

Notes for October 20, 2006

- *John Locke 1632-1704*

Physician by training, he had a lively correspondence with Robert Boyle, one of the founders of modern chemistry. Locke wrote his major philosophical work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* at the eve of Newton's work *Principia Mathematica*, which only gained philosophical significance late in Locke's life. For more details: <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/philosophers/locke.html>

The burgeoning scientific work in Cambridge had a profound influence on Locke, who wrote in the Preface to the *Essay* that philosophy should act as the "handmaiden" to science, "clearing away the [conceptual] underbrush" to make way for what he considered were the *important metaphysical claims* that *scientists* made. (Compare this with the Medieval philosophers who felt the same way towards theology – i.e., that it gave the truly metaphysically important insights.)

Though Locke agreed with Descartes that knowledge can be fundamentally reduced to simple "units" of *intuition*, he disagreed with Descartes that such units need *necessarily* be 'clear, distinct, and self-evident,' but *instead must* be based on and derived *entirely* from *experience*. No doubt, Locke's training as a physician, his preference for the *experimentalist* approach in science led him to this *empiricist* position, much like Descartes' training as a mathematician led him to his *rationalist* position. (That is to say, the rationalist and the empiricist disagree on the basis of knowledge: the empiricist wants to claim it's founded on *experience* alone whereas the rationalist argues it's based on *reason*.¹) A few important definitions:

- **Defn1: Knowledge: Justified and true belief. (I.e., I know X if and only if I can: a.) *Justify my belief in X*, b.) *Prove that that my belief in X is true.***
- **Defn2: Causal Theory of Perception: To perceive object X means *only* that X is *causally related* to one's perceiving system. That is to say, object X *causes* certain sensations and impressions, which may or may not accurate representations of X.**

So, for example, in the case of Defn 1., you could see the rationalist skeptic Descartes as questioning how we can *justify* our beliefs in (for example) an outside world, other minds, etc. Whereas empirical skeptics like Hume worry mostly about whether our beliefs in an outside world are *true*. (For Hume, you

¹ Immanuel Kant transcended what may be a *false disjunct* (see handout on fallacies, posted in your section website), by pointing out (the perhaps somewhat obvious claims) that knowledge requires *both*. As he wrote in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Concepts without percepts [i.e., perceptual content] are empty, whereas percepts without concepts are meaningless."

can have a justified, *untrue* belief in, for example, causation. The belief is justified insofar as our minds “can’t help but associate” contiguous events that are similar, but (according to Hume) this doesn’t guarantee that such events are causally connected. Quite the contrary!

A consequence of Defn2 (the causal theory of perception) is that the impressions and sensations of object *X* may not be representative of *X at all*, i.e., the impressions and sensations may be derived strictly from the “power” of *X* to create such a sensation. These are *X*’s *secondary qualities*. The notion of primary qualities (i.e., representations of object *X* corresponding to *X*’s real properties) versus secondary qualities is one that goes back to Galileo: Locke didn’t invent such notions. Locke, however, in keeping with the atomic/molecular picture of gases that Boyle advanced, argued that primary qualities are restricted to the object’s size, shape, mass, motion (i.e., velocity.) Whereas, *secondary qualities* are the sensations of color, smell, taste, and sound resulting from our perception of the object. In addition, Locke mentions *tertiary qualities* (v 23, p. 143) as the powers in an object to change the *secondary qualities* of another object. (For instance, heat being the tertiary quality of a flame to change the *color* of wax.)

The real problem for Locke was similar to that Descartes faced: how do we come to gain *knowledge* of material *substances*, i.e., independently existing physical objects? For Locke, our fundamental *intuitions* were either *sensational* (i.e., simple intuitions based on immediate sensory experience) or *relational* (i.e., intuitions formed from *inferences*, based on other sensational intuitions² so it looks like we’re stuck talking only about sensations and impressions and our memories of them.³

But Locke *wanted* to ground a notion of knowledge of objects based on his empirical claims. He could “do” so, unfortunately, only by shoving off two important features of his view into the realm of the unobservable:

1. **Powers:** We cannot ever perceive the *powers* an object has to produce the secondary qualities we experience. We can only perceive the *effects* of such powers. So how can we come to talk sensibly about them, much less know them?
2. **Substance: (Recall handout on Descartes)** To be a physical object means to be a *material substance*. But we never *perceive* this directly. We only perceive the substance’s *properties* (which are the primary, secondary, and tertiary qualities.) So how can we come to know the ‘subject’ by which we tack on the predicates or properties? Or, if material

² For example: “I see a dagger before me” is an example of a sensational intuition. Whereas, if I were to add, “and that dagger belongs to Joe Schmo because I can tell from the handle, etc” that would be *relational*, since my claim is based on some *inferences* to other intuitions, not directly part of the immediate sensation.

³ This position is also known as *phenomenalism*, which is the notion that there are no objects, only bundles of phenomena, or clusters of sensory impressions.

substance is unobservable, how can we infer that the bundle of impressions I experience, whether primary or secondary qualities, *really* come from a *source* (i.e., an *object*?) Perhaps (as Hume believed) it's just our minds that weave these bits of sensory impressions together, from a buzzing sea of sensation, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

As an illustration of Problem 2., suppose you perceive a chair. You perceive its primary qualities, (shape, mass, motion, etc.) and its secondary qualities (color, sound, etc.) You want to say that all these qualities come from a *source*, namely, that *object* (the 'chair.')

But you can't. Why? You only know the properties, i.e., the 'predicates' of the 'subject' (the chair.) If you can't claim that the chair is an independently existing subject, then you're in the skeptical position *a' la* Hume: you can only claim with certainty that you experience "bundles of sensations" that *seem* to be 'anchored' to such (unobservable) substances, but this is just a *hypothesis*. And this hypothesis can never be demonstrated to be true, because a substance is unobservable. Another way of putting it, is we never experience the chair, in-and-of-itself (call it X). We only experience the associated phenomena, i.e., sensory input, that *seem* to produce such a representation we'd like to call "chair," *but how will we ever really know?* We can't *ever* perceive the *powers* that X has to *affect* our sensory apparatus, much less X (in and of itself.) Maybe there *is* no such X.

Berekeley's Response:

"Not 'maybe'...but, there *is no such X*" was exactly Berkeley's response. Berkeley argued that the very *notion* of material substance is unnecessary, so get rid of it:

"Does the *reality* of sensible things consist in being perceived? Or, is it something distinct from their being perceived, and that bears no relation to the mind?"

...asks Philonous, rhetorically, sarcastically (p. 147)

"But...should it not seem odd...if it be allowed that no idea, nor anything like an idea can exist in an unperceiving substance...not to mention the peculiar difficulty there must be in conceiving a material substance...to be the *substratum* of extension." (ibid., p. 155)

Till finally it almost reads like Philonous is shouting down Hylas:

"I have no reason for believing the existence of Matter. I have no immediate intuition thereof: neither can I immediately from my sensations, ideas, notions, actions, or passions, infer an unthinking, unperceiving, inactive substance—either by probable deduction or by necessary consequence....the very notion or definition of *material substance*, there is included a manifest repugnance and inconstancy." (ibid. 170)

So, eliminate material substance and you eliminate the problem of trying to account for 'substance,' 'powers' etc. *There are simply no physical objects*. Recall Cartesian dualism: what's the other substance? Mind, or spirit. Though Berkeley was an empiricist, not a rationalist, he implicitly agrees with Descartes that Mind/Spirit is an independent substance. The difference was, for Berkeley, that's the *only* substance. This is his metaphysically monist position, which was *idealist*, not materialist.

“To me it is evident, for the reasons you allow of, that sensible things cannot exist otherwise otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I conclude...seeing that the only depend not on my thought...*there must be some other Mind wherein they exist.*” (165)

This other Mind is God's. So for Descartes, God (who ensures we're not deceived) safeguards our justification in the beliefs of physical objects. For Berkeley, God (whose mind a;; is a thought of) safeguards the truth in the belief of physical objects, insofar as such sensations appear remain stable and independent of one's thinking.

Running through Berkeley, perhaps many of the argument fallacies may come to mind: question-begging, false dichotomy, slippery slope, weasel words, bad analogy, etc. Though Berkeley was actually a very subtle reasoner. His idealism looks so odd, since, in many ways it's even worse than Descartes. Descartes *reconstructs* Mind and Space (matter) with the God-bootstrapping technique. Whereas Berkeley seems to toss in God as a final stop gap to prevent his spiritual substantialism from careening into the abyss of solipsism.

He certainly, however, seems to be using his fair share of weasel-words and equivocations in questions like:

“But it is a universally received maxim that *Everything which exists is particular*. How then can motion in general, or extension in general, exist in any corporeal substance?” (156)

In other words, he's assuming (or begging the question) that bodies possess 'general' properties like motion and extension. But this is mere sophistry. A *specific* body can have a *specific* motion (i.e., velocity) and occupy a *specific* position and have a *specific* size, and all this says *nothing* about the metaphysical status of *general universals*. In other words, I look at a baseball whizzing by and I record its location, size, speed. To say the baseball “must” have *general* extension and motion is to confuse epistemology with metaphysics. *Of course*, a specific value of the ball's speed and location *presupposes* the *general conceptual* notions of motion and extension, but such conceptions need not 'live' in the baseball. They don't! They “live” in my *physical theory*.

In fact, if there's one glaring equivocation running throughout Berkeley, it's his glomming together the notion of 'objectivity' with 'invariance' (For instance, Philonous argues that primary qualities like size vary according to the perspective of the beholder,

as do secondary qualities, hence primary qualities cannot be objective.) Again, though, there are many *objectively measurable* properties in physics which *aren't* invariant. Consider the scale-dependent properties of temperature and pressure.

Of course, in all fairness to Berkeley, one has to buy into the metaphysical picture that physics presents for the above rebuttal to have any pull. And as a matter of fact, there are many contemporary physicists who look at the weird behavior of atoms in the subatomic realm, and such physicists often adopt a Berkeley-esque idealism. Why? Because whatever electrons or quarks 'are,' they *certainly* don't possess primary qualities listed above by Locke, and more importantly, their *behavior* seems to depend *radically* on *how one goes about detecting them*, as though one really cannot separate easily the observer from the observed.

Hume

Note: For a more general overview of Hume's empirical skepticism, see Oct 7 Notes

Hume's response to Locke is even more radical. In §IV, pt1 of *An Enquiry...* (p 193) as well as more implicitly (in II, *A Treatise...*, p. 179) he seems to chime in with Locke's distinction between "sensational/relational" when he stipulates between "matters of fact/associations of ideas." *But*, as he writes in §III, the associations of ideas seem to boil down into the (apriori) relations of *resemblance* and the (aposteriori) relations of *cause/effect*. What about temporal contiguity? (I.e., the perception of similar events in time? Well it seems to involve both *apriori* notions of resemblance *and* *aposteriori* notions like observing impressions and their 'less lively' traces *in time*.)

As shown in Oct 7, the 'matters of fact,' ultimately reducible to bits of sense impressions are associated by an "irresistible and fortunate part of our nature" into the above three kinds of relations. For example, as he argues somewhat repetitively in the first reading (*A Treatise*) such a "propensity to feign the continu'd existence of all sensible objects" (185) is due to stringing together resembling, contiguous impressions. I see a chair one moment. I see a chair the next instant. My "propensity" to call these two impressions as comprising impressions of one temporally persisting, (therefore 'continually existing') *object*, i.e., 'the chair' is *only* due to this "irresistible and fortunate part of [human] nature" to associate similar impressions in this way. But (as discussed in Oct 7) this is no rationally warranted maneuver. "Custom, then, is the great guide to human life." (201)

Of course, the most persistent of these associations is *causation*. But the inference arises again when associating contiguous events. It's simply a matter of "*an object, followed by another...*" (213) But if causation is *not* a metaphysical principle, holding events of the world together, but simply an association our minds can't help but make, then the whole *causal theory of perception* evaporates! (Since this theory is obviously based on an objective notion of cause/effect.) Gone with that theory is also the warrant for the existence of an external and internal world, or even a temporally persisting self. We're 'hardwired' into associating impressions in such a manner that such notions arise as

plausible, hence Hume's 'shrug' (we're psychologically incapable of being skeptics), but this is habit, a weaker form of passion. "Reason is ultimately a slave to the passions."⁴

What's Wrong With All these Guys?

Locke, Berkeley, and Hume seem to err too far on the side of *particularism*, i.e., the notion that *only particulars exist*. All three would agree all knowledge reduces to *particular sense-impressions*, "one damn thing after the other," so to speak. All three seem to puzzle on *how* such impression can be related, whether it's in some invisible substance or power (Locke) or in the Mind of God (Berkeley) or in *our* own mind (Hume.)

But, one can ask, is *lived* experience like this? Do we *really experience* life as a series of disconnected 'snap shots,' sense-data? Perhaps someone with severe brain damage does. But, as the American philosopher William James coined the term, if we *reflect* on experience, *it's a stream of consciousness*. There seems to be a deep and subtle connection and relation among and within each moment of lived experience, which defies being abstracted to some point-instant, or 'bit' of sense-data.

These 'empiricists,' in other words, appear not to be empirical *enough*. In other words, they impose a very artificial scheme onto experience, reducing it to some hypothetical confetti of unrelated sense-data. This is a very questionable metaphysical picture. It's certainly not even accurate. Take away this reductionism, and you go far to take away the 'punch' of many of their so-called problems and (even worse) solutions.

⁴ Though Hume did not mean this in some simplistic, emotionalist sense. Hume's theory of the passions is very subtle and sophisticated, informing his ethics and his philosophy of religions.