

The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 4

Locke: primary and secondary qualities (cont.), language

Despite the promise not to examine the doctrine in any depth (Handout 3), let us enlarge on the subject of primary and secondary qualities. Let us be clear though that we do nothing more than scratching the surface.

RESEMBLANCE OF SHAPES. Ideas of primary qualities are said to resemble these very qualities. This very fact should allow us unlocking the secrets of nature and block epistemological scepticism. But what could it possibly mean? We seem to have no problem with saying that shapes resemble each other. For we can apply geometric transformations to obtain one from the other. These include translation, reflection, rotation and resize. In such instances we evidently are concerned with resemblance between shapes *as* primary qualities.

E II.viii.15

RESEMBLANCE OF SMELLS. What of secondary qualities? We say that this smell resembles that smell, and that this white rose smells like that red rose. Here we announce a similarity between certain qualities of the roses, hence at issue is the resemblance between secondary qualities. Nevertheless the reason why we think they are similar is because of the similarity of our sensations: I feel the same way when I smell either of the roses. Even so, the similarity between secondary qualities reduces to the similarity of the effects they have on me. No sense has been of any other aspects of the similarity between them.

Remark 1. A further question is, on what grounds we think our sensations be similar. Two answers to mention. First, their similarity may be a fact of consciousness, not to be explicated any further. Second, their similarity may consist in the similarity of brain states. Both answers lead us into deeper issues in the philosophy of mind.

CROSS-MODAL RESEMBLANCE. So far we considered similarity between qualities and similarity between ideas, all within the same sensory modality. However, we also say that this piece music is similar to colours (Debussy), or to the moonlight (Beethoven), or to the emotion of happiness (Shostakovich). In these cases we *might* mean that a certain correspondence (isomorphism) can be established between a musical theme and, say, a colour spectrum. Each note, or a combination thereof, is matched with a certain colour, in such a way that relations between notes (say, succession) are also matched with relations between colours (their position in the spectrum). On this account, there is at most a structural similarity between musical sounds and colours: a sound cannot be *transformed* into colour, unlike a small square transformed into a large square.

RESEMBLANCE OF IDEAS AND QUALITIES. Turning at last to the presumed similarity between ideas and qualities: the situation, I think, is no better there than with the sound/colour similarity. We have at most an isomorphism. But if so, only a weak response to scepticism is in the offing. It is this: we can predict and manipulate nature, because, happily, our ideas can be arranged in the way that corresponds to the arrangement of qualities. Still, we cannot perceive how things really are, no more than a person merely by listening to Debussy can perceive colours. Now, I think, Locke aims at a stronger response, by intending to claim that ideas resemble qualities in the sense in which two geometric shapes resemble each other. But this, we now see, is simply absurd.

Question 2. Is there a sense in which this portrait of Lenin resembles Lenin? Is it because the shapes are geometrically transformable?

A NOTE ON PAIN. Locke compares secondary qualities (e.g., heat) to pain. This seems strained. I cannot meaningfully say, 'I am in pain, but, really, I am not.' I cannot feel pain without in fact being in pain. On the other hand, it is not absurd to say, 'I feel hot, but I am not really hot, as the thermometer shows my temperature is normal.' There is a difference in the way we use the two predicates. 'Being in pain' is a property of my experiences. 'Being hot' is not always, and not naturally, such a property. Evidence: compare 'This was a painful experience' with 'That was a hot experience.' I speculate further that the difference is due to the need for measurement. From the time immemorial we had to distinguish between the degrees of heat for the purposes of prediction and control. No such need transpired for pain.

A THREEFOLD DISTINCTION. On the back of the pain/heat contrast, one could advance a distinction between three classes of *statements* differing in the way their truth is determined.

Mind-independent statements: truth determined entirely by how things are. ‘The sun has the mass greater than the earth’: its truth does not depend on the beliefs or feelings of any observer, or indeed the existence of any observer.

Mind-dependent statements: for instance, ‘This room is noisy’: its truth is determined both by the reactions of competent observers and by how things are with the room itself.

Mind-determined statements: for instance, ‘I am in pain’, ‘Paris is the capital of France’, ‘This painting is beautiful’. All of these depend for their truth on the beliefs, feelings, reactions of certain competent observers (myself in the case of pain).

Question 3. Reflect on this distinction.

NATURE OF LANGUAGE. There are two central tenets in Locke’s account of language. One is that words stand for ideas. In linguistic communication the purpose is to make the ideas known to other participants. The other tenet is that terms are arbitrary. E III.ii.2
E III.ii.8

The second tenet contradicts the theological opinion that some referring terms, in some language, really denominate the essences of things to which they purport to refer. As well, Locke seems to emphasise the liberty that we have in selecting the terms. But the scope of this liberty, as he comes to realise himself, is not very wide indeed.

The first tenet, earlier endorsed by Hobbes, was mercilessly attacked in modern analytic philosophy. A number of points: If names stand for ideas, what do sentences stand for? A complex idea, an image? Neither seems plausible. And the account of communication seems bogus altogether. Certainly, on occasions, I want you to know specifically what I think. But primarily, and arguably in its original use, communication is designed to convey how things are out there, and not what I think of them.

YSB