

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2004
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Lecture Notes, November 8

I. Berkeley's argument for idealism from empiricism

- 1) Objects are sensible things.
 - 2) Sensible things have sensible qualities.
 - 3) The sensible qualities are the secondary qualities.
 - 4) Those secondary qualities are strictly mental properties.
- So, objects are strictly mental.
I.e. there is no physical world.

On premises 1) and 2), read §3.
Esse is percipi, being is being perceived.
This is fairly obvious for certain properties, like color.
Descartes and Locke agree on this.
Berkeley wants to extend the point.
We perceive only the perceptions, not what's behind them.
Recall the original Empiricist's Problem, from November 1.

So, Locke and Berkeley agree that the secondary properties only arise from perception, that their esse is percipi.
They disagree over the status of our ideas about primary qualities.
Berkeley wants to show that they too are only perceptions, that they are essentially mental.
Locke argues that they represent, and resemble, material objects.

Berkeley provides two arguments to show that **primary** qualities (like extension, and motion) are merely ideas, merely mental things.

1. Lockean
2. Reductive

II. Berkeley's Lockean argument against primary qualities

The use of the following principles characterize a Lockean argument:
If two or more people have different experiences of the sensation, then that sensation is merely mental.
If one person in two or more different states (at different times) has different experiences, then that sensation is merely mental.
If every one has the same perception, then the perception represents something real.

Berkeley's argument is that this last principle is never fulfilled.
There are no properties that do not vary with the perceiver.
He proceeds by example, for all the primary properties:

For number, consider what number we might give to a deck of cards.
Read §12, on the relation of number to extension.

For size and extension, consider the mite, a tiny insect.
What appears large to one perceiver can appear tiny to another.

For shape, consider what we see under a microscope.

Straight edges will appear as jagged.

Also, consider that the rectangular table is never really perceived as a rectangle.

The shape is inferred, not perceived.

For motion, consider how it varies with the succession of our ideas, §14.

Take motion as the reciprocal of time, the change in an object's position over time.

If our ideas proceed more quickly, the motion will appear more slow.

Berkeley is considering the primary qualities as we experience them, and showing that these perceptions vary in the same way that perceptions of the secondary qualities do.

III. Berkeley's Reductive argument against the primary qualities.

Berkeley provides a more direct argument that the primary qualities reduce to secondary properties: §10.

1. You can't have an idea of a primary quality without secondary qualities.

2. So, wherever the primary qualities are, the secondary are.

3. Secondary Qualities are only in the mind.

So, the primary qualities are mental, too.

Notice that for Berkeley, there is no primary/secondary distinction, §9.

Again, Berkeley considers objects as what we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste.

Their esse is percipi, being perceived, §3.

For Locke, our ideas of primary qualities resembled material objects.

But this, for Berkeley, is an illegitimate inference.