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A Defense of Locke's
Primary/Secondary Quality Distinction

by

Monica Cowart

The purpose of this paper is to show how Locke's view of primary and secondary qualities can withstand Berkeley's objection that all qualities, including primary ones, exist only in the mind. Before advancing Locke's position it is necessary to define two terms which will be used throughout this paper: "idea" and "quality." "Idea" will refer to the perception the mind has of an object or body through the senses. "Quality" will refer to a trait which is characteristic of a substance. Furthermore, qualities exist in the external world and ideas exist in the mind. Even though Locke gives different definitions of "idea" and "quality" he often uses the words interchangeably. Thus, it is necessary to draw the above distinction for the purposes of clarity in this paper.

In An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke expounds on the differences between primary and secondary qualities. He contends that all material things exist in a three-dimensional external world. To examine this view it is necessary to define "substance," determine the relationship between powers and secondary qualities and analyze the primary/secondary quality distinction. It is this overview of Locke's position which will later enable one to understand Berkeley's misinterpretation of the primary/secondary quality relationship.

Locke suggests that our understanding of substances results from the mind grouping simultaneous sensory inputs into ideas. Moreover, these sensory inputs, which are transformed into ideas, are caused by the actual substance. For instance, if a man looks at the sun his mind will register intense light, warmth, a reddish color, as well as a certain size and position from which these other traits radiate. Consequently, whenever all of the sensory inputs occur together he will recognize the stimuli as his experience of the sun. Thus, the word "sun" originates from the observed interaction of these traits. To express this thought, Locke states that:

the mind . . . takes notice also that a certain number of these simple ideas [he really means qualities] go constantly together; which being presumed to belong to one thing, and words being suited to common apprehensions, and made use of for quick dispatch, are so united in one subject, by one name.

(Book II, Chap. XXIII, Sec. 1, 390).

Therefore, Locke claims that although one refers to the sun as if it were one idea; it is actually representative of many simple ideas of qualities.

However, Locke notes that it is doubtful that these simple qualities can exist by themselves, since it is necessary that they adhere or dwell in something which will unite them. After all, these simple qualities must reside in an ordered

substratum; otherwise an individual would not come into contact with the same combinations of qualities. Thus, an individual would not be able to communicate ideas about those qualities to others in standard linguistic terms. Since it is essential that these qualities are inextricably linked to the substance in order to explain the repeated phenomenon found in the external world, Locke defines substance as "the supposed, but unknown, support of those qualities we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist without something to support them" (Book II, Chap. XXIII, Sec. 2, 392). Hence, whenever an individual imagines an object he conjures up the conglomeration of simple ideas, based on its qualities, that he has learned to associate with this object. Even though individuals also assume that these qualities co-exist in a substratum, they are unable to reduce these qualities and directly encounter the true essence of the substratum. Thus, Locke concludes that the analysis of substance will remain obscure, since individuals are unable to determine the nature of the substratum the simple qualities exist within. They are only able to conclude that these qualities adhere to "something." However, the substratum plays no further role in the primary and secondary quality distinction. In conclusion, Locke admits that his definition of substance is vague, but contends that a better definition does not exist.

Next, in order to discover the true nature of secondary qualities, it is necessary to examine the relationship between powers and qualities. In this case, all powers are actions one substance performs on another. Power is further described as "virtually an idea of a quality presented in sense" (Book II, Chap. XXIII, Sec. 8, 398). For instance, Locke explains that a lodestone is capable of attracting iron and conversely, iron is drawn to a lodestone. Thus, these "powers" enable the individual to identify substances by observing their behavior with respect to other substances. A further illustration can be seen by examining fire. When an individual builds a fire he notices both its color and temperature. In time, he may also notice that the wood is transformed by the fire into charcoal. Thus, after observing these traits through the senses the individual begins to develop a complex idea of fire based on the powers and secondary qualities. In the above case, our ideas of the temperature and color of the fire are caused by the secondary qualities which are powers of the fire to cause changes in us. Moreover, when the senses pick up these qualities and powers in the substance, ideas of the qualities are formed in the mind. However, even though the individual has an idea of the power associated with the substance in the mind, Locke stresses that the powers are inextricably rooted in the substance in the external world. Therefore, the idea is the result of the exterior power working on the individual. Finally, it should be noted that the idea based on the secondary

qualities is distorted because these qualities and powers are unable to provide an accurate representation of a substance.

Subsequently, Locke states that "powers make a great part of our complex ideas of substances; since their secondary qualities are those which in most of them serve principally to distinguish substances one from another, and commonly make a considerable part of the complex idea of the several sorts of them" (Book II, Chap. XXIII, Sec. 8). Locke attributes this reliance on powers for identification to the inability of our senses to uncover the hidden traits of substances which make up their essential core. However, since we are forced to rely on our limited sensory input, we can only identify different substances by appealing to their secondary qualities which are the powers to cause our minds to have the ideas of secondary qualities.

One can better understand this relationship by considering the components of an oriental rug. On the surface the rug is red and soft. These traits are parallel to the color and feel of secondary qualities. Moreover, these traits are found within the threads of the rug. This thread is considered a power since it can act on the senses and leave an idea in the mind. An example of this would be a foot standing on the rug. The imprint left shows one of the powers by which the rug can be identified. Moreover, the foot feels the softness and the attached person sees the color of the rug. Furthermore, the mesh canvas the thread is wound through is parallel to the primary qualities. It is this canvas which is the true essence or framework of the rug. However, even though the canvas is the unchanging essence, it cannot be directly experienced. The secondary qualities and powers can be experienced only through the senses. Thus, the individual would call the rug red, soft and imprintable. However, these qualities are all distortions and do not suggest that the canvas is the true unchanging substance. Hence, secondary qualities exist in the world as powers which create a distorted content of our representations, and primary qualities exist in the world as they are represented. This is why ideas of primary qualities are accurate representations and ideas of secondary qualities are distortions.

Finally, it is necessary to distinguish primary and secondary qualities since it is this distinction which Berkeley will later question. Locke states that there are three components of a substance: primary qualities, sensible secondary qualities and active/passive powers. Primary qualities exist in every substance even though they are not always experienced by the senses. Therefore, their existence does not depend on the awareness of the individual. These qualities are inherent parts of substances. Locke lists "bulk, figure, number, situation and motion of parts of bodies" as the primary qualities (Book II, Chap. XXIII, Sec. 9,

399). For Locke, the purpose of this list is to show what qualities capture a substance's true essence. Moreover, these characteristics should remain unchanging, regardless of outside factors, because their existence gives the substance its identity. Thus, the list presented by Locke illustrates the type of qualities that might fall into this category. It should not be taken as a final checklist with which to compare the qualities of a substance, but rather as a working model helpful in illustrating his definition of fixed versus fluctuating qualities. Therefore when Locke refers to primary qualities, he is not speaking of qualities that cling to a substratum, but instead of the actual substance itself. By this view, primary qualities are not really qualities at all, but the unchanging essence which is the substance.

Next, Locke explains that secondary qualities are not simply ideas perceived in the mind, but the powers a substance uses to convey distorted ideas of the substance to the individual. Thus, secondary qualities differ from primary qualities since they produce distorted ideas of substances in individuals. In contrast, primary qualities produce accurate ideas of substances in individuals. It is for this reason that secondary qualities are considered quasi-qualities. In this case the only ideas in the mind are not the secondary qualities themselves, but the ideas of the secondary qualities. These ideas are conveyed through the powers. Furthermore, the ideas in the mind are the effect of the powers; thus they cannot also be their own cause.

Finally, Locke shows that distorting powers are often confused with primary qualities because incoming stimuli from the externally world is derived through the senses. These powers occur when two substances interact. Locke explains that "the aptness we consider in any substance, to give or receive such alterations of primary qualities, as the substance so altered should produce in us different ideas from what it did before" (Book II, Chap. XXIII, Sec. 9, 400). In addition, our only perceptions of these powers are those we observe through our senses. For instance, Locke shows that we are unaware of the changes the lodestone makes on the microscopic atoms of the iron because the change is unobservable by our senses. Furthermore, we would be unaware of any change at all in a substance if it were not for these powers acting through our senses. However, as noted before, the change we view is a distortion. Thus, Locke implies that humans can only understand the function of powers through the input of their senses; however there is also a microscopic level at which the powers of one substance act upon another which humans are unable to access.

Consequently, this interior level, if discovered, would change the perceptions of different substances altogether. Locke states that:

had we senses acute enough to discern the minute particles of bodies, and the constitution on which these sensible qualities depend, I doubt not but they would produce quite different ideas is us: and that which is now the yellow color of gold, would then disappear, and instead of it we should see an admirable texture of parts, of certain size and figure (Book II, Chap. XXIII, Sec. 11, 401).

In summary, Locke defines a substance as a set qualities united in a substratum. Moreover, he argues that substances are broken down into primary qualities, secondary qualities and powers. He further states that individuals identify substances by appealing to the distorted characteristics portrayed by the powers and secondary qualities. This occurs because a substance's primary qualities are not always readily accessible by the senses. In conclusion, Locke argues that primary and secondary qualities exist in the external world and the ideas of those qualities exist in the mind.

However, in A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, Berkeley objects to Locke's claim that primary and secondary qualities exist in the external world. He first contends that the idea of a primary quality is like the primary quality itself. Moreover, since nothing can be like an idea but another idea, the quality must be identical to the idea. Furthermore, ideas are found only in thinking substances or minds. He illustrates this point by stating that it "is evident from what we have already shown that extension, figure, and motion are only ideas existing in the mind, and that an idea can be like nothing but another idea, and that consequently neither they nor heir archetypes can exist in an unperceiving substance" (Part I, Sec. 9, 26). Moreover, primary and secondary qualities are inextricably linked. Berkeley states that "those original qualities are inseparably united with the other sensible qualities, and not, even in thought capable of being abstracted from them" (Part I, Sec. 10, 27). Therefore, since primary qualities are ideas that exist in the mind and secondary qualities are inextricably linked to primary qualities, it follows that both primary and secondary qualities are ideas which exist in the mind. After all, only an idea could be grounded in another idea. Hence, Berkeley argues that there are no substances existing in an external world. There are only ideas of substances in the mind.

In response to Berkeley's objection one must examine the flaw in one of his initial premises: an idea can be like nothing but another idea. A problem arises due to the misinterpretation of the word "like." For instance, when Berkeley contends that the idea of the primary quality is like the primary quality itself, he

uses the word "like" to mean the idea is "the same as" or "the quality." By this interpretation there is no difference between the idea of the quality and the quality itself because the idea is the quality. However, this analysis is a misinterpretation of Locke. When Locke writes of ideas of primary qualities being like the qualities themselves, he means that they are similar in content, not nature. Locke never tried to imply that the idea and the organism were the same metaphysically, only that the content of the idea is an accurate representation of the organism.

In fact, Locke's purpose for stating that primary qualities are similar to the ideas themselves was to show a further difference between primary and secondary qualities. To Locke, primary qualities are capable of accurate representations of reality. For instance, the idea of the size of a table I am working on is the "same" as the table itself, in that there is no distortion. Locke is simply trying to show that secondary powers do distort things and primary powers do not. Thus, Berkeley's claim that primary qualities are ideas and all ideas exist in the mind fails because Berkeley misinterprets Locke's use of "like," and he is unable to prove that primary qualities are the same in nature as the ideas of primary qualities. This premise is crucial to his argument. Therefore, when this premise becomes questionable his entire argument loses its credibility.

In conclusion, Locke's claim that primary and secondary qualities exist in the external world overcomes Berkeley's objection that these qualities are ideas which exist in the mind. The main reason Berkeley's argument fails is that he twists Locke's interpretation for his own needs. A careful analysis shows that Locke does not grant that ideas of primary qualities are the same as the qualities themselves. Berkeley does not realize that Locke is simply elaborating on distorted qualities and true qualities. Thus, Locke's primary and secondary quality distinction overcomes Berkeley's objection, since Berkeley's argument rests on a misinterpretation of Locke.

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