The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 5

Locke: Abstraction, substance, essence

Abstraction. The theory of abstraction is designed to solve the problem of using general terms, such as 'white' (adjectives), 'triangle' (simple modes), 'murder' (mixed modes), 'gold' (substance names). What is the problem? The problem is that Locke begins with nominalism: all that exists is particular things. Then how can we legitimately (meaningfully) use general words, such as those mentioned before?

The answer is, by the process of abstraction. I see a white dog. I notice it resembles in its colour to white milk, white paper, white cat etc. I only pay attention, in imagination or in actual perception, to the colour of these particular objects. I pay no attention to its other features. So we use the capacity for selective attention, together with the capacities of noticing resemblances and making comparisons, to create the idea of whiteness. E II.xi.9

So much for simple ideas. There are complex abstract ideas. Take the idea of theft. Well, form first the idea of human. Ignore all individual features of any human. Attend only to what all humans share. Then you are ready to use the predicate 'is human'. Repeat the procedure with regard to 'property', 'concealment' etc. E II.xii.5

Remark 1. The process of abstraction, as sketched by Locke, may usefully be compared to Husserl's notion of 'reduction' and 'bracketing', and to Frege's critique of it.

Nominalism, conceptualism, realism. As mentioned, nominalists believe that only particular (even better, concrete) things exist. But someone who begins with the claim that only particular things exist is also a natural convert to conceptualism. All that justifies our use of general terms is their relation to our own concepts. This has the consequence that classification is up to us, and so is not grounded in reality. So ultimately it is arbitrary. 'This ice cream is white', 'My hand is white', 'This patch of snow is white'—all these statements are literally false. Whiteness is not in the things themselves.

But are concepts any more respectable to a nominalist than, say, Plato's Forms? Of course concept-tokens may be so, but we are ready to grant, as almost any conceptualist does, that different people grasp the same concept, just as the same person grasps the same concept on different occasions. Thus we are forced to introduce concept-types.

Realism offers another answer. Classification is not at all arbitrary. Predication is not persistently erroneous. Unfortunately, the ontological price to pay is way too high.

Resemblance in ontology. Perhaps Locke held a view that was a combination of conceptualism and the resemblance theory. (For a classical exposition see Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, ch. IX, also relevant is ch. X.) How do I know that this wall is white? We now say that it is white, since it resembles other white things, those things in particular exposure to which first introduced me to the use of 'white'. How do I know that this wall is white and this sheet of paper is white? The answer is that they resemble each other.

So we admit into our ontology all sorts of particulars, but also at least one universal, namely, the universal relation of resemblance. Suppose, however, someone were to say that this relation itself is of our own creation. The world has no similar particular. We choose to classify some of them as similar, some as dissimilar. Consider the statement 'The Sun is heavier than the Earth.' The relation 'x is heavier than y' is a universal. On the present view, it is a product of our classification. So when there are no classifiers around, is the statement true? Was the Sun heavier than the Earth so many billions of years ago? Berkeley and possibly Kant would like to say precisely this. Isn't this response too strange though? In addition to this *tu quoque*, we can deploy the same argument for scientific realism we mentioned earlier. Supposing there is no objective resemblance between things as they are, how come we manage to find our way around in this flux? The answer may be exactly that we grasp resemblances between things. No such grasp could be consistently present without there being resemblances in the things themselves.

Substance. Locke offers us an explanation of how we *might* acquire the idea of substance. I receive in experience a host of ideas regularly combined together. This table has a certain colour, a certain shape, a certain size. I then assume that there must be something holding all these qualities together, the table-substance. Hence we have no *idea* of substance. And because of this, our talk about substances is rendered meaningless. That is: we have ideas of qualities, but we fail to have an idea of substance. E II.xxiii.1 E II.xxiii.2 E II.xxiii.3

This might be no loss at all, as the idea of substance does not have much use in philosophy anyway. But perhaps, on the other hand, the postulation of substances is reasonable. What kind of thing the underlying substance would be? Presumably another collection of qualities. But we often speak as if there is a *substratum* that possesses different qualities. Well, the substratum that possesses the most fundamental primary qualities would be unperceived—unperceivable in principle. E II.xiii.19

Bodies, spirits, God. We get the complex idea of spirit (soul) by an inference to the best explanation. We observe various workings of the mind. We cannot explain how they are at all possible, unless they are produced by a spirit. From these observations we infer—by reflection, that is—the existence of spirits. However, we do not have a simple idea of spirit. Analogously for the idea of body: it 'is as remote from our Conceptions, and Apprehensions, as that of Spiritual Substance.' E II.xxiii.5

Locke's intent in this passage is to discredit the idea of body. Since we are happy to admit that we cannot represent spirits to ourselves, the idea of spirit is obscure. And since the idea of body is no clearer than the idea of spirit, our idea of spirit is obscure. By the same token, we cannot represent God. E II.xxiii.22 E. II.xxiii.35

This reasoning, however, invites the objection that all our abstract ideas are obscure. Just as the idea of pure extension is obscure, so is the idea of pure manhood (the Man), or pure tablehood (the Table). If this is to be so, then our talk involving these ideas would be as meaningless as the talk involving the idea of material substance. E II.xxiii.2

Substances and essences. Locke's positive view can be summarised as follows. There are particular substances. In fact, there is nothing but such particular substances. The internal constitution of these substances is largely unknown. We can only speculate about it. This speculation suggests that internal constitutions of substances having similar secondary qualities is also similar. But there is a possibility nevertheless that they may turn out to be different. We classify substances on the basis of their observable qualities (as well as our convenience). Thus substances acquire nominal essences. What their real essences are remains, as we said, unknown.

Real and nominal essences. It is a bit difficult to understand why Locke was so much at pains to insist on this distinction. On the face of it, it is immediate (we think). Internal workings of things is one matter, our classifications is another one. Locke's discussion is best understood in the context of his polemic against the Schools and their Aristotelian philosophy. According to Aristotle, there are formal explanations.

Example 2. Aristotelian explanations: projectile. See the example on the board.

Now, Locke intends to claim that only real essences can do the explanatory job. Consequently, all explanations must be empirical, rather than relying on the speculations about species (or natural kinds) and their essences. The world does not come pre-formatted in natural kinds.

But the situation is different with abstract objects (mixed modes). There real essences coincide with nominal essences. E III.v.14
Hence the possibility of demonstrative knowledge in mathematics and morals.

Locke cites the example of Adam. Its purpose is to show that we are able to identify essences of abstract objects (or E III.vi.44
universals), such as jealousy or adultery, while unable to know the essences of material substances, such as gold. But the example can be read in a different way. We can say that Adam did not mean his terms for jealousy and adultery to stand for whatever the situation he observed Lamech to be in. With 'gold', however, he meant the term to stand for whatever *that* piece of shiny stuff was made of. Complications arise when two pieces of different metals, that look very similar, are brought to Adam. He dubs both of them 'gold', but once the mistake is revealed, a revision in the use of the term is necessary.

Kripke and Locke. The Adam example shows that use names for material substances to refer to their real essences. But this creates a problem, so far as we are supposed to be ignorant of those essences. What is the alternative? We could use these names to refer to their nominal essences. But this creates a different problem. Suppose I associate with the term 'gold' a nominal essence 'shiny, yellow piece of metal'. You, however, may very well associate with it a very different essence, such as 'heavy, expensive piece of metal'. Then we end up talking about different things altogether when using the term 'gold'. Locke recognises this problem, but thinks that nature should provide conditions for the stability in our linguistic practices. E III.vi.28

He nevertheless enlarges on the flawed use of terms. He admits that a common man, when using the term for gold, intends it to stand for the real essence of gold. So when I say, 'Gold is shiny', I do not mean to say, 'What I call "gold" is E III.x.17
shiny', in which case, by the way, I may be saying something entirely trivial. Rather, I mean to say, 'Whatever has the real essence of gold is shiny.' From Locke's point of view this of course is unfortunate, since we should forever remain ignorant of real essences.

In the retrospect, however, what Locke claims here is very important. 'Gold might not have been shiny': this statement is not a contradiction. Nor does it describe anything we cannot imagine. Compare it with the statement 'Gold might have had the atomic number 80.' This is a genuine impossibility. If a certain substance has the atomic number other than 79, it is not gold.

Well, on the other hand, we have to take care to distinguish between metaphysical and epistemic possibilities. It is epistemically possible that gold has the atomic number 80. This means that we (the chemists) may be mistaken about its property. If, however, gold actually has the atomic number 79, then it necessarily has it. Which means, to repeat, that no substance with a number other than 79 could be gold.

YSB