

## PERCEPTION

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From *Continuum Companion to Locke*, eds. S-J. Savonius, P. Schuurman and J.C. Walmsley (Continuum Press, 2010). Please refer to the published version.

Locke often uses the term ‘perception’ broadly, as a synonym for ‘thought’ (e.g. *E*, II.vi.2, p. 128). In the ‘propriety of the *English Tongue*’ (*E*, II.ix.1, p. 143), however, ‘perception’ refers to the passive operation of the mind that Locke more usually calls ‘sensation’.

Along with reflection, sensation furnishes the mind with ideas, the ‘materials’ of knowledge. Much knowledge is knowledge of general truths. But perception is also a way of acquiring ‘sensitive knowledge’: knowledge of the existence of particular finite substances and their observable qualities (*E*, IV.ii.14-15, pp. 536-538 and IV.xi, pp. 630-639).

It is controversial whether sensitive knowledge is consistent with Locke’s official definition of knowledge (in which ‘perception’ is used in the general sense), as ‘*the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas* (*E*, IV.i.2, p. 525). In particular, knowledge of the existence of ‘things without the mind’ appears to depend not on agreement between ideas, but on the agreement of ideas with the world.

Locke’s thought seems to be that sensation carries with it an awareness that it is the ‘*the actual receiving of Ideas from without*’ (*E*, IV.xi.2, p. 630), in the same way that memory is supposed to consist in reviving ideas with the ‘*additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before*’ (*E*, II.x.2, p. 149). There is some suggestion that this additional awareness is grounded in differences in the ideas involved: that the awareness of an external cause is tied to the greater force and vivacity of ideas of sensation, and the feeling of familiarity of recalled ideas to their comparative lack of

force and vivacity (these ideas are '*laid in fading colours*', *E*, II.x.5, p. 152). Hence Locke asks the sceptic: is there not 'a very manifest difference between dreaming of being in the Fire, and actually being in it?' (*E*, IV.ii.14, p. 537).

This response to scepticism is not unproblematic. The distinction between sensation on the one hand and memory and dreaming on the other is not obviously co-extensive with the distinction between more and less forceful and vivacious ideas: there can be dull sensations and forceful memories and dreams. Worse, this response threatens to beg the sceptic's question, who wants a reason for thinking that greater force and vivacity is in fact a mark of an external cause.

For his part, Locke suggests extreme sceptical doubt is self-undermining, because it calls into question the reliability of the faculties necessary to ask the sceptical question in the first place: 'For we cannot act any thing, but by our Faculties; nor talk of Knowledge itself, but by the help of those Faculties, which are fitted to apprehend even what Knowledge is' (*E*, IV.xi.3, p. 631). But although Locke offers a number of additional 'concurrent Reasons' for rejecting the sceptical hypothesis (*E*, IV.xi.4-7, pp. 632-634), he is ultimately not overly concerned by the sceptical challenge: the attendance of ideas of sensation, unlike memory and dreaming, with pleasure and pain is at least sufficient for our purposes as moral subjects (*E*, IV.ii.14, pp. 535-538 and IV.xi.8, pp. 634-635).

The passivity of the mind in perception is central to Locke's account of sensitive knowledge, as it guarantees that ideas of sensation are caused by things distinct from ourselves. This epistemologically central claim is therefore somewhat compromised by Locke's claim that the ideas received in sensation are often altered by 'judgement' or 'habitual custom', as when the idea of 'a flat Circle variously shadow'd, with several degrees of Light and Brightness' is transformed into 'the perception of a convex Figure, and an uniform Colour' (*E*, II.ix.8, pp. 145-146). This claim prefaces the discussion of

the ‘Molyneux Question’, added to the second edition of the *Essay*. Molyneux asked Locke (Molyneux to Locke, 2 March 1693, *Corr.*, vol. iv, p. 651) whether a man born blind and made to see would be able to distinguish by sight a globe from a cube, correctly anticipating that Locke would answer the question negatively. Locke explains that the blind man ‘has not yet attained the Experience, that what affects his touch so or so, must affect his sight so or so’ (*E*, II.ix.8, p. 145).

Following Berkeley (1975, sect. 133), it is often assumed that the issue turns on the ‘heterogeneity’ of ideas received via different senses: that the ideas of extension received by sight and touch differ fundamentally in kind, and can only be associated as a result of experience of their conjunction. But this does not sit well with Locke’s claims that the idea of extension is a simple idea that we perceive via more than one sense (e.g. *E*, II.v, p. 127 and II.xiii.5, 24, pp. 168 and 178-179), and moreover a simple idea that resembles qualities of objects, and so presumably other simple ideas of extension. If so, why *couldn’t* a man born blind distinguish a cube from a globe on being made to see?

It is therefore more likely that Locke’s negative answer to the Molyneux Question depends instead upon the view that light and colours are the ‘direct’ objects of sight (Bolton, 1994). The blind man would be unable to distinguish the cube from the globe because he would lack the experience necessary for judgement to transform patterns of light and colour (‘from that, which truly is a variety of shadow and colour, collecting the Figure’) into 2-dimensional plane figures, and these 2-dimensional plane figures into 3-dimensional solid figures (see also *W*, vol. iii, p. 325).

Even so, problems remain. Locke’s claim that the transformation occurs ‘without our taking notice of it’ appears to conflict with the claim, central to his polemic against nativism, that it is ‘hardly intelligible’ that there should be ideas in our minds of which we are unaware (*E*, I.ii.5, pp. 49-51). Likewise, the claim that judgement ‘alters the appearances into their causes’ stands in tension with Locke’s epistemologically

fundamental claim that all simple ideas represent properties of objects perfectly—are ‘real’ and ‘adequate’—because in receiving them the mind is purely passive, and so they cannot but correspond to their causes.

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