

7.3 Ideas and Qualities

7.3.1 Readings and Study questions

- Readings: Ideally, you would read Book II of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* entirely, but here is what is required (chap stands for chapter, par for paragraph):

Book II: chap 1 par 1-8 , chap 2, chap 8 par 8-23, chap 9 par 8, chap 23 par 1-4,

And optional is Book 2 chap 27 (on personal identity, but I doubt we'll have time to discuss it)

- Study questions:
 1. Which are the two origins of all human knowledge according to Locke?
 2. Explain how simple ideas are formed by the understanding. Is it an active or a passive process?
 3. Explain how complex ideas are formed by the understanding. Which are the kinds of actions that the mind can engage in in order to put simple ideas together?
 4. What is the difference between primary and secondary qualities? Give examples.

7.3.2 Introduction

What is at stake: giving an empiricist account of knowledge]: the blank slate

- Locke is explicitly empiricist: all knowledge comes from experience.

From where does it have all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from *experience* ... (II,I, 2)

- Locke's famous image: the mind is similar to white paper, which becomes imprinted through experience.

Let us suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas (II, I, 2)

- Locke gives an account of the production of ideas which will be criticized by Berkeley and Hume.

In a sense, Berkeley and Hume will turn Locke's arguments against Locke himself, showing that Locke did not go far enough on the empiricist road.

—→ *Locke will give a "natural" but also rather "naive" account of how ideas are formed in our understanding on the basis of experience. Our aim here is to understand his account as well as the ambiguities that it contains, such that we will understand how Locke opens to Berkeley's and Hume's philosophies.*

7.3.3 The Origin of Ideas: Sensation and Reflection

Two origins of knowledge: sensation and reflection

- Sensation and Reflection are the sole sources of knowledge:

All ideas come from sensation or reflection. (II,I, 2)

External objects furnish the mind with the ideas of sensible qualities, which are all those different perceptions they produce in us. And the mind furnishes the understanding with ideas of its own operations.(II, I,4)

- Sensation – external sense – impressions coming from the external objects – produces ideas of sensible qualities

Ideas from sensations historically come first. Our body is "fit" to receive information about the external objects. Sensations are produced by the external objects, which Locke take to be fundamentally constituted of material corpuscles (atoms) (he follows his mentor Boyle on this).

- Reflection – internal sense – perception and understanding of the operations of the mind – produces ideas of the operations of the mind

- Ideas from reflection come later.

- Locke does not give any “mechanical” explanation of how ideas of reflection are imprinted on us – this would involve to give a mechanical explanation of the internal structure of the mind and of ideas, upon which, you will remember, he said he wanted to avoid speculating.

Active or passive process :

- On the one hand, Locke tells us that we are mostly passive when we form ideas of the external objects in our understanding
- On the other hand, he explains that, in order to form ideas, both from sensation and from reflexion, the attention of the mind is needed (II,I,7). No one can have clear ideas of the operations of the mind unless she turns her attention to it. And no one can have clear ideas of a clock unless she turns her attention to it.
- Finally, in II,IX,8, Locke admits the importance of judgment in perception, and mentions Molineaux’s problem.

Reminder: Descartes: hats, coats and men.

Molineux: would a blind man who has just recovered sight recognize a cube from a sphere?

- That our perception, even of external object, is more active than passive could cause some trouble concerning Locke’s view that our ideas are copies of the external objects.

Conclusion :

—→ *Locke gives an empiricist account of the origin of our ideas. All our ideas originates either in our sense of external objects – sensation – or in our sense of internal operations of the mind – reflection. In both cases, the understanding must be attentive to the internal or external sensations in order to construct these ideas. There remains an ambiguity in Locke’s account concerning the supposed passivity of the understanding when forming ideas from sensations. Berkeley will exploit it later.*

7.3.4 Simple and Complex Ideas

Two kinds of ideas : simple and complex

Simple Ideas : Though sensations are complex, ideas are simple, because distinguished according to various senses.

Complex ideas are made of simple ideas, by comparison, repetition, composition etc.

Locke gives an account of abstraction: abstract ideas are ideas from which we have stripped some qualities. For example, the abstract idea of a circle is formed when we take the idea of a particular circle, and strip this idea from all the properties which make this circle a particular circle (color of course, but also particular diameter for example). Thus we form the notion of an abstract circle.

Berkeley will criticize this notion of abstract idea in saying that it does not make sense: I cannot have any idea of circle without a particular diameter for example.

Simple ideas or the psychological atoms :

Locke's analogy: simple ideas are like material atoms

Just as we cannot destroy or create the elements of matter, but only decompose and recompose them, we cannot destroy or create the elements of thought. but only decompose and recompose them.

The role of experience : Experience is necessary in order to construct these ideas – a blind man does not have any ideas of colors.

Appeal to introspection – Locke does not give much of an argument in support of his classification of ideas. Instead, he appeals to common sense and introspection. He encourages us to look into our own understanding and notice his workings. Of course, this does not seem to have much of a convincing power. That said, such a method seems consistent with Locke's commitment to empiricism, which advocates to rely on experience rather than on rational speculation. Introspection can be seen as the experiment of the mind.

→ *Locke seems to give a rather straightforward classification of our ideas. In appealing solely to the analogy with material atoms and observation from introspection, he seems to be faithful to his commitment to empiricism.*

7.3.5 The Object of Ideas: Qualities

Locke has given us an account of how ideas are produced in our mind. It remains to say what the object of these ideas is. The answer is simple: qualities.

Ideas and Qualities : while ideas are in our minds, qualities are in the objects. Locke defines a “quality” by contrast to “idea” as follows:

Whatever the mind perceives in itself or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding, that I call *idea*, and the power to produce any *idea* in our mind I call a *quality* of the subject in which the power is.

According to the above definition:

- qualities are powers in external objects, to produce some effects on our minds
- ideas are perception of whatever qualities produce in our minds.

Two (or three) types of qualities – Qualities come into two types according to Hume: primary and secondary.

- Reminder: Descartes’ piece of wax – Descartes reduced matter to extension and movement. All other “sensible qualities” were taken not to be properties of the object but rather the product of the interaction between the properties of the object and our own body and sense organs.

- Locke, with some modifications, takes up the same distinction. The idea is the following. One must admit that some of our sensations do not correspond to the properties of external objects (heat is a classic example here). That said, Locke, following Descartes, believes that *there remains some sensations which correspond or resemble the true properties of external objects*. The game is thus to find out which of the sensible qualities that we perceive are “really” within the objects, and which are mirroring the interaction between our body and the external objects.

NOTE: Locke mentions a third type of quality, “tertiary” if you wish. These correspond to the powers that some bodies have to produce some

modification in other bodies, modifications which turn can produce some effect on us.

For example: The sun melts the wax and the wax appears melted to us.

Locke seems to consider tertiary qualities as a subclass of secondary qualities. There is no need to make things more complex than they are, and for this reason, we will talk only of the primary and secondary qualities.

Primary qualities – The primary qualities are the “real qualities” in the sense that they belong to the external bodies.

Locke gives a longer list than Descartes does: extension (“bulk” in Locke’s terms), figure, movement, number + solidity.

While for Descartes, solidity was a sensible quality which did not pertain to the external bodies, it does for Locke. Remember that Locke embraces Boyle’s atomism. The notion of atom is still understood as a “solid corpuscle” at the time.

So, the characteristics of the primary qualities are that:

1. they are “real” in the sense that they belong entirely to external bodies (II, viii, 17)
2. they belong to *all bodies* : Locke’s example is a grain of wheat. Divide it as much as you want, the parts obtained will always be extended, movable, solid etc.
3. they are inseparable from the bodies. The same example applies. Locke’s argument in support of this claim seems to be similar to Descartes’, that is to say: one cannot conceive of bodies without extension, movement, figure, number and solidity
Of course, a question arises here: if it is true that primary qualities are these qualities without which one cannot conceive of bodies, how come that Descartes and Locke did not come up with the same list? How are we going to justify where to put the demarcation line between primary and secondary qualities?
4. the ideas produced by these qualities resemble these qualities. See in particular paragraphs 15 and 18. Locke claims that the idea

of the circle and the circle as it exists in external bodies are the same.

There would be a lot to say about this notion of resemblance. As most of Locke's account, it is natural, and attractive for that reason, but also far too naive.

Secondary qualities – The secondary qualities do not belong to external bodies. One can conceive of bodies without these qualities. Bodies possess secondary qualities only in so far as they are perceived by a subject. By themselves, bodies have no color, no heat etc.

Our ideas of secondary qualities are produced by the primary qualities, and ultimately by the effect of insensible corpuscles on our sense organs.

Our ideas of secondary qualities do not resemble anything in the external bodies. Instead, they are really sensations on our side.

So, given an external body:

- its primary qualities produce some ideas in our mind (of its extension, movement, number and solidity) which resemble these qualities
- its primary qualities also produce some ideas in our mind in their interactions with our sense organs

The argument: heat and pain – In order to argue that secondary qualities do not pertain to the external bodies, Locke proposes two arguments concerning the quality of heat:

1. Secondary qualities are relative:
 - The same water feels hot or cold depending on how warm your hand is.
 - Being the same water, it has identical properties.
 - So, warm and cold are not properties of the body
2. Comparison between warmth / coldness with pleasure and pain (II,viii, 16)
 - Everybody admits that pleasure and pain are not properties of external bodies, but rather sensations in our own bodies produced by the properties of external bodies
 - There is no empirical distinction between warmth/ coldness and pleasure/pain: the same fire which produces warmth and pleasure

at a distance, produces pain when we get closer. So, there is no reason to give a different ontological status to the two sensations - Warmth and coldness, just as pleasure and pain, are in the mind and not in the external bodies.

—→ *There is no empirical evidence that coldness and warmth are sensations produced by a different mechanism than pain and pleasure. Hence, there is no reason to give them different ontological status. If we agree that pain and pleasure exist in us rather than external properties, so should we agree that it is the case for warmth and coldness as well.*

A worry – Could not the above argument be turned against Locke himself?

Locke explains that there is no reason to distinguish between heat and pain: both are qualities which do not pertain to the external bodies, but rather exist in so far as a body is perceived by a subject. But, could not we make the same argument concerning the distinction between primary and secondary qualities?

The worry here is of course to justify why primary qualities would have different types of effects. For example, how to justify the claim that our idea of extension corresponds to a true property of the external body while our idea of color does not?? The mechanism by which the ideas are produced seems to be similar in both cases: ideas are produced by the impact of insensible corpuscles on our sense organs. Why would our sensation of extension be any different in character than our sensation of color?

So, the very same argument which shows that secondary qualities exist only as in us could be used to show that this is the case for primary qualities, unless one finds a way to distinguish between them.

We have seen that Locke appeals to the argument that one cannot conceive of bodies without extension. Such an argument does not seem to be faithful to the commitment to empiricism though: from the empiricist stand point, there seem to be no clear distinction between our sensations of extension and our sensations of color and heat, and hence, it seems that we could easily conclude that extension exists in us rather than in external bodies.

Berkeley will exploit this problem at length.

7.3.6 Conclusion: Locke's two notions of idea

Summing up – Locke's view and its difficulties

Locke's epistemology : The following notions should now be clear:

- Origin of ideas: sensation and reflection
- Types of ideas: simple and complex
- Object of ideas: primary and secondary qualities

The main difficulties faced by Locke's epistemology:

- Active vs passive production of ideas by the understanding
- Distinction between primary and secondary qualities: could not we claim that all qualities, whether "primary" or "secondary" exist only in us rather than in external bodies?

A common source for the problem – Locke's two notion of ideas.

Both difficulties above can be understood better as related to a more fundamental problem within Locke's accounts of ideas. His account indeed features an important ambiguity concerning *what ideas refer to*.

- At first sight, it seems that Locke takes ideas to refer *directly* to the qualities of external objects and the operations of the mind.
- That said, whether they come from sensation or reflection, ideas are constructed through the attention of the mind, which needs to take "notice" of them (II, I,7).
- Locke's use of the term 'idea' is ambiguous: sometimes the object of ideas are qualities, and sometimes the object of ideas is the mental product of these qualities.
- In other words, the question is whether the relationships between ideas and their object is direct or mediate – for example for ideas coming from sensation:
 - external objects directly produce ideas of these objects. In this case, our ideas refer to external objects.
 - external objects produce internal, mental entities – say 'impressions' – of which the understanding must take notice in order to construct an idea. In this case, our ideas refers to some internal, mental products of sensation.

- Locke does not take any stance and explicitly maintains the ambiguity. The difference is important though, as we shall see when reading Berkeley and Hume.
- Basically, the problem is the following:
 - On one hand, it seems impossible to maintain that we have a direct contact with external objects: attention is clearly needed in order to produce ideas.
 - On the other hand, if we admit that our ideas refer to mental products, then what do we know about the relationships between our ideas and the external objects?

At least two questions arise:

1. In what sense can we say that our ideas ‘resemble’ external objects?
2. How can we assess such a resemblance? Aren’t we “stuck” in our representations?

→ *This is the dilemma that Berkeley is going to set up for Locke.*

7.4 Text Analysis : Against the notion of substance

The text analysis is on Book II, Chap. XXIII, paragraph 1-4. Usual questions, usual times.

