

## Does Berkeley misunderstand Locke?

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In "The Principles of Human Knowledge" and "Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous" Berkeley attempts to refute the distinction between primary and secondary qualities as proposed by Locke in "An Essay on Human Understanding". According to Locke, the primary qualities of an object include bulk, shape, motion and number. Other qualities such as colour, taste or temperature are classed as secondary qualities. Both types of quality have the power to produce ideas in the mind of the observer but Locke believes that only the primary qualities are inherent in the object. It is the primary qualities that constitute the 'real' world. The secondary qualities arise due to the operation of the primary qualities on the sense organs and thus are not fundamental to the object.

Although it is clear that Berkeley, the idealist, disagrees with Locke, the realist, on far more than the finer points of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, I will limit this essay to the three main arguments put forward in the extracts mentioned above.

Firstly Berkeley challenges Locke's claim that our ideas of the primary qualities of bodies resemble the qualities themselves. Berkeley makes the point that this is a strange supposition and that surely ideas can only resemble other ideas. He states that "an idea can be like nothing but an idea" (Guttenplan, p.278) and likens the comparison between an idea and something that is not an idea to trying to compare a colour with something that is invisible or something that is hard or soft with something that is intangible. But I believe that Berkeley misinterprets Locke on this point. Whilst I agree that it is difficult to comprehend how an idea can somehow resemble something that is not an idea, I do not believe that this was Locke's intended meaning. Indeed Locke does state that "our ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them" (Guttenplan, p.267), but this statement comes after he has already made the distinction between primary and secondary qualities and is not a crucial tenet of his argument.

I think it more likely that Locke was appealing to Descartes' principle of causation regarding ideas. At the beginning of the extract, Locke defines a quality as "the power to produce any idea in our mind". Primary qualities "produce simple ideas in us" whereas secondary qualities are defined "as nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities". This suggests that it is not that Locke believes that our idea of a primary quality resembles the quality but rather that the primary quality has the power to produce or cause our idea of that quality. Our ideas of secondary qualities also have an underlying cause being as they "depend on those primary qualities". Furthermore, Locke later describes how "such particular ideas [of secondary qualities] vanish and cease, and are reduced to their causes" (Guttenplan, p.268) in the absence of a sensing observer.

The second argument that Berkeley uses is that of the "Inseparability Thesis". Here he notes that primary and secondary qualities are inseparable "even in thought" in that he believes it is impossible to conceive of an object's primary qualities alone. If one attempts to imagine an object of a particular size or shape, it is impossible for the mind not to also attribute colour or some other secondary quality to that object. If, as Berkeley states, secondary qualities are "sensations existing in the mind alone" (Guttenplan, p.279), it follows that, for the inseparability thesis to hold, primary qualities must also exist only in the mind. At first glance this would seem to strike a serious blow to

Locke's realism and his belief in the fundamental nature of primary qualities. But I believe that here also Locke's thesis has been misinterpreted by Berkeley. Locke does not think of the secondary qualities as existing solely in the mind of an observer; rather he views them as "powers to produce those sensations" in the observer's mind. To me, this is an important difference. Certainly the ideas produced by the secondary qualities exist solely in the mind of the observer, but the potential of the secondary qualities to produce those ideas can be thought of as existing independently of the observer. Berkeley has misinterpreted Locke's description of secondary qualities believing them to be mere sensations rather than the fuller interpretation of these qualities as 'powers' to produce those sensations. I believe this misinterpretation leads Berkeley to a flawed application of the inseparability thesis.

The final argument made by Berkeley to refute Locke invokes the concept of perceptual relativity. Locke provides an example of perceptual relativity as applied to temperature. If your hand is cold and is placed in a bowl of warm water, the water will feel hot to the touch; conversely if your hand is hot, the water will feel cold. This can be explained by understanding that temperature is a secondary quality and therefore subjective to the observer. In the dialogue between Hylas and Philonous, Berkeley demonstrates how primary qualities can also demonstrate perceptual relativity, "as we approach to or recede from an object, the visible extension varies" (Guttenplan, p.282). Whilst I would not disagree with Berkeley's point here, I would argue that it does not refute Locke's thesis. Immediately before providing the example, Locke makes a statement that begins "Ideas being thus distinguished and understood...." (Guttenplan, p.269). This suggests that what follows is not intended as an important line of argument. The distinction between primary and secondary qualities has already been made and the example can be read merely as an interesting phenomenon that may be explained by an understanding of secondary qualities.

Overall I accept that Berkeley does make many valid points, but whereas Philonous may have prompted Hylas to comment "I own I am at a loss what to think", I must admit that I do not share the sentiment. I believe that Berkeley misunderstands the key points of Locke's argument and consequently fails in his attempt to disprove Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

## **Bibliography**

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