entirely arbitrary and hypothetical, acquires a force and evidence by its being the only one, upon which I can reconcile these contradictions. There is scarce a moment of my life, wherein there is not a similar instance presented to me, and I have not occasion to suppose the continu’d existence of objects, in order to connect their past and present appearances, and give them such an union with each other, as I have found by experience to be suitable to their particular nature and circumstances (Hume 2003, p.127).

Hume, like Berkeley, is quite correct in claiming that the common-sense view of perception is false given the assumptions of the ontology of ideas. How, then, does he re-interpret the common-sense view within the context of that ontology and in such a way that the main premise, namely, that ideas are the only objects of perception, remains true?

Hume begins his account by drawing an initial distinction between those impressions that exhibit ‘coherence’ and ‘constancy’ and those that do not, and he tells us that it is only with this former group of impressions that he is concerned since it is from these impressions that our belief in external objects arises:
After a little examination, we shall find, that all those objects, to which we attribute a continu’d existence, have a peculiar constancy, which distinguishes them from the impressions, whose existence depends upon our perception. Those mountains, and houses, and trees, which lie at present under my eye, have always appear’d to me in the same order; and when I lose sight of them by shutting my eyes or turning my head, I soon after find them return upon me without the least alteration. My bed and table, my books and papers, present themselves in the same uniform manner, and change not upon account of any interruption in my seeing or perceiving them. This is the case with all the impressions, whose objects are suppos’d to have an external existence: and is the case with no other impressions, whether gentle or violent, voluntary or involuntary (Hume 2003, p.125).

Of the property of coherence Hume has this to say:

Bodies often change their position and qualities, and after a little absence or interruption may become hardly knowable. But here ‘tis observable, that even in these changes they preserve a coherence, and have a regular dependence on each other: which is the foundation of a kind of reasoning from causation, and produces the opinion of their continu’d existence. .......... This coherence, therefore, in their changes is one of the characteristics of external objects as well as their constancy (Hume 2003, p.125).

What Hume needs to explain here is how we manage to attribute the properties of constancy and coherence to impressions which, as discrete and discontinuous entities, are in reality just the opposite of what we experience when we experience an external or corporeal object.

If Hume is to be able to give an account of how numerous perceptual acts can be perceptions of the same object, rather than each act being a perception of its own individual object, he must find a way of relating the disparate impressions which constitute the object of each act so as to give
rise to the belief that we are in the presence of one object and not many. The difference involved here can be schematically represented as follows:

\[ (1) \]
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Perceptual Act}_1 \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Perceptual Object}_1 \\
&\text{Perceptual Act}_2 \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Perceptual Object}_2 \\
&\text{Perceptual Act}_n \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Perceptual Object}_n 
\end{align*}
\]

\[ (2) \]
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Perceptual Act}_1 \\
&\text{Perceptual Act}_2 \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{Perceptual Object} \\
&\text{Perceptual Act}_n 
\end{align*}
\]

There seems to be no doubt that Hume is aiming for (2), that is, an object that is common to the multiple appearances of it, rather than (1) which schematically represents Berkeley’s position. The following passage, which I will quote at length, certainly appears to support this view:

> When we have been accustom’d to observe a constancy in certain impressions, and have found, that the perception of the sun or ocean, for instance, returns upon us after an absence or annihilation with like parts and in a like order, as at its first appearance, we are not apt to regard these interrupted perceptions as different, (which they really are) but on the contrary consider them as individually the same, upon account of their resemblance. But as this interruption of their existence is contrary to their perfect identity, and makes us regard the first impression as annihilated, and the second as newly created, we find ourselves somewhat at a loss, and are involv’d in a kind of contradiction. In order to free ourselves from this difficulty, we disguise, as much as possible, the interruption, or rather remove it entirely, by supposing that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible (Hume 2003, pp.128-129).

We can see here that the first paragraph deals with perceptions in terms of multiple perceptual objects. The second paragraph candidly acknowledges
the contradiction involved between this and the claim that we perceive one
common, external object. In the third paragraph we can clearly see that
Hume is working towards some sort of delineation of the latter but within the
constraints of the ontology of ideas itself.

In my view Hume’s most important contribution to the development of
an account of external or corporeal objects consists in his recognition that we
must somehow be able to account for an object that is common to the multiple
appearances of it. That is, we must be able to account for a material object
as an entity distinct from our perceptions of it. Unless we can do this the
problems of perceptual discontinuity outlined earlier in respect of Berkeley
cannot be overcome. Only once this has been achieved can we rightly speak
of an object remaining the *same through the varying and multiple perceptions
of it*, as illustrated in the diagram above.

Hume’s achievement here, however, although a great improvement
upon Berkeley, does not go far enough since his object is still private to the
perceiver.

The main reason for this, I believe, is that the concept of an external or
material object involves, in addition to temporal continuity, spatial continuity
and this concept was simply not available to Hume within the context of the ontology of ideas.

As I mentioned in my discussion of Berkeley only temporal continuity is available in terms of the ontology of ideas. When Hume does mention spatiality it is only in passing and is not central to his discussion of objects, as Bennett notes in his discussion of Hume’s use of objectivity concepts (Bennett 1971, p.314).

Let us look more closely at how Hume arrives at his conception of a material or external object.

We saw in regard to Berkeley that each perceptual act delivered its own object. Since act and object are individuated together it is really impossible to speak of an object in Berkeley’s universe; rather what one is dealing with is a temporal succession of sensible particulars which are themselves phases or constituents of perceptual acts. Although Hume’s conception of object is born out of this notion of temporal succession, he is trying to move away from the idea of multiple, one-dimensional objects to the notion of an enduring, multidimensional object. I have illustrated the
difference in the two diagrams above. This is also evident from the following passage:

We cannot, in any propriety of speech, say, *that an object is the same with itself*, unless we mean, *that the object existent at one time is the same with itself existent at another*. By this means we make a difference, betwixt the idea meant by the word, *object*, and that meant by *itself*, without going the length of number, and at the same time without restraining ourselves to a strict and absolute unity. Thus the principle of individuation is nothing but the *invariableness* and *uninterruptedness* of any object, thro’ a suppos’d variation of time, by which the mind can trace it in the different periods of its existence, without any break of the view, and without being oblig’d to form the idea of multiplicity or number (Hume 2003, p.130).

Hume sees the problem clearly enough, as the first two sentences indicate:

To speak of an object as the same is to posit an entity that endures through time and not one that arises anew with each perceptual act.

In a Berkeleyan universe each perceptual object is numerically different so it is logically impossible for an object existent at one time to be the same as that existent at another. Individuation of the object in this case cannot be by means of any perception of its unity (invariableness) and persistence through time (uninterruptedness).

Yet Hume maintains that we do individuate in this way and in this he is surely right: when I leave my room and return some time later and see the same objects I do not mean by ‘same’ the *apparently* same objects, as would be the case in Berkeley’s universe, where each perceptual act gives
rise to a new perceptual object. By ‘same’ I mean the numerically same objects as were there before I left. That is, I assume that the objects which I see at t² share a continuity with the objects which I saw at t₁, even though the objects seen at t² may have (but also may not have) undergone some sort of change in the intervening period when I wasn’t there, as Hume himself notes (Hume 2003. p.125).

The problem that the properties of unity and continuity pose, as properties of individuation, is straightforward for Hume: given that, within the context of the ontology of ideas, the only objects of our perceptions are variable and discontinuous impressions or ideas, how can we account for invariability and uninterruptedness as properties of objects without being involved in a contradiction?

At this point Hume appeals to two elements which, when taken together, he believes allow us to speak of identity in reference to objects: the relation of resemblance and the faculty of imagination.

It is our perception of the resemblance between impressions which causes us to connect similar ideas and hence enables us to speak of a
succession of ideas or impressions as constitutive of an enduring object. As Hume puts it:

Of all relations, that of resemblance is in this respect the most efficacious; and that because it not only causes an association of ideas, but also of dispositions, and makes us conceive the one idea by an act or operation of the mind, similar to that by which we conceive the other (Hume 2003, pp.131-132).

And, of the imagination, he has this to say:

An easy transition or passage of the imagination, along the ideas of these different and interrupted perceptions, is almost the same disposition of mind with that which we consider one constant and uninterrupted perception. ‘Tis therefore very natural for us to mistake the one for the other (Hume 2003, p.133).

Hume, I believe, is envisaging the following perceptual scenario.

I look at the front of my desk at t₁ and I am presented with two legs, two drawers and a counter-top and whatever else might make up this front aspect. No other aspect of the desk is present to my view. My perception at t₁ lasts for several seconds. During this entire time I neither alter my position in relation to the aspect of the desk that I am seeing nor do I open and close my eyes. This I think would count for Hume as ‘a constant and uninterrupted perception’.

After a few seconds I blink. The desk momentarily disappears from view. I leave the room and come back after an hour or so and sit down, looking at the front of the desk again. I open and close my eyes, the desk
momentarily disappearing from view again and so on. These perceptions I believe would count for Hume as different and interrupted because, although the perceptual content is the same, as perceptions they are numerically distinct and occur at different times. Perceptual content has to remain the same otherwise the resemblance condition relative to the numerous perceptions is not met.

Hume wants to say that it is in the case of these perceptions that the imagination intervenes to produce a perceptual experience similar to that of seeing one invariable object. The problem with this analysis, however, is that it has to assume that all the perceptions in a series share the same perceptual content otherwise it cannot account for the perceptions being perceptions of one object. The only difference that Hume allows for is the numerical difference that arises from the fact that the perceptions occur at different times.

But how does the imagination contribute to producing the belief that what is being perceived at $t_1, t_2$ and $t_n$ is one object enduring through time? Keeping in mind that Hume subscribes to the ontology of ideas which maintains that each perceptual act gives rise to its own unique object the role
of the imagination here would be to suppress the differences between the perceptions in such a way that the fiction of perceiving one enduring object is substituted for the reality of perceiving multiple unique objects.

The imagination would only need to suppress the time intervals to achieve the desired result since once the time intervals between the perceptions are suppressed all one is left with is an awareness of the same perceptual content.

In this sense, then, a perceptual experience involving multiple perceptions of the same object is analogous to the uninterrupted perception of that same object.

However, while this might adequately explain how multiple perceptions that share the same perceptual content can give rise to the belief in the perception of a single object, it is difficult to see how it could account for perceptions that do not share the same content since such perceptions would lack resemblance.

This analysis cannot account for the sort of perceptions that result from movement around objects as would occur if I moved around my desk, shifted things on it, opened and closed drawers and so forth. Not only are these
perceptions interrupted by time intervals of varying lengths, but the visual content of the various perceptions is also interrupted in that it differs from one perception to the next in accordance with my different and various movements around the objects themselves.

In the first instance how would one know, when confronted with perceptions of an object that differ in perceptual content due to difference in perceptual aspect, which perception to take as exemplifying an uninterrupted and unvarying perception of that object?

An adequate analysis of external objects must include an account of how we can attribute perceptions of different aspects of an object to the one object. Such an account calls for an analysis of perception that can accommodate difference in perspective, and hence difference of perceptual content, and is a separate issue to that of how numerically different perceptions with the same perceptual content relate to the one object, which is the issue to which Hume addresses himself.

As I will argue later in this dissertation this type of analysis was not possible until Twardowski’s introduction into philosophical discourse of the
notion of the 'presented object' and Husserl's development of the concept of perceptual transcendence to which it gave rise.

I mentioned earlier that both Hume and Berkeley believed that the ontology of ideas falsified the common-sense view of perception and that they both tried to square that view with the ontology itself.

In Berkeley’s case this amounted to introducing the metaphysical assumptions of the ontology that relate to external objects into the common-sense view itself. I believe I am seeing a cherry tree in the orchard but, in fact, Berkeley tells me, I am really seeing an idea. To perceive the cherry tree and to perceive the idea amount to the same thing.

Hume doesn’t proceed in this way. Rather than being concerned, like Berkeley, with refuting the notion of substance which, as he recognizes, provides the principal support for the belief in corporeal objects he accepts the belief at face value and then tries to resolve the contradiction involved when interpreting that belief within the context of the ontology of ideas itself. We have seen how resemblance is invoked to achieve this. Yet the identity that results from this resemblance isn’t real as is evident in the following passage on the imagination:
The very image, which is present to the senses, is with us the real body; and 'tis to these interrupted images we ascribe a perfect identity. But as the interruption of the appearance seems contrary to the identity, and naturally leads us to regard these resembling perceptions as different from each other, we here find ourselves at a loss how to reconcile such opposite opinions. The smooth passage of the imagination along the ideas of the resembling perceptions makes us ascribe to them a perfect identity. The interrupted manner of their appearance makes us consider them as so many resembling, but still distinct beings, which appear after certain intervals. The perplexity arising from this contradiction produces a propension to unite these broken appearances by the fiction of a continu’d existence, which is the third part of that hypothesis I propos’d to explain (Hume 2003, pp.133-134).

Nonetheless, it does allow for a reconciliation between the common-sense view and the claims of the ontology of ideas for it allows us to conclude that the former is a fiction produced by the perception of resemblance in conjunction with the imagination.

For all his pioneering efforts in respect of delineating an ontology of the object Hume is still constrained by the ontology of ideas.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that I believed Hume gave a more successful account of external objects within the context of the ontology of ideas than did either Berkeley or Locke. It is not that Hume succeeds in telling us what an external object is; this is far from the case. However, his account does render our belief in such objects intelligible in a way that Berkeley’s doesn’t.
Hume, by refusing to engage in the debate over immaterial and
material substance and instead concentrating on what he considers to be the
most important aspects of our belief in the existence of corporeal objects,
produces what I believe to be a more satisfying account as a result.

Moreover, Hume sees more clearly than either Berkeley or Locke the
limitations of the concepts governing the discourse in this regard. His
emphasis on continuity and coherence shows his sensitivity to their absence
in Berkeley’s account.

His insight that our perception of external objects is fundamentally
different from our awareness of ideas and his attempt to ground the properties
of constancy and coherence which in his view demarcate, as a group, those
impressions which give rise to our perceptions of such objects, go well
beyond the ontology of ideas. Not until Husserl will this difference again be
noticed and remarked upon.

The problem remains, however, that we are still dealing with subjective
objects and an ontology that is limited to ideas. Hume’s objects might exhibit
the properties of coherence and constancy in contrast to the ephemeral
nature of the sensible qualities of Berkeley, but they remain just as private to

the mind as Berkeley's sensible qualities.

J L Mackie speaks of the real existence of material things as an 'outline

hypothesis' in that it explains the experiences we have better than any

alternative hypothesis, in particular that of phenomenalism. One of the

reasons for accepting this hypothesis is, in Mackie's view, its simplicity:

What is essential in this outline hypothesis is that it fills in gaps in things

as they appear, so producing continuously existing things and gradual

changes where the appearances are discontinuous. Its resulting merit is a

special sort of simplicity, the resolving of what would, on the rival,

phenomenalist, view, be quite unexplained coincidences: what we now

regard as successive observations of the same thing at intervals would be

the repeated springing into existence of complex groups of appearances

remarkably like other groups which had passed out of existence before

(Mackie 1976, p.64).

While Hume's incorporation into the ontology of ideas of two of the most

important aspects of common-sense realism regarding external objects

introduces this simplicity, his belief that external objects are at bottom a fiction

precluded him from moving outside the ambit of phenomenalism itself.

Berkeley and Hume attempted to account for external objects within

the context of the ontology of ideas. For Locke, however, the adoption of the

major premise of that ontology, that all the mind is acquainted with are ideas,

affected his account of reality in a rather different way. We saw that in the
thought of Berkeley and Hume being is reduced to ideas where the latter are subjective objects grounded by the mind itself.

Locke’s position differs markedly in that while he accepts the major premise of the ideas ontology, he doesn’t reduce the being of external objects to ideas. In developing a causal account of perception Locke takes the view, expressed by Descartes (although regarded by him as mistaken), that external objects cause the ideas we have of them, and turns it into the much stronger claim that in so doing they give us knowledge of the existence of those objects themselves. This view is developed in Book IV of the Essay in a chapter entitled “Of our Knowledge of the Existence of other Things”. In this chapter Locke maintains that we have three ways of obtaining knowledge of existence: intuition, which yields knowledge of our own being; reason, which gives us knowledge of God and sensation, which gives us knowledge of ‘any other thing’. To quote the relevant passage here:

The Knowledge of the Existence of any other thing we can have only by Sensation: For there being no necessary connexion of real Existence, with any Idea a Man hath in his Memory, nor of any other Existence but that of GOD, with the Existence of any particular Man: no particular Man can know the Existence of any other Being, but only when by actual operating upon him, it makes it self perceived by him. For the having the Idea of any thing in our Mind, no more proves the Existence of that Thing, than the picture of a Man evidences his being in the World, or the Visions of a Dream make thereby a true History (Locke 1982, p.630).
What Locke seems to be saying here is that when I perceive an external object it is not sufficient that I simply have the idea of the object somehow in my mind; rather the idea and the actual object must be co-present and included in my idea of the object must be the *knowledge that the object itself is causally related to the idea that I have of it*. Such knowledge doesn’t have to explain how the object causes the particular idea; rather it conveys just that there is this causal relation between object and idea. On this analysis it would seem that ideas of sense can only arise simultaneously with our encounters with objects, a view supported by Locke’s contention that such knowledge is limited only to the present:

But this Knowledge extends as far as the present Testimony of our Senses, employ’d about particular Objects, that do then affect them, and no farther (Locke 1982, p.635).

The interest of this lies in Locke’s assertion that *ideas alone* are not sufficient to give us knowledge of reality, an assertion which marks a departure from Berkeley and Hume both of whom limit reality to the realm of ideas. This is, of course, consistent with their reductionism: if ideas are the termini of mental acts then ideas become the ‘things’ with which those acts are acquainted. Such a view exhibits a failure to distinguish between being acquainted with the idea itself and being acquainted with what the idea refers to; once the two
are conflated to entertain the idea is tantamount to entertaining the thing to which it refers. This epistemological principle goes hand-in-hand with the major metaphysical premise of the ontology of ideas and the problem this poses for an account of external objects has already been discussed in respect of Berkeley and Hume.

Locke notes that the knowledge of objects which sensation gives is not of the same order of certainty that reason or intuition gives but he makes the point that given the end to which we put such knowledge we do not need this certainty. His argument here is teleological and harks back to Descartes: we are equipped with sense organs which give rise to ideas in us which enable us in turn to acquire a knowledge of external reality, such knowledge being for our own preservation:

That the certainty of Things existing in rerum Naturâ, when we have the testimony of our Senses for it, is not only as great as our frame can attain to, but as our Condition needs. For our Faculties being suited not to the full extent of Being, nor to a perfect, clear, comprehensive Knowledge of things free from all doubt and scruple: but to the preservation of us, in whom they are: and accommodated to the use of Life: they serve to our purpose well enough, if they will but give us certain notice of those Things, which are convenient or inconvenient to us (Locke 1982, p.634).

However, because this knowledge of the external terminates, like all knowledge in the Lockean system, in ideas conceived as internal and private to the mind of the perceiving or knowing subject we can accord no logical or
actual priority to the external realm and we would need to be able to do this if
we were to be able to regard ideas as corresponding to, or representing, the
latter.

We have already seen that this priority cannot be justified in either
Descartes, Berkeley or Hume since the object category in all three thinkers is
dependent upon the subject category. We read representational theories
incorrectly if we read them as an internalization, through ideas, of an external
reality. Rather, such theories depend for their efficacy on the externalization
of ideas considered as the content or reality of the subject category itself. For
this reason the subject category is no less dominant in a non-reductive
philosophy such as Locke’s than it is in the reductive philosophies of Berkeley
and Hume.

At the beginning of this chapter I stated that I would look at the
respective accounts of external or corporeal objects given by Berkeley, Locke
and Hume with a view to assessing their adequacy in relation to resolving the
problem of the external world.

From the above discussion it is clear that the shortcomings of the three
accounts considered can be traced to the acceptance by all three thinkers of
the main premise of the ontology of ideas. That ontology cannot account for
the reality of external objects as entities independent of ideas. Moreover, the
ontology of ideas treats perception and thought as synonymous, which leads
to the erroneous assumption that the relation between subject and object,
which is a *necessary* relation in the case of thought, is so in all cases.

While this may be true in respect of mental or private objects, this
clearly doesn’t seem to be the case in so far as external or corporeal objects
are concerned. Our experience of such objects seems to suggest that they
can, but do not have to, stand in an awareness relationship to us; we are
sometimes aware of them and sometimes not and, when we are not, we do
not suppose they are not there simply by virtue of our non-presence. There is
thus a *contingent* aspect to our experience of these objects which the
ontology of ideas completely fails to capture.