

Early Modern Philosophy

(HPPH5033/HPPH6033)

Vuthy Hastings

Critically assess Locke's distinction between Primary and Secondary qualities (2500 words)

Introduction:

Imagine two people standing by the same river; one of them states that the water is *cold*, and the other states that it is *pleasantly cool*. A third person arrives, takes a thermometer and dips it in before announcing a number as though the temperature could settle what cold really meant. This kind of scene is what John Locke audits; how can we preserve objectivity without denying that experience varies? Locke starts with a line drawn between primary qualities – solidity, extension, shape, motion/rest, number (Locke, 2017, pp. Essay II.viii, 9); and secondary qualities – colour, taste, sound, warmth (Locke, pp. Essay II.viii, 10).

The river in this view is broken into a certain arrangement of size, figure, texture, and motion. These qualities, according to Locke, are ‘utterly inseparable’ (Locke, pp. Essay II.viii, 9) from bodies. The secondary quality is the cold that was felt; that quality is not in the body of water, but are ‘powers grounded in the primary qualities to produce sensations in us’ (Locke, pp. Essay II.viii, 10). Locke’s aim is to keep the world stable and make it the common cause of our shifting appearances, while explaining why it appears differently depending on light, distance, and bodily condition (Locke, pp. Essay II.viii, 21).

This essay critically assesses whether Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities succeeds on its own terms. I begin this essay by reconstructing Locke’s position in *Essay II, vii*: the claim that primary qualities are inseparable from bodies, and that secondary qualities are but powers grounded in the primary qualities to produce sensations in us (pp. Essay II.viii, 9-10). Next, I will test the distinction by drawing upon secondary discussions that clarify and scrutinise Locke’s argument – especially the role of the resemblance thesis, the appeal to corpuscularian explanation, and the status of secondary qualities as powers versus being mere mental items (Wilson, 2016, pp. 198 - 206). Lastly, I assess the most forceful criticisms, including Berkeley’s challenge that Locke’s argument threatens to spread from secondary qualities to primary ones (Berkeley), and Mackie’s worry that the distinction rests on a strained picture of perception and resemblance.

Point 1: Primary & Secondary Qualities

Before we go any further, I’m going to switch into a dialogue. Locke is responding to a very ordinary puzzle: why the same river can feel different to different people, so a conversation lets the problem stay concrete while the theory gets built in real time.

Sceptic: One of us says the water is *cold*, the other says it’s *pleasantly cool*. If experience shifts, does the world shift as well? And if our senses can’t even agree, why trust them at all?

Joe: Disagreement doesn't prove chaos. It means we need to sort what belongs to bodies from what belongs to perceivers. Yes, things vary with distance, lighting, organs, temperature, and attention (pp. Essay II.viii, 21). I am trying to stop that familiar mess from becoming a sceptical swamp.

S: What is your strategy?

J: I begin with primary qualities, using an inseparability test: a quality counts as primary if it is 'utterly inseparable from the body' (pp. Essay II.viii, 9).

S: Sounds fancy, show me!

J: 'Take a grain of wheat, divide it into two parts, each part has still solidity, extension, shape, and mobility; divide it again, and it still retains those qualities' (pp. Essay II.viii, 9).

S: Which qualities?

J: Solidity, extension, figure, motion/rest, and number. The point isn't that the exact shape never alters; it's that some determinate of extension/figure/motion will always be there (pp. Essay II.viii, 9) if it's a body at all. You can't strip those away without stripping away the body.

S: So, primaries are like the minimum kit required for a thing to count as physical.

J: Exactly. That's why they can anchor objectivity: they are 'in them, whether or not we perceive them' (pp. Essay II.viii, 23)

S: I'll concede that, now explain why cold was felt here but pleasantly cool there?

J: That's where secondary qualities arrive. Colours, tastes, sounds, warmth; these are whatever reality we by mistake attribute to them (pp. Essay II.viii, 14). They are 'in truth

nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to produce various sensations in us' (pp. Essay II.viii, 10)

S: Sounds like you're saying colour and warmth aren't real.

J: Not unreal, real as powers. They are not in bodies as *we experience* them; they are ways bodies, by their primary constitution, can produce certain ideas in us under certain conditions.

S: So the river can stay one way, while the sensation changes because the setup changes.

J: Yes! So the same water can produce heat in one hand and cold in the other if its corpuscles (tiny bits of matter) are intermediate between the different states (motion) in each hand (pp. Essay II.viii, 21).

S: And this more than mere wordplay?

J: This is meant to be part of a scientific picture: bodies operate by impact and motion, and secondary quality ideas can be produced 'by the operation of insensible particles on our senses' (pp. Essay II.viii, 13). I know what I am doing here and I hope I shall be pardoned with this little excursion into natural science (pp. Essay II.viii, 22), because without it we can't distinguish the primary and real qualities of bodies from those secondary and imputed qualities (pp. Essay II.viii, 10 - 22).

S: So, the distinction is supposed to fit a corpuscular explanation with size, shape, and motion doing the work underneath.

J: Yes, now we add the resemblance thesis to explain why primaries are the safer anchor here. So, 'the ideas of the primary qualities of bodies resemble them, and their patterns really do exist in the bodies themselves; but the ideas produced in us by secondary qualities don't resemble them at all' (pp. Essay II.viii, 15).

S: And that is why you think the sensible can be removed from the world?

J: Right, because you can strip away seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and the 'colours, tastes, ordours, and sounds vanish and cease' (pp. Essay II.viii, 17), leaving their 'causes, i.e. bulk, figure, and motion of parts' (pp. Essay II.viii, 17).

S: You've built a two-level picture – ideas inside, causes outside – and then said only one side resembles what's really there. It's almost as if you're trying to get one distinction to do several jobs at once: metaphysical, explanatory, and representational. At this stage, the architecture's primary qualities are the stable furniture of bodies; secondary qualities are powers grounded in primary qualities; and resemblance is meant to tell us which of our ideas genuinely mirror the world.

J: Yes.

S: Let's see if this holds up under pressure.

Point 2: Why Locke thinks the distinction is *earned*

Why should we accept Locke's way of sorting the world? Locke's answer is because the distinction is meant to solve a very specific problem: how to keep a stable, mind-independent world without pretending our senses never vary (pp. Essay II.viii, 9-23). First, Locke thinks this distinction is placed on us by a simple tension. Our ideas are 'perceptions in our minds' (pp. Essay II.viii, 7), yet we also talk as though qualities belong to bodies themselves. His move separates what ideas are *in us* from what is in the bodies as the modifications of matter that produce them (pp. Essay II.viii, 10-11). In other words, the distinction is supposed to stop us from confusing how something is experienced with what must exist in the object for experience to occur at all.

Second, Locke's power talk is really doing the philosophical work here. When he says secondary qualities 'are in truth nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to produce various sensations in us' (pp. Essay II.viii, 10), he isn't making colour and warmth vanish into nothingness. He is trying to *re-house* them: not as a basic ingredient of matter, but as dependable causal roles grounded in structure. This is why the three sorts of qualities matter: i) primary qualities, ii) the power to produce ideas in us and iii) the power to change other bodies. This lets him say ii) and iii) 'are only powers to act differently on other things' (pp. Essay II.viii, 21).

Third, Locke offers a persuasive argument against a very human mistake: projecting our sensations into objects as if they were little inner things stored inside matter. His sun and wax analogy deliberately humbles us. When properly understood, warmth and light 'are no otherwise in the sun than the changes made in the Wax...are in the sun' (pp. Essay II.viii, 16-17). The point is, we already accept that the sun does not literally contain the wax's whiteness; so we should be less confident that fire contains felt warmth as we experience it.

Finally, Lex Newman notes that Locke's distinction cannot be reduced to a single thesis, since it concerns resemblance, causal powers, corpuscular explanation, and perceptual variation, with different strands of the argument coming apart under scrutiny (The Cambridge Companion to Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding, pp. 101-104)). And J. L. Mackie, though far from a Lockean loyalist, still insists that revising details does not automatically force us to 'break down the distinction' (Mackie, 1976, pp. 25-26) itself. So, the strongest conclusion is this: Locke's distinction earns its place as a disciplined attempt to reconcile a mechanistic picture of bodies with the undeniable variability of experience.

Point 3: Objections

So far, Locke's distinction looks like a tidy piece of metaphysical housekeeping: keep bodies objective by anchoring them in primary qualities, and treat colours/sound/heat as powers

that arise from the bulk, figure, and motion of insensible parts (pp. Essay II.viii, 13-14). The trouble is that the very *machinery* that makes the distinction attractive also generates a metaphysical gap, a gap between the world as it is in itself and the world as it appears.

The first pressure point is Locke's representational language. We are told that some ideas are in our minds, and others are in bodies and cause perception in us (pp. Essay II.viii, 7-10). This suggests a two-level picture: the inner perception on one side, outer causes on the other. Locke also tries to deter us from the belief that our ideas are 'exactly the images and resemblances of something inherent in the object' (pp. Essay II.viii, 7), but only a few sections later, the distinction is bolted to the resemblance thesis: 'the ideas of primary qualities of bodies resemble them' (pp. Essay II.viii, 15), whereas the 'ideas produced by secondary qualities don't resemble them at all' (pp. Essay II.viii, 15). Locke rejects a crude picture in the mind, but then needs some privileged relation, resemblance, to explain why primary qualities deserve a higher epistemic status than secondary ones. This is exactly where the gap begins to open: we are told that primary qualities are 'in them, whether we perceive them or not' (pp. Essay II.viii, 23) but our route to them still runs through the medium of ideas, impulses, nerves, and motions – 'manifestly by impulse' (Locke, pg118). Mackie's diagnosis sharpens this worry. He says Locke's distinction is 'formulated within the framework of a representative theory of perception which distinguishes sharply between ideas in our minds and any externally real thing' (Mackie, 1976, pp. 26-27) while still assuming we can 'speak intelligibly about resemblances between some of our ideas and those external realities' (Mackie, 1976, p. 28). If that framework is completely untenable, Mackie argues, then this 'must be fatal for any distinction between primary and secondary qualities that is developed within its framework' (Mackie, 1976, p. 28). The warning is clear: Locke's distinction is not just a classification; it inherits the burdens of a particular theory of perception and representation. If your bridge is unstable, it doesn't matter how neat the two shores look.

The second pressure point is the Berkeleyan challenge: Locke's own argument style threatens to spread from secondary qualities to primary ones. Berkeley's famous move in *Principles of Human Knowledge*, §§9-15, is that the very considerations used to demote colour and heat variation with perceivers and circumstances, the relativity of sensory

appearance also applies to shape, size and motion. Wilson summarises this cleanly: Berkeley argues that the argument appealing to the relativity of the secondary qualities also holds of primary qualities (Wilson, 2016, pp. 201-206), so the primary/secondary distinction does not provide a way to defend a moderate form of materialism (Wilson, 2016, pp. 201-206). This isn't a cheap parlour trick. Locke himself invites it in when he leans on variation examples to show how easily we confuse what's *in the thing* with what's in the *experience*. Fire produces warmth at one distance and pain at another; why treat one sensation as in the fire but not the other? (Locke, pp. Essay II.viii, 16-17).

The gap is wide open for Berkeley to stroll right on through: if variability can disqualify heat as in the object, why doesn't variability disqualify apparent size, apparent shape, apparent motion, and so on? (Berkeley, 1873 - 1878, pp. §§9-15). Berkeley isn't simply refuting the Lockean view; he is attacking the simplification of it. Even when we grant Locke's powers of language, the Berkeleian pressure maintains because powers don't eliminate the gap – it relocates it. Locke wants to say that what is 'sweet, blue, or warm in idea is nothing but particular size, shape, and motion' (Locke, pp. Essay II.viii, 14-16) of imperceptible parts. But then our sensory life starts to look like a set of effects whose connection to the world is secured by a theory we don't directly experience. We never meet the object as it is; we meet its impact on us – and the real story is always one step behind the scenes.

Conclusion:

Locke's primary/secondary quality distinction began as a good attempt to organise an everyday problem: the world seems stable, yet experience varies. Through treating primary qualities as 'utterly inseparable from the body' (pp. Essay II.viii, 9) and secondary qualities as 'powers to produce various sensations in us' (pp. Essay II.viii, 10), Locke offers a framework that can preserve objectivity while acknowledging the shifting character of sensation. The view's attraction is that it's explanatory. It fits a corpuscular picture in which bodies operate by impulse and it cautions us of the habitual projecting of felt warmth, colour, or taste into objects as if they were literal ingredients of matter. On its own terms, Locke earns the

distinction as a disciplined way of reconciling a mechanistic account of bodies with the variability of perception (pp. Essay II.viii, 13-26) (Wilson, 2016).

However, the same machinery that makes Locke's position also generates the greatest difficulty. Locke discourages the idea that ideas are 'exactly the images and resemblances' (Locke, pp. Essay II.viii, 7-8), then he relies on the resemblance thesis to secure primary qualities: primary ideas resemble their causes, while secondary ideas 'have no resemblance..at all' (pp. Essay II.viii, 15). This produced the metaphysical gap that ran throughout the objections: we are told the real world is one way, 'whether or not we perceive it' (pp. Essay II.viii, 23), but our access to it is mediated by ideas, and the link is secured by a theory that is the very thing under dispute (Mackie, 1976, p. 28). Berkeleys challenge only intensified the pressure: if variation disqualifies heat and colour as in the objects, why does it not also rid of apparent size, shape, and motion? (Wilson, pp. 201-206) (Locke, pp. Essay II.viii, 16-17) (Berkeley, pp. §§9-15). So what survives is Locke's explanatory insight that sensible qualities depend on underlying structure and conditions remains powerful.

Bibliography

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