

Locke: Empiricism and Primary vs. Secondary Qualities

Empiricism vs. Rationalism

-Conceptual (How do we come to have our ideas or concepts?) vs. Doctrinal (How do we come to know truths?) Empiricism and Rationalism: The empiricists gave experience a bigger role in our coming to have ideas and to know truths, while rationalists gave a bigger role to reason.

Rationalists were friendlier to innate ideas and *a priori* knowledge.

-Test cases: Molyneux Problem (II,9,8, p.12.6), ontological argument

Locke's Empiricism: Locke's attack on innate "notions or principles" (p. 2.2)

-Defense: I,2,3-4 (p. 2): Defense against the argument from universal consent

-Offense: I,2,5 (pp. 2-3): "not known to children, idiots, etc." In the sections that then follow, Locke considers and rejects other attempts by which it might be claimed that principles are in some good sense innate, leading to...

-Locke's Dilemma [1,2,5; 1,2,22 (p. 4)]: "Implicitly known before proposing, signifies that the mind is capable of understanding them, or else signifies nothing": If the mind isn't actually thinking these ideas at birth, then the only sense in which they might then be "imprinted" is that the mind is capable of coming to think them. But in *that* weak sense, the empiricist is happy to agree that all our ideas are innate.

-But consider Leibniz:

I have also used the comparison with a block of veined marble, rather than a completely uniform block of marble, or an empty tablet, that is, what the philosophers call a *tabula rasa*. For if the soul were like these empty tablets, truths would be in us as the shape of Hercules is in a block of marble, when the marble is completely indifferent to receiving this shape or another. But if the stone had veins which marked out the shape of Hercules rather than other shapes, then that block would be more determined with respect to that shape and Hercules would be as though innate in it in some sense, even though some labor would be required for these veins to be exposed and polished into clarity by the removal of everything that prevents them from appearing. This is how ideas and truths are innate in us, as natural inclinations, dispositions, habits, or potentialities are. . . (Preface to *New Essays on the Understanding*, AG 294)

-My riff on this example: pp. 239-240 of chapter at <https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/campuspress.yale.edu/dist/c/1227/files/2021/01/AIproofs-Ch7.pdf>

Locke's (Conceptual) Empiricist Principle: All our ideas come from, spring from, derive from experience (sensation or reflection): II,1,2 (p. 5)

-Sensation: from the senses (sight, touch, taste, etc.). Examples of ideas: yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet (II,1,3, p. 5).

-Reflection: ideas "the mind gets by reflecting on its own operations within itself" (II,1,4, p. 5). Examples: "perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing, and all the different actings of our own minds, which we, being conscious of and **observing** in ourselves, do from these receive into our understandings as distinct ideas, as we do from bodies affecting our senses" (II,1,4).

-Does this Principle have any teeth? (Is it something a rationalist should reject?) That depends on what's meant by the likes of "comes/derives/springs from". If that just means that if you had no experience at all, you'd have no ideas, few (including few rationalists) would deny it. But if it somehow ties the ability to have particular ideas with particular courses of one's experience, it can be a substantive principle.

-Does it, for example, support this principle?: No experience of x, then no idea of x (probably not, as Locke seems to understand his principle; but if it did, it would be very substantive – indeed, substantive enough to be pretty clearly false-in this unrefined form)

-Locke's two arguments for the principle:

1. by survey (II,1,5, p. 6)
2. by lack of ideas where one has lack of experience (II,1,6, p. 6).

-How Locke describes how we should conduct our survey (at II,1,5) suggests these two quite substantive principles:

1. No experience of x, then no simple idea of x
2. If you have an idea of x, then you have either experienced x or the idea of x is complex, and you have derived from experience (in accordance with Principle 1) the simple ideas from which the idea of x can be composed.

-Distinction: Simple [II,1,25-II,2,2, p. 7] vs. Complex [II,12, 1-2, p. 13] Ideas.

-Mind is passive in receiving simple ideas, which comprise the materials from which it can actively construct various complex ideas.

-A mark of simple ideas are indefinable in a way that complex ideas are not – see the passage at II,4,6, p. 8.6: Simple ideas must be derived directly from experience (from the senses in the case of ideas of sense): “If any one ask me, What this solidity is, I send him to his senses to inform him”.

Primary and Secondary Qualities

-examples: 1°: “solidity, extension, figure, mobility”, then “bulk, figure, texture, motion or rest, and number” (II,8,9, p. 9); 2°: “colors, sounds, tastes, etc.” (II,8,10, p. 9)

-Locke often writes that 1° qualities, but not 2°, are “*really*” in bodies; for instance: “The particular bulk, number, figure, and motion of the parts of fire or snow are really in them, whether anyone’s senses perceive them or not. And therefore they may be called real qualities, because they really exist in those bodies. But light, whiteness, or coldness, are no more really in them than sickness or pain is in manna” (II,8,17, pp. 10-11). His use of “really” seems to connote some kind of independence from perceivers. He seems to me *not* to be using “really” in opposition to “only apparently.” (If what he meant is that 2° qualities are only apparently in bodies, while 1° qualities, by contrast, are “really” (i.e., not just apparently) in them, then he would be sounding like an eliminativist about 2° qualities. But he seems to me a reductionist.)

-3 distinct distinctions

1. Primary Qualities are those “utterly inseparable from the body in whatever state it is” (II,8,9, p. 9). Needs help: determinable and determinate qualities: Spherical is a PQ b/c it is a determination of shape, and all bodies must have some shape, while red is a SQ b/c it is a determination of color, and not all bodies must have color?

2. Secondary Qualities are those “which in truth are nothing in the objects themselves but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities” (II,8,10, p. 9): SQs are powers while PQ are the basis of those powers.

3. Resemblance between qualities in bodies and ideas they produce?: Yes for PQs, no for SQs: “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” (II,8,15, p. 10)

-Recall here, in connection with distinction 3, Descartes’s account, in M3, of our natural belief in external bodies: “But the chief question at this point concerns the ideas which I take to be derived from things existing outside me: what is my reason for thinking they resemble those things? Nature has apparently taught me to think this.” Like D, Locke thinks our ordinary belief here gets some things wrong, and like D—though Locke is willing to be more explicit on the point—what we’re naturally wrong about is the SQs

-Background: Scholastic/Aristotelian science vs. modern mechanism; see 2,8,11, p. 9: "...by impulse, the only way which we can conceive bodies to operate in."

-Why this relative demotion of 2° qualities? Proposal:

Mechanism (the mechanistic view of which properties are relevant to causal interactions among bodies, supported by the success of "modern" mechanistic science) + CRPQ: the principle of the causal relevance of perceptible qualities. This leaves irreducible 2° qualities out in the cold (!).

-Locke's reductionism: SQs reduced to powers to produce sensations in us (see distinction 2, above), apparently (though this isn't entirely clear to me) in such a way that they depend on our sensation of them to exist (II,8,17, p. 11)? But there are other possible forms of reductionism in the same spirit as Locke's: can, for instance, reduce 2° qualities to powers to produce ideas in certain types of perceivers, whether or not those perceivers exist, or to the complexes of 1° qualities in virtue of which objects have the powers in question.

-Locke's reductionism, combines with his claim that an error is involved in our judgments that bodies "really" have SQs: "...whatever reality we by mistake attribute to them [SQs]" (II,8,14, p. 10); "But light, heat, whiteness, or coldness are no more really in them than sickness or pain is in manna" (II,8,17, pp. 10-11).

-Locke's reductionism vs. Descartes's eliminativism (?). An important difference, yes. But there's a lot of important agreement, too. On either philosopher's view, a mistaken view of reality infects our thinking of bodies wrt their SQs. They disagree over whether the important mistake we make in our thinking renders our judgments like "That table is brown" false. But though Locke will allow that such a judgment is true (or so it seems to me), he thinks that the property of brownness that actually characterizes the table isn't what we think of it as being like. We're right that the table is brown, but brownness turns out not to be what we thought of it as being like.

Though they agreed that there is nothing in bodies resembling the qualities immediately present to our minds in the perception of secondary qualities, Primary Quality Realists disagreed about the analysis of secondary qualities. Some, such as Galileo [KDR: Descartes], identified them with sensations and held that tastes, odors, colors, and so forth do not reside in the bodies perceived as having them, but only in the perceiver. Others, such as Boyle [KDR: Locke], allowed that secondary qualities may be ascribed to bodies, but only as powers that they have, by virtue of their primary qualities, to affect sentient beings....

In either of these versions, Primary Quality Realism presents us with a physical world that is very different from what it appears in sense perception to be. In place of colors, tastes, smells, and so forth that fill our sensory fields and form so large a part of our ordinary picture of the world, and that certainly do not seem to be only powers, we are offered a world of geometrical properties and motions—little more than a mathematical framework—plus perhaps some powers. It is a world that is not even grey, except in the sense that it is able to make us see grey. Berkeley claims, by contrast, to agree with ordinary people that "those things they immediately perceive are the real things." -our RMA paper, p. xv-xvi

Next time: We will finish Locke and start Berkeley on 3/10. The Berkeley readings can be taken in order, and the sections to get through, if possible, by Wednesday are 1-17 (of Part One! Section 1 should start with the words "It is evident to anyone...")