

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007
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Lecture Notes, October 2

I. Recapitulation

Last week, we discussed Locke's primary/secondary distinction. Locke proposes that we can have knowledge of the external world on the basis of sense experience. We just have to be careful to distinguish our veridical ideas from misrepresentative ones. Locke's account of our knowledge relied on a doctrine of abstract ideas, which allows us to form general ideas by abstracting from our particular sense experience. I also mentioned that Berkeley thinks that there are two problems with Locke's doctrine. One problem arises from Locke's use of abstract ideas. The other problem is that we experience, properly speaking, only our sensations, and not the objects as they are in themselves. Berkeley's solution to these problems is to deny that there is a material world. Questions?

II. Three arguments for idealism

Berkeley's idealism is often summarized as: esse is percipi. Esse is percipi means being is perception. In fact, for Berkeley, there are perceptions, and perceivers. The notion of a perceiver causes difficulties for Berkeley, to which we may return. Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley all agree that secondary properties, like color, exist only in the mind. Berkeley extends the point. We perceive only the perceptions, not what is behind them, under them, or causing them. So, we have no knowledge of the material world.

Locke and Berkeley disagree over the status of our ideas about primary qualities. Locke argues that they represent, and resemble, material objects. Berkeley wants to show that they too are only perceptions, that they are essentially mental. Berkeley provides three arguments to show that primary qualities are in the mind:

1. From the sensibility of objects
2. The extended Lockean arguments
3. A reductive argument

III. The argument from the sensibility of objects

Berkeley's argument for idealism from the sensibility of objects is an argument from the definition of what it means to be a sensible object.

The argument appears in the first dialogue, pp 117-120, using heat as an example of a particular sensible quality.

1. Objects are sensible things.
 2. Sensible things are things with 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.

This argument is not valid, as it stands.

You might take some time to find the problems with it.

I think it fairly represents Berkeley's intentions though.

Remember, the empiricist claim is that all we know must originally come in through the senses.

IV. Berkeley's Lockean arguments

The Lockean arguments demonstrate, for each supposedly primary quality, that it is really a secondary quality.

I call these arguments Lockean because Berkeley uses Locke's principles for distinguishing veridical from misrepresenting ideas against him.

Remember, the disagreement between Berkeley and Locke is over metaphysics, not methodology.

The use of the following principles characterizes a Lockean argument:

P1: 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.

P2: 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.

Hylas and Philonous run through the secondary properties, pp 120-4.

In this portion of Berkeley's argument, he does not disagree with Locke.

Berkeley's Lockean argument against the primary qualities is that P2 is never fulfilled.

There are no properties that do not vary with the perceiver.

He proceeds by example, for all the primary properties: number, extension, shape, motion, solidity

V. Berkeley's Lockean argument against number...

...does not appear in the *Three Dialogues*

The following is from *Principles* §12:

That number is entirely the creature of the mind, even though the other qualities be allowed to exist without, will be evident to whoever considers that the same thing bears a different denomination of number as the mind views it with different respects. Thus, the same extension is one, or three, or thirty-six, according as the mind considers it with reference to a yard, a foot, or an inch. Number is so visibly relative, and dependent on men's understanding, that it is strange to think how any one should give it an absolute existence without the mind. We say one book, one page, one line, etc.; all these are equally units, though some contain several of the others. And in each instance, it is plain, the unit relates to some particular combination of ideas arbitrarily put together by the mind.

Consider what number we might apply 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.

VI. Berkeley's Lockean argument against extension, pp 124-5

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 of utmost importance, since extension is the most plausible 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 an objective fact about my extension which 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 an actual standard meter bar, 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.

(See the website for links to interesting histories of measurement.)

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.

We would have no way of discovering this fact.

Dilations and restrictions could 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.

VII. Berkeley's Lockean argument against shape, p 125

For shape, consider what we see under a microscope.

Straight edges will appear as jagged.

Berkeley had used the microscope to argue against the reality of color, on pp 122-3.

In Berkeley's favor, consider that the rectangular table is never really sensed as a rectangle.

The shape is inferred.

VIII. Berkeley's Lockean argument against motion, pp 125-6

Consider how motion varies with the succession of our ideas.

Take motion as the reciprocal of time, the change in an objects position over time.

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

IX. Berkeley's Lockean argument against solidity, p 126

Berkeley considers solidity as resistance to touch.

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:

The ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves, but the ideas produced in us by these secondary qualities have no resemblance of them at all. There is nothing like our ideas, existing in the bodies themselves. They are, in the bodies we denominate from them, only a power to produce those sensations in us: and what is sweet, blue, or warm in idea, is but the certain bulk, figure, and motion of the *insensible* parts, in the bodies themselves, which we call so (Locke's *Essay*, Book II, Chapter VIII, 15; emphasis added).

Locke says that the secondary qualities arise from the impulse of insensible parts of matter on our senses. But, says Berkeley, we can have no experience, no sensation, of insensible parts.

We can not sense that which is insensible!

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.