

# Locke, Hume, Berkeley

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## Lockean ideas

Locke introduces 'idea' as "whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks ...or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking" (I.i.8). There are ideas of 'sensation' and of 'reflection', those the mind acquires "when it turns its view inward upon itself, and observes its own actions about those ideas it has" (II.vi.1). Abstract ideas are created by omission of detail (something Berkeley found impossible because for him an idea must 'resemble' its object by possessing the property it represents). Simple ideas, by contrast, are never created:

That the Mind, in respect of its simple *Ideas*, is wholly passive, and receives them all from the Existence and Operations of Things, such as Sensation or Reflection offers them, without being able to make any one *Idea*, Experience shows us. (II.xxii,1)

Mistakes arise only in the combination of simple to complex ideas: simple ideas are "natural and regular productions of Things without us, really operating upon us; and so carry with them all the conformity which is intended; or which our state requires" (IV.iv.4).

Even though Locke introduces ideas as the *objects* of thinking and sensation, some commentators have taken them to be processes. Kemmerling thinks they are processes *insofar as these have representational content*:

Das kognitiv Entscheidende an jedem Vorgang des Perzipierens ist sein repräsentationaler Gehalt. Indem über "die Idee" gesprochen wird (die ontologisch gesehen nichts anderes ist als der Vorgang ihres Perzipiertwerdens), wird der Gehalt des Vorgangs thematisiert. Wird also z.B. über die Idee von Rund gesprochen, dann wird damit der Gehalt des Vorgangs einer Rund-Perzeption thematisiert. (Kemmerling 2008: 207)

But how can an idea be its own content? To reconcile Locke's two perspectives, Lenz (2010: 271) speaks of two perspectives, distinguishing "ideas as material" from "ideas as parts of episodes of thinking". Simple ideas are signs of their qualities because they causally covary with them:

For the Objects of our Senses, do, many of them, obtrude their particular *Ideas* upon our minds, whether we will or no [...] As the Bodies that surround us, do diversly affect our Organs, the mind is forced to receive the Impressions; and cannot avoid the Perception of those *Ideas* that are annexed to them. (II.i.25)

Simple ideas thus have both their representational power and their veridicality just in virtue of their causal origin: their truth consists in "such Appearances, as are produced in us, and must be suitable to those Powers, [God] has placed in external Objects, or else they could not be produced in us" (II.xxxii.14).

## Berkeleyan radicalisation

Berkeley takes the idea that ideas are the *objects* of sensation as his starting point, and denies that they have the causes we think they have; as Locke said of the idea of substance, things themselves are just bundles of ideas:

It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either *ideas* actually imprinted on the senses; or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind; or lastly, *ideas* formed by help of memory and imagination – either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways. – By sight I have the ideas of light and colours, with their several degrees and variations By touch I perceive hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, and of all these more or less either as to quantity or degree. Smelling furnishes me with odours; the palate with tastes; and hearing conveys sounds to the mind in all their variety of tone and composition. – And as several of these are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one THING. (§ 1)

He then presents his idealism as a consequence of the rejection of abstract ideas:

For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that is to me perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them. [...] For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the *existence* of sensible objects from their *being perceived*, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? Light and colours, heat and cold, extension and figures – in a word the things we see and feel – what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas, or impressions on the sense? and is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? For my part, I might as easily divide a thing from itself. (§§ 3,5)

The reply to invoke representation as the bridge between the realm of ideas and that of things he rejects citing the so-called ‘likeness principle’:

But say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind, in an unthinking substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure. If we look but ever so little into our thoughts, we shall find it impossible for us to conceive a likeness except only between our ideas. (§ 8)

He then explicitly generalises the argument against the reality and the mind-independence of secondary to all qualities.

Berkeley’s so-called ‘Master Argument’ is supposed to show that the very *notion* of an unperceived object is contradictory:

But say you, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and no body by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no difficulty in it: but what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in your mind certain ideas which you call books and trees, and at the same time omitting to frame the idea of any one that may perceive them? But do not you your self perceive or think of them all the while? This therefore is nothing to the purpose: it only shows you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind; but it doth not shew that you can conceive it possible, the objects of your thought may exist without the mind: to make out this, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy. When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas. (§ 23)

The problem with this argument is that it already presupposes that there is no stable way to draw a difference between the *content* of what is imagined and what follows from the fact that something is being imagined. It cannot be saved by supposing that ‘imagine’ is factive and that we cannot perceive that noone perceives *x* without perceiving *x* (this is the suggestion of Barkhausen & Haag (2010: 374)); at best, it produces a stand-off.

The *Dialogues* (III, 245-246) suggest another route to Berkeleyan idealism: as the mind combines ideas from different senses in Molyneux's situation to *construct* the idea of some one thing, so do we call "things" (hypothetical) sources of ideas. As our interest lies in the connection of ideas and this is all we can ever have epistemic access to, we have no, and cannot ever have any, epistemic warrant to go 'beyond' the bundle of ideas. In his work on optics, Berkeley came to the conclusion that we do not see distance, but feel it, in virtue of feeling the movements of our own eyes. Talk of an external body that is both felt and seen is nothing but a construction of our mind (Saporiti 2008: 276). In the *Principles*, this bundling is generalised: the things we see have nothing but objective being, they are these bundles of ideas themselves.

## Humean reconciliation?

Hume divides introspectible mental items ("perceptions") into two classes: "Those perceptions which enter with most force and violence we may name *impressions*, and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By *ideas* I shall mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning." (I.i.1) Ideas and impressions are linked by Hume's copy thesis: "all our simple ideas are caused by previous impressions which they resemble in every respect except the degree of vivacity which defines the difference between them" (Bennett 2001: 211). He says that "all our simple ideas proceed, either mediately or immediately, from their correspondent impressions" is the "first principle [he] establish[es] in the science of human nature" (I.i.11-12). It is tempting to understand this 'procession' as a representation relation: ideas represent their impressions (e.g. Wild 2010a: 363). The "general proposition" he "establishes" in I.i.12 – "That all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent." (I.i.1.7)

The impressions themselves do not represent anything. Or, at least, if they did we would not know:

A like reasoning will account for the idea of external existence. We may observe, that 'tis universally allow'd by philosophers, and is besides pretty obvious of itself, that nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas, and that external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion. To hate, to love, to think, to feel, to see; all this is nothing but to perceive.

Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since all ideas are deriv'd from something antecedently present to the mind; it follows, that 'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different. from ideas and impressions. Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc'd.

In Berkeleyan fashion, this seems to confuse historical with representational properties of ideas. We may call it a "phenomenological attitude" (Wild 2010a: 374) and claim that "in the phenomenological attitude, impressions do not have external objects" (Wild 2010b: 390) – but this leaves open the question whether they do have external objects.

Accepting Berkeley's criticism of Locke's abstract ideas, Hume explains that particular ideas can be used in a general way (I.i.7.7). Such a *use* of ideas also explains the difference between the ideas of judgment and of imagination:

An idea assented to feels different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us: And this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a superior force, or vivacity, or solidity, or firmness, or steadiness. This variety of terms, which may seem so unphilosophical, is intended only to express that act of the mind, which renders realities more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination. Provided we agree about the thing, 'tis needless to dispute about the terms. The imagination has the command over all its ideas, and can join, and mix, and vary them in all the ways possible. It may conceive objects with all the circumstances of place and time. It

may set them, in a manner, before our eyes in their true colours, just as they might have existed. But as it is impossible, that that faculty can ever, of itself, reach belief, 'tis evident, that belief consists not in the nature and order of our ideas, but in the manner of their conception, and in their feeling to the mind. I confess, that 'tis impossible to explain perfectly this feeling or manner of conception. We may make use of words, that express something near it. But its true and proper name is belief, which is a term that every one sufficiently understands in common life. And in philosophy we can go no farther, than assert, that it is something felt by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgment from the fictions of the imagination. It gives them more force and influence; makes them appear of greater importance; infixes them in the mind; and renders them the governing principles of all our actions.

Whether or not an idea represents something external to it is just a matter of how it feels to entertain it.

## Secondary qualities

Bennett (2001: 76) lists the following five theses Locke affirms of secondary qualities and denies of primary ones:

1. They are dispositions to cause a characteristic kind of sensor estate in percipients. "Secondary qualities ...are nothing but the powers those substances have to produce several ideas in us by our senses" (*Essay* II.xxiii.9). "[We speak] as if light and heat were really something in the fire more than a power to excite these ideas in us; and therefore are called qualities in or of the fire. But these [are] nothing in truth but powers to excite such ideas in us" (xxxi.2).
2. They are not in outer objects: "Yellowness is not actually in gold" (xxiii.10).
3. They are not intrinsic to the objects that have them, but rather are relations between those objects and something else: The yellowness, solubility, etc. of gold ?? are nothing else but so many relations to other substances, and are not really in the gold considered barely in itself" (II,xxiii.37).
4. They are in minds rather than in outer objects: "Light, heat, whiteness or coldness are no more really in them than sickness or pain is in manna. Take away the sensation of them; let not the eyes see light, or colours, nor the ears hear sounds; let the palate not taste, nor the nose smell; and all colours, tastes, odours, and sounds, as they are such particular ideas, vanish and cease" (viii.17).
5. The ideas of them do not resemble anything in the physical world, as do ideas of primary qualities: "The ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them ...; but the ideas produced in us by these secondary qualities have no resemblance of them at all. There is nothing like our ideas existing in the bodies themselves" (viii.15).

Berkeley uses the internality of secondary qualities to argue for the mind-dependence of all properties of objects:

I shall farther add, that after the same manner, as modern philosophers prove certain sensible qualities to have no existence in matter, or without the mind, the same thing may be likewise proved of all other sensible qualities whatsoever.<sup>44</sup> Thus, for instance, it is said that heat and cold are affections only of the mind, and not at all patterns of real beings, existing in the corporeal substances which excite them, for that the same body which appears cold to one hand, seems warm to another. Now why may we not as well argue that figure and extension are not patterns or resemblances of qualities existing in matter, because to the same eye at different stations, or eyes of a different texture at the same station, they appear various, and cannot therefore be the images of any thing settled and determinate without the mind? Again, it is proved that sweetness is not really in the sapid thing, because the thing remaining unaltered the sweetness is changed into bitter, as in case of a fever or otherwise vitiated palate. Is it not as reasonable to say, that motion is not without the mind, since if the succession of ideas in the mind become swifter, the motion, it is acknowledged, shall appear slower without any alteration in any external object. (§ 14)

Hume thinks that the notion and rejection of secondary qualities characterises "modern philosophy":

The fundamental principle of that philosophy is the opinion concerning colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold; which it asserts to be nothing but impressions in the mind, deriv'd from the operation of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the objects. [...] This principle being once admitted, all the other doctrines of that philosophy seem to follow by an easy consequence. For upon the removal of sounds, colours, heat, cold, and other sensible qualities, from the rank of continu'd independent existences, we are reduc'd merely to what are call'd primary qualities, as the only *real* ones, of which we have an adequate notion. (I.iv.4)

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