

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007
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Lecture Notes, February 19

I. Hobbes' parsimony and Cartesian reasoning

Last week, we started to look at Hobbes' materialism, and took a detour through Locke's defense of the primary/secondary distinction.

Locke's primary/secondary distinction is consistent with Hobbes' materialism, since it avoids positing a non-material mind as the seat of the secondary qualities.

Hobbes denies that we must posit a non-physical substance to account for the properties we experience.

For occurrent sensory states, Hobbes' materialism might be favored, if only on Ockhamist grounds.

That is, Hobbes only posits one kind of thing, whereas Descartes posits two.

Remember Aristotle's criticism of Plato's forms: it is otiose to posit a distinct realm (of forms) to account for change in the sensible world.

(Plato could, by the way, claim some degree of parsimony, because he denigrates the sensible world.)

So, Hobbes' account of the sensory states I have right now may seem preferable.

But, when we consider memory and fantasy, Descartes' account seems preferable.

Hobbes must account for mental states which are not obviously caused by transfers of momentum from objects to our senses.

Besides our faculties of memory and fantasy, Hobbes also needs to account for our ability to deduce new ideas by reasoning.

We can derive new theorems in mathematics, infer laws of physics, and, more simply, make common deductions about the world around us.

The challenge for Hobbes' materialism is to provide an account of human reasoning which does not rely on an independent, thinking substance.

Hobbes responds to the challenge by relying on the [Galilean/Newtonian concept of inertia](#).

Once our ideas are set in motion by sensation, they remain in motion.

Occurrent sensory images drown out the former ideas, as the sun obscures the distant stars.

So, Hobbes accounts for memory on the basis of the remaining, inert, yet obscured motion of particles in the body, p 133.

To account for ideas of fantasy, Hobbes says that we can recombine parts of different memories (as of a horse and a bird), to create new images (as of a flying horse).

Even if we accept Hobbes' accounts of memory and fantasy, it is hard to see how that account could lead to a full Cartesian account of reasoning.

Perhaps Descartes overemphasized the clarity of reasoning.

Still, all that Hobbes gives us is an account by which images which were together when originally sensed remain together in memory.

The metaphor of water on a table is evocative, but not very convincing.

Notice that Hobbes provides a scientifically testable theory.

Consider, "It follows that the longer the time is, after the sight or sense of any object, the weaker is the

imagination (p 130).”

It is true that our memories fade, but not in proportion to time, alone.

My memory of a minor event yesterday is no more faint than my memory of an important event which occurred years ago.

Another problem for Hobbes’ scientific account involves the effect of our interests in our perception. We do not see just a visual manifold.

Rather, we pick out items based on our desires and preconceptions.

It turns out that Hobbes’ theory is false, but it is important in that it is a precedent for the kind of theory that scientists want.

II. The end of Hobbes

Hobbes’ materialism has parsimony in its favor.

Also, Hobbes provides a plausible account of mental causation: since all mental phenomena are physical phenomena, the laws of mental causation are the same as the laws of physics.

Still, he lacks a convincing scientific account of human reasoning.

Even if Descartes overemphasized the purity of reason, Hobbes’ account is anemic.

Perhaps a contemporary materialist could improve on Hobbes’ account, and maintain its spirit.

More problematically, Hobbes lacks an explanation for the appearances of secondary qualities.

By holding that mental states are just motions of particles in the body, Hobbes is responding to the Aristotelian allegation that our senses conform to the real properties of an object, such as color.

But, he seems to neglect the problem that motion is not color.

Why do we see yellow lemons, instead of just extensions in motion?

We might say that the lemon has a ‘dispositional property’ which makes us see it as yellow.

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

Locke responded skeptically to the problem of the appearances.

It’s just equally a mystery why qualia should attach to minds or to bodies.

Berkeley is unsatisfied with this kind of skepticism, and thinks that we can resolve the problems by adopting a different kind of monism.

III. Berkeley’s opposition to Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke

Descartes’ dualist was charged with the impossible task of describing the interactions between a non-material substance (mind) and a material substance (body).

Hobbes and Berkeley provide two different ways to avoid the dualist’s mind/body problem.

Hobbes’ materialist denied the existence of a non-material substance.

Conversely, Berkeley’s idealist asserts that there are no material objects, all reality is mental, §§4 and 9. Since there is no material world, there is no problem of interaction.

Berkeley writes in opposition to both Descartes and Locke.

Besides opposing the materialist portion of Descartes’ dualism, Berkeley denies the existence of innate ideas, and wants to re-connect thinking with sensation.

Hobbes also rejects Descartes' opposition of sensing and thinking.

In this way, both Hobbes and Berkeley are reactionary.

Hobbes wants to return to the materialism of Aristotle, while accommodating the new science.

Berkeley wants to return to Aristotle's union of sensation and thought, without his materialism.

Berkeley and Hobbes (and Locke) are all in agreement that all knowledge must ultimately be explained by, or reduced to, sense experience.

Berkeley discerns three kinds of ideas, all of which either are, or are traceable to, sensations: sensations; ideas of reflection; or ideas of memory and imagination, which can recombine ideas of sensation, §1.

While we have read Hobbes as an example of modern materialism, Berkeley takes Locke as his primary materialist opponent.

Berkeley and Locke disagree about two important points.

First, Berkeley rejects the primary/secondary distinction.

Second, Berkeley abhors Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas.

Locke presents the doctrine of abstract ideas as a replacement for Descartes' innate ideas.

For Descartes, for example, mathematical knowledge had to be innate, since we never sense mathematical objects.

For Locke (as for Hobbes and Berkeley) all knowledge must be grounded in sense experience.

Locke's solution was to justify our knowledge of mathematical objects by a process of abstraction.

We see doughnuts and frisbees, for example, and focus only on their common shape to arrive at the idea of a circle, Locke Handout §II.15.

Abstraction is required in other areas, as well.

Consider extension, which Descartes believed to be the essential property of physical objects.

We experience extended things, but not extension itself.

Any ideas of extension, size, or shape must arise from abstraction.