

Locke and Berkeley on Primary and Secondary Qualities

Locke: Bodies are not exactly as they seem to us to be. Some of the ideas that we have when we look at a body resemble qualities possessed by the body itself (primary qualities). Some of them don't (secondary qualities). Something in the body causes us to have an idea of blue when we look at it; but what causes us to have the idea is not something which resembles the idea – the cause is, rather, the primary qualities of the minute parts of which the body is made up. Locke articulates this in the following way: secondary qualities are simply powers which the body has to produce certain ideas in us.

Berkeley: We are directly aware of bodies themselves. (Since bodies are just collections of ideas.) Thus Berkeley rejects the idea/quality distinction and so there is no room for the suggestion that bodies lack some of the features that they seem to us to possess.

Berkeley attacks Locke's argument at two points. He attacks the conclusion directly. He suggests that we could not have a conception of bodies with primary qualities but not secondary qualities. The two are inseparable in thought. So they must be inseparable in reality. This seems to be wrong. (cf. Bennett, p.91)

Berkeley also attacks Locke's arguments for the distinction. Locke's arguments:-

1. (2.8.9) "A body keeps (its?) primary qualities through all changes - but not its secondary qualities. This suggests that secondary qualities are not genuine qualities in some sense." But Locke must mean that whatever you do to a body it will always have *some* primary qualities. And he doesn't show that the same isn't true of secondary qualities.
2. (a) (2.8.20) "Pounding an almond can only alter its texture. Yet it looks a different colour and tastes different. So the colour and taste must be effects of the texture." This is clearly question-begging (cf. Bennett, p.103).
(b) (2.8.19) "Bodies have no colour in the dark. The most plausible conclusion to draw from this is that colour is not really in the body at all at any time ie. there is nothing resembling our idea of blue in the body." Again this clearly begs the question. Why should we believe him when he says that bodies have no colour in the dark?
3. The relativity arguments eg "A body that feels warm to one hand feels cold to the other. The body can't be both warm and cold. So nothing resembling our ideas of warmth and cold can be in the body." Berkeley has two replies: (i) The same relativities apply to primary qualities; so they provide no grounds for distinguishing between the two kinds of qualities. (ii) The conclusion doesn't follow anyway. The phenomena only show that we can't discover the qualities of bodies by perception alone.
4. Locke's real reasons for accepting the distinction come from science. We can, Locke suggests, explain all the interactions between bodies in terms of their primary qualities. It is, then, reasonable to suppose that we can explain the effects which bodies have on us in terms of their primary qualities. So the idea that bodies contain anything resembling our ideas of secondary qualities is a redundant hypothesis: we don't need it to explain our experience. Berkeley's response: Locke concedes that we can have no understanding of how changes in the physical world can produce changes in the mind - can cause us to have ideas. So he is not justified in making any claims about what qualities bodies must have in

order for them to produce in us the ideas that they do.