

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005  
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Lecture Notes, November 21

## I. Berkeley's Lockean argument against primary qualities

Berkeley provides both a Lockean argument and a reductive argument to show that primary qualities are merely ideas, merely mental things.

Much of the Lockean argument appears more explicitly in the handout excerpt from the *Three Dialogues*

The use of the following principles characterize a Lockean argument:

If some quality of an object appears different to two or more people (or to one person in two or more different states) then that quality is merely mental.

Remember the hot and cold water experiment.

If the quality appears the same to every one, then it is a real property of the object.

Locke uses the example of the sphere.

Berkeley's Lockean argument against the primary qualities 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:

## II. Berkeley's Lockean argument against number

Consider what number we might give to a deck of cards.

It is 52 cards, 4 suits, 13 ranks, 1 deck.

The number correctly applied to the object varies as we think of the object in different ways.

It may be a property of a concept, rather than of an object.

Read §12, on the relation of number to extension.

## III. Berkeley's Lockean argument against extension

For extension (size), consider the mite, a tiny insect.

What appears large to one perceiver can appear tiny to another.

The size of an object is relative to perceiver, just as the color or taste is.

I appear large to the mite, but to a giant, I appear small.

Thus extension is a secondary property, too.

This example is key to Berkeley's Lockean argument, since extension is most plausibly a primary quality.

One response to Berkeley's argument about extension is that there is something on which the mite, the giant, and I can agree: I am six feet tall.

That is, the correspondence between a scale of measurement and an object is not relative to the perceiver.

If there is such an objective fact about my extension, if it is not relative to the perceiver, then Berkeley's

argument fails.

But this response is insufficient.

The scale of measurement itself is relative to a perceiver.

A yard was originally defined as the distance between the end of the king's finger and the tip of his nose.

We have more objective measures now, but even these do not solve the problem.

There used to be a standard meter, against which all other meters could be measured.

Now, we use the distance light travels in a specific period of time, since the speed of light is supposedly a constant.

(According to Einstein, the speed of light is a constant, though some scientists question this result.)

But consider, what if we awoke tomorrow and found that everything had doubled in size.

(And, the speed of light doubled, as well.)

We would have no way of discovering this fact.

This could even happen all of the time, without us knowing!

We settle our scales relative to useful sizes and distances.

Extension does seem to be a secondary quality, according to the Lockean principles.

#### IV. Berkeley's Lockean argument against shape

For shape, consider what we see under a microscope.

See Handout, Column III.

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.

#### V. Berkeley's Lockean argument against motion

Consider how motion varies with the succession of our ideas, §14; also Handout, Column III.

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.

#### VI. Berkeley's Lockean argument against solidity

Berkeley considers solidity as resistance to touch, Handout, column IV.

A strong person will find something soft that a weaker person will find hard.

This is even more plausible if we consider giants and mites again.

Hylas grants that hard and soft are relative to the perceiver, but says that the causes of these are not relative.

Philonous responds that the causes are not perceived.

Compare with Locke, Book II, Chapter VIII, §15.

Locke says that the secondary qualities arise from the impulse of insensible parts of matter on our senses.

But if we are empiricists, says Berkeley, we can have no experience, no sensation, of insensible parts.

This is a contradiction.

This is what Berkeley relies on in the argument for idealism from empiricism.

Berkeley considers all of Locke's primary qualities as we experience them.

He has shown that these perceptions vary in the same way that perceptions of the secondary qualities do.

## VII. 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 not have an idea of a primary quality without secondary qualities.
  2. So, wherever the secondary qualities are, the primary are.
  3. Secondary qualities are only in the mind.
- So, the primary qualities are mental, too.

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

Their esse is percipi, being perceived, §3.

Locke thinks that our ideas of primary qualities resemble material objects.

But this, for Berkeley, is an illegitimate inference.

There is no primary/secondary distinction, since all qualities are secondary.