

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://philosophy.thatmarcusfamily.org>
Office phone: (718) 997-5287

Lecture Notes, April 3

I. Quiz: What are the primary qualities? What are the secondary qualities?

II. The Primary/Secondary Distinction and the Resemblance Hypothesis

On Wednesday, we saw that Locke accepts the Resemblance Hypothesis, for primary qualities.

Our ideas of extension, for example, resemble extension in the world.

That is, I have an idea that this piece of paper is 11 inches long.

So, the paper really is 11 inches long.

Also, my idea of the motion of a car resembles the real motion of that car.

The car really is moving.

Note that the primary qualities are mathematically describable.

My ideas of secondary qualities do not resemble anything in an object.

Note also that Locke and Descartes do not disagree substantially about the nature of the physical world.

They do disagree about how we know about those properties.

In technical terms, their disagreement is epistemological, not metaphysical.

We should expect this, since both Descartes and Locke were writing in support of modern science.

III. So, why do we see yellow lemons?

There is something in the object that makes me think it is the way it is.

The world really consists of particles (atoms) in motion.

These unite in varying ways.

Depending on how they unite, they affect us in different ways.

Their arrangement determines how we experience an object.

The arrangement of particles in the apple makes the light reflect from its surface so that I have a red experience.

We might say that the apple has a 'dispositional property' which makes us see it as red, §II.VIII.13.

But the dispositional property is not redness, which is, properly speaking, a property only of my experience.

We have ideas which arise from the interaction between our senses and the material world.

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

The material world has its primary qualities truly.

Locke's position is called 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 1660s.

Galileo (1564-1642) wrote:

...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 Galileo's quote with Locke, §II.VIII.17.

IV. 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.

V. Locke, mathematics, and starting Berkeley

Descartes's 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 sensory account of our knowledge of the physical world.

But Locke's account of mathematics, which relied on the doctrine of abstraction, is less plausible.

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.

Even Locke agrees that we do not see triangles.

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

In particular, it is produced by 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.

He argues that Locke's use of the doctrine of abstract ideas in his accounts of both the physical world and mathematics creates a serious problem for his commonsense account of our knowledge.

The first things you should read are Berkeley's Introduction (not the editor's introduction, though you might find that useful eventually), and the first twenty sections of the main text, pages 7-30. Also, you should look at sections 97-100, on pages 61-62.

VI. An Empiricist's Problem

The empiricist claims that all knowledge comes from experience.

But we experience sensations, not the causes of our sensations.

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 like Locke or Berkeley.

Locke says that our ideas of primary qualities of objects resemble real qualities of those objects.

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

Berkeley argues that there are no material objects.

See §4, and §9.

VII. Metaphysics and Epistemology

Recall the three positions concerning the nature of reality we have discussed:

1) Materialism: All reality is material.

This would have to include ideas.

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

Hobbes was really 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 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.

That is, Berkeley and Locke agree on methodology: that one should try to account for all knowledge on the basis of sense experience.

To see how close Berkeley and Locke are with respect to their empiricist methodology read the following quote from Locke.

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 concernments. 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. (Locke's Introduction, §4-§5, to the *Enquiry*)

Now, compare Locke's quote with the first few sections of Berkeley's Introduction to the *Principles*.

The beginning of Berkeley's Introduction may be taken as criticism of Descartes's work.

(I will refer to these sections as §I4, for example.)

Note that Berkeley agrees with Locke's criticisms.

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 skepticism is unjustified.

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

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

Berkeley thinks that the main problem with Lockean materialism is its reliance on 'abstract ideas'.