

BERKELEY LECTURE 3

1. Locke represents us as being caught up in some baffling detective story. We have a highly limited perspective on the world that is constrained by our sensory organs. All we ever observe directly are the colours and lights arising from its impingement on our retinas, the sounds arising from its impingement on our ears, etc.—in general the impact of physical bodies on our own. These give us clues from which we infer a relatively unchanging world: the changeability of our sensations being due to our altered perspective on that world. Berkeley attacks three elements of this picture: the primary/secondary distinction, material causality, and matter itself.
2. Locke expressed the distinction between primary and secondary qualities as follows: those qualities *in objects* that produce ideas in us he called 'primary qualities', such as solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number. (*Essay* II.viii.9). Those qualities that are *merely* powers to produce ideas in us, such as colour, sound, taste etc., he called 'secondary qualities'. (II.viii.10). The resulting picture is that, in so far as we think of the world as being *really* coloured, or having tastes, etc., we are deceived (II.viii.7). The world is a gigantic, soundless, colourless (but not shapeless or motionless) machine that *appears* to be coloured to certain parts of itself (namely people)—though how this can be we cannot say (IV.iii.28; cf. 2D 210).
3. What reasons are there for drawing the distinction in this way? It seems that we can give a causal explanation of *all* our ideas in terms of the satisfaction by objects of just what Locke called the primary qualities—this is an instance of the so-called corpuscularian hypothesis. This places limits on Locke's scepticism, for it seems that for him, the idea of a primary quality resembles the quality itself and thus intimates to us the true nature of reality. (II.viii.14).
4. We should first note that Berkeley rejected the 'resemblance' thesis on the grounds that *only an idea can resemble an idea*. 'By matter therefore we are to understand an inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure and motion do actually subsist. But it is evident... 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 their archetypes can exist in an unperceiving substance' (*PHK* 9). This 'likeness' principle is plausible, for what sense can it have to say that something we cannot sense resembles something we can sense?
5. Second, Berkeley argues that we cannot even conceive of matter as having *only* primary qualities: in particular, we cannot 'frame the idea' of motion and extension without that of colour (*PHK* 10). That would involve the sort of abstraction that he had argued to be impossible.
6. There is a deeper issue behind this. Whether or not we can somehow encompass a unitary conception of (say) shape, independent of its sensory manifestations, is related to a well-known crux of eighteenth-

BERKELEY LECTURE 3

century psychology known as Molyneux's problem (Locke *Essay* II.ix.8). It helps us to understand the content of Berkeley's position to note that he was *committed* to saying 'no', which he duly did (NTV 132); but there are analogues of it for which that seems wrong.

7. We had said, and most people do think, that the behaviour of matter (its primary qualities) is the *cause* and hence the *explanation* of our sensations. This view trades on the idea that matter or its primary qualities can cause our sensations. Berkeley rejects this as follows: either so-called primary qualities are properties of matter, or (as Berkeley thinks) ideas. In neither case can they be causally efficacious.
8. He says: 'All our ideas, sensations, or the things which we perceive... are visibly inactive, there is nothing of power or agency about them' (*PHK* 25). Here Berkeley is appealing to the introspective method (*PHK* Int. 25). Look at your ideas: all you see is one idea followed by another—you never get any idea that one of them *produces* another (as against Locke *Essay* II.xxvi.1).
9. As for unthinking substance: Berkeley thinks that the only notion we have of causation is from instances of purposive human action: 'I find I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure... This making and unmaking of ideas doth very properly denominate the mind active. Thus much is certain, and grounded on experience: but when we talk of unthinking ideas, or of exciting ideas exclusive of volition, we only amuse ourselves with words' (*PHK* 27, see also *PHK* 146-7). So it is false to say that ideas of extension or motion cause anything, and it is meaningless to say that unthinking matter causes anything. (On 'notion' see *Pr* 140. For a different, Humean argument in the same direction see *Treatise* I.iv.2). But if it neither bears primary qualities nor produces ideas then nothing is left for matter to *do*: Berkeley concludes that nothing is left for 'matter' to *mean* (2D 225-6).
10. Someone who insists that we *do* have a conception of matter might admit the power of Berkeley's arguments whilst regarding them as a *reductio* of their premises. But a *reductio* of what? Well, how *do* we so much as *get the concept* of a sense-independent, material world? What Berkeley got right was that we cannot construct it from the impoverished empiricism about concept-formation by which he and Locke both felt constrained. 'It is no more possible to have a purely sensory concept of [say] hardness than it is to have a purely kinaesthetic conception of what it is for one's legs to be crossed' (G. Evans, 'Things without the mind', *Collected Papers* p. 270). What is needed is a more holistic empiricism that admits that one can form concepts by grasping a *theory*. The empiricism resides in the fact that experience can disconfirm attributions of these properties via theoretical mediation; and what makes 'red' and 'loud' *more* sensory or 'secondary' concepts than 'hard' or 'square' or 'magnetic' is that much less surrounding theory is necessary for this in the former cases than in any of the latter.