Can reality be known as it is? What is the role of the senses in the quest for 'real' knowledge?

By Adam Davies

Within this essay, ideas put forward by Boyle, Locke and Berkeley will be illustrated and examined in relation to the questions put forward in the title. Of course, the epistemological questions that are being addressed here are not solely limited to the ideas of these three thinkers; instead, the extracts chosen for this essay represent an introduction to the topic and provide enough material for one to at least begin forming an answer to the questions.

Robert Boyle and John Locke were contemporaries (Guttenplan et al. 2004, p. 261) and they shared similar views on the external world and how it is represented by the senses through primary and secondary qualities; Locke's view builds on Boyle's corpuscularian hypothesis and forms the position against which Berkeley objects. Boyle's theory is as follows: all bodies (things that are extended, divisible and impenetrable) have matter as a universal commonality between them. Furthermore, the diversity we perceive in such bodies is the result of motion. Therefore, it is matter and motion that brings about the external world of bodies (Guttenplan et al. 2003, p.258). It is the universal motion that divides material bodies into separate parts, each of which must have two attributes: size and shape. Even at the most minute level, these bodies are finite and thus retain these attributes. After all, if a body is finite, as such bodies are, its dimensions 'must be terminated and measurable' and thus 'have some figure or other.' These are primary qualities and Locke describes them as solidity, extension, figure, and mobility (Guttenplan et al. p.265).

Boyle's primary qualities are a description of 'the mechanistic world - of matter and motion - … conceived in the absence of human beings' (Hornsby, J. 2003, p.261). Once we introduce sensible human beings into the picture, Boyle describes the particular impressions received by such beings as 'wrought upon by the figure, shape, motion and texture of bodies without them' (Guttenplan et al. 2003, p.259). These secondary qualities are what human beings see, smell, touch, taste and hear: colours, sounds etc. Because external bodies affect our senses in different ways, we categorise the sensory experience appropriately. The eye might perceive a stimulus that we call 'blue' from one object and a different stimulus that is consequently called 'yellow' from another object.

Locke claims that the mistake human beings make is in being '…so forward to imagine, that those ideas are the resemblances of something really existing in the objects themselves' (Guttenplan et al, 2003, p. 271); we assume that because we perceive such sensory stimuli and see, for example, the colours blue and yellow, these qualities must in fact be 'real', by which it is meant that they truly exist in the objects that trigger such an impression. These qualities are thought to be actual powers that

have an effect on the world: the impression of ‘blue’ has the faculty to work on the universe in the same way forces such as gravity do. Despite this assumption, the objects that these impressions (such as colour) are attributed to possess nothing more than the primary qualities of solidity, extension, figure and mobility.

Here we should address the question at hand. With regard to the role senses play in obtaining knowledge, it is clear that Locke is unwilling to rely solely on one’s initial sensory perception of secondary qualities to know what is really there. Rather, such a quality represents a *power,* ‘by reason of its insensible primary qualities’, within the object to bring about a particular impression (Guttenplan et al., 2004, p. 270). However, he argues that one can know reality by understanding primary qualities, and Locke does claim that senses play a vital role here: ‘the idea of solidity we receive by touch’ (Blackburn, 2001, p.246). Therefore, only by perceiving *primary* qualities with our senses, reality is known as it really is; after all, it is only primary qualities that truly resemble our idea of them.

However, it begs the question why, if to know reality one must reject their direct sensory perception of secondary qualities, one should nevertheless rely on these same senses when perceiving primary qualities. Indeed, this is the objection Berkeley makes: ‘Now why may we not as well argue that figure and extension [primary qualities] are not patterns or resemblances of qualities existing in matter, because to the same eye at different stations, …they appear various, and cannot therefore be images of anything settled and determinate outside the mind?’ (Guttenplan et al. p.279). His argument is simply that if we are so willing to dismiss secondary qualities as existing nowhere outside the mind, we must surely have no issue dismissing primary qualities with the same logic. It is ‘the very same reasoning to conclude, there is no extension of figure in an object…. You may at any time make the experiment, by looking with one eye bare, and with the other through a microscope.’ (Guttenplan et al. 2003, p.283). Berkeley therefore holds the idealist position that reality, known as it is, is only minds and their ideas (Guttenplan et al. 2003, p. 287); if we can know our minds then we can know reality, for that is all reality is. Sensory perception would be necessary to receive data from the ‘external world’ but, as he claims what we perceive as the external world is actually ideas (which cannot resemble anything but an idea within the mind), the sensory perception of an external world does not play a role in knowing what is real.

Berkeley’s response eradicates the property distinction by applying to *all* qualities what Locke and Boyle were only willing to apply to secondary qualities. He succeeds in addressing what seems to be an inconsistency in how Locke uses the senses to justify a resemblance between primary qualities and our ideas of them. However, one could argue that one particular quality, that of *solidity,* is immune from the criticism even if it is perceived through the senses like secondary qualities.

The distinction between secondary qualities and solidity is in the perceptual relativity of the former. As has been shown, the impressions of secondary qualities are relative to the perceiver. Berkeley goes as far as to say that it is not just secondary qualities but *all* qualities that suffer from perceptual relativity. But touching a body and perceiving *solidity* in the way Locke suggests would surely not be a such a relative experience. For, whereas a colour could be various shades of blue depending on the eye seeing it, and alcohol could fall anywhere between smooth or bitter depending on the mouth consuming it, when considering solidity, a body is simply either solid or not. There is no middle zone between possessing solidity and lacking it, no spectrum of possible interpretations. And so we could perhaps say, even if we accept Berkeley's denial of the external existence of other primary qualities (because, as he shows, even perceiving extension and motion gives relative impressions), that solidity is the sole primary quality by virtue of its lack of perceptual relativity, with all other qualities falling under the description of 'secondary'. One may thus conclude that the senses do play a role in the quest for real knowledge, allowing us to determine those bodies that possess solidity around us. Things really are solid and we are able to use our senses to understand them; therefore reality, to the extent that solid things are real, can be known as it is.

It must be made clear that when considering the scope of role of the senses in obtaining knowledge, there are many more positions to explore: the method of doubt used by Descartes and the conceptual schema of Kant to name two. It goes without saying that considering the property distinction is but one of many possible approaches to the question of whether reality can be known as it is and to what extent the senses play a role. When considering such contributions by Boyle, Locke and Berkeley, what all three can agree on is that our ideas of secondary qualities do not resemble them. For Boyle and Locke, it is because, by sensing a secondary quality in a body, we are actually perceiving certain powers; for Berkeley, the idealist, it is because all ideas resemble nothing more than what is in the mind. Consequently, Locke argues that we can know reality as it is and, because there is an external material reality, we must use the senses to do so; Berkeley argues that reality can be known as it is but what we consider to be sensory perceptions actually stem from ideas in the mind and thus do not reflect an external, mind-independent reality. Therefore, 'sensory perception' is defined differently here, reflecting the mind's ideas rather than external data. How seriously one takes Berkeley's conclusion depends on the extent to which they are willing to accept that there is not a single quality independent of the mind, not even solidity, that is accurately resembled by ideas.

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