

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
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Lecture Notes, November 14

I. Locke and atomic theory

Locke, defending a limited version of the resemblance hypothesis, provides us with methods for determining whether an idea can be taken as veridical, resembling a real property of an external, material object, or whether it should be denigrated as misrepresentative. Our ideas of the primary qualities are veridical, those of the secondary are not.

Primary Qualities	Secondary Qualities
Solidity extension Figure Motion/ Rest Number	Color Odor Hot/ Cold Sound Texture Taste

The world really consists of particles (atoms) in motion, which, depending on how they are arranged, affect us in different ways giving rise to the secondary, sensory qualities.

For example, the arrangement of particles in the apple makes the light rays reflect from its surface in such a way that I have a red experience.

This is the corpuscular, or atomic, theory.

Atomic theory is not original with Locke, writing in 1689.

Democritus had posited the existence of atoms in the fifth century BC.

Boyle, the founder of modern chemistry, had written similarly in the 1660.

Check out this quote from Galileo (1564-1642):

...that external bodies, to excite in us these tastes, these odours, and these sounds, demand other than size, figure, number, and slow or rapid motion, I do not believe, and I judge that, if the ears, the tongue, and the nostrils were taken away, the figure, the numbers, and the motions would indeed remain, but not the odours, nor the tastes, nor the sounds, which, without the living animal, I do not believe are anything else than names.

Compare with Locke, §II.VIII.17.

We have ideas, impressions on our minds, which arise from the interaction between our senses and the material world.

The material world exists independently of us, but which depends on us for sensory (secondary) properties.

The material world has its primary qualities truly.

II. Nominalism

'Nominalism' is the claim that some words are merely names and do not denote real objects or properties.

We are all nominalists about fictional objects, like the Easter Bunny.

Some people are nominalists about numbers.

Locke is a nominalist about color, and other secondary properties.

III. Locke, mathematics, and Berkeley

Descartes' description of our knowledge of the physical world was implausible, since it denied that the senses had a role.

But Descartes had an account of our knowledge of mathematics and science, which relied on pure reason.

Locke rejects pure reason, and produces a more intuitive take on the physical world, relying on our senses.

But what about mathematics, then, for Locke?

Recall that Descartes parsed our ideas into three types:

A) Innate; B) Acquired; C) Produced by me

Locke rejects anything of type A).

Mathematics can not be of type B), for the same reasons that Descartes gave.

We still do not see triangles.

Even Locke agrees.

So, our knowledge of mathematics must be of type C), produced by me.

In particular, it is produced by a process of abstraction.

We sense particulars, like doughnuts and frisbees.

Then, we generalize, forming an abstract idea, like that of a circle.

Berkeley calls this the doctrine of abstract ideas.

Read the Introduction, especially.

Locke's commitment to abstract ideas, for Berkeley, creates a problem for his commonsensical metaphysics.

IV. An Empiricist's Problem

All knowledge comes from experience.

We experience sensations, not their causes.

So, we have no knowledge of what causes our sensations, i.e. objects in the supposedly material world.

That is, we seem only to know our experiences, and not the external world.

Descartes argues that we judge that there is an external world, and what it is like, with our minds.

This option is not available to an empiricist.

Locke says that the primary qualities inhere in material objects, that our ideas resemble them.

So we have some knowledge of the external world in that way.

Berkeley, on the other hand, argues that there are no material objects!

See §4, and §9.

V. Three metaphysical positions

1) Materialism: All reality is material.

This would have to include the mental.

Thus, a materialist might say that the mind is the brain.

Hobbes was a materialist, though Locke was not.

2) Dualism: Some reality is mental, some is physical.

Descartes and Locke are both dualists, though we read Locke as a materialist.

Note that God is taken as a mental object, an infinite thinker.

3) Idealism: All reality is mental

Berkeley holds this view.

See §9.

Note that these metaphysical positions are independent of one's epistemology.

Locke and Descartes agree on dualism, despite their disagreement over epistemology.

And Berkeley disagrees with Locke about metaphysics, though he mostly agrees about epistemology.

Compare with this, from Locke, from the Introduction, §4-§5, to the *Enquiry*:

If by this inquiry into the nature of the understanding, I can discover the powers thereof; how far they reach; to what things they are in any degree proportionate; and where they fail us, I suppose it may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension; to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether; and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities... The discoveries we can make with this ought to satisfy us; and we shall then use our understandings right, when we entertain all objects in that way and proportion that they are suited to our faculties, and upon those grounds they are capable of being proposed to us; and not peremptorily or intemperately require demonstration, and demand certainty, where probability only is to be had, and which is sufficient to govern all our concerns. If we will disbelieve everything, because we cannot certainly know all things, we shall do much as wisely as he who would not use his legs, but sit still and perish, because he had no wings to fly.

Read Introduction, §1-§6.

The beginning of the Introduction is a rejection of Descartes' work.

Berkeley says that we have prejudices, errors and paradoxes.

They are wrongly thought to arise from our natural weakness and limitations.

Materialism, and the materialist element of dualism, leads to skepticism.

But this is an unjustified skepticism.

We can avoid these problems, which arise from raising dust and complaining we can not see.

Berkeley is here concerned with the kinds of problems that Locke mentions with Cartesian philosophy.

The rest of the Introduction contains an extended attack on Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas.

Berkeley urges us not to accept the "largest views", false principles.

The main problem with Lockean materialism is its reliance on 'abstract ideas'.