



## **Hume on Primary and Secondary Qualities**

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## HUME ON PRIMARY AND SECONDARY QUALITIES

Hume's view of the primary/secondary quality distinction is, I believe, a matter of considerable interest. It bears upon Hume's position in relation to Locke and Berkeley, and has important implications for general features of his epistemology and metaphysics. The central part of my discussion will therefore be taken up with a consideration of those passages from his writings in which Hume refers to the primary/secondary quality distinction. Hume's treatment of this aspect of the 'modern philosophy' may be seen against the background of his discussion of perception and its objects, and it is therefore this with which I begin.

## I

HUME'S SYSTEM

I refer to Hume's system in relation to perception and *the manner in which objects affect the senses*<sup>1</sup>. Hume's avowed purpose here is to discuss the way in which objects appear to the senses (in particular, those of sight and touch), rather than *to account for their real nature and operations*. Our ignorance of the nature of bodies reflects the fact that we are limited in experience to those properties of objects which discover themselves to the senses<sup>2</sup>. In determining the nature of Hume's system there are, I think, two (related) factors to be taken into account: (i) Hume's distinction between perceptions and objects; and (ii) Hume's critique of the Naïve or Direct Realist theory of perception.

(i) Perceptions and Objects

The distinction which Hume wishes to make between perceptions and objects, and his general account of the relation between them, is embodied in his

discussion of the idea of external existence (T 6).  
*We may observe, that 'tis universally allow'd by philosophers, and is besides pretty obvious of itself, that nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas, and that external objects become known to us only by the perceptions they occasion*<sup>3</sup>. We should note that what Hume is describing here is, in essence, the Indirect Realist account of perception, i.e. that we are acquainted with an external reality only in the form of perceptions ('impressions') which arise from sensory contact with it. That Hume is prepared to speak elsewhere of perceptions in their relation to external objects as images<sup>4</sup> is indicative of his commitment to a Representative theory. There are, of course, severe limitations upon our understanding of the relation between perceptions and objects. *As every idea is deriv'd from a preceding perception, 'tis impossible our idea of a perception, and that of an object or external existence can ever represent what are specifically different from each other*<sup>5</sup>. In so far as external objects are supposed to differ from perceptions in their specific identity, we can form only a relative idea of them (T 68). Nevertheless the idea of bodies or objects is clearly to be distinguished from that of perceptions; while being specifically the same, like ideas and impressions, these items, or rather the ideas involved, are *attended with the supposition of a difference, that is unknown and incomprehensible* (T 244). As different existences perceptions and objects may be conceived to differ in respect of their relational properties, for example, but otherwise whatever is true of the one must also be true of the other.

These two sets of distinctions - between, on the one hand, ideas and impressions and, on the other, perceptions and objects - may usefully be compared and

contrasted. In each case the items with which we are concerned are numerically different but specifically identical; and, furthermore, the relation between the items which make up each pair is a causal one. The obvious difference between the two cases is that while both impressions and ideas are objects of experience, the causal dependence of the one upon the other being revealed by the order of their appearance before the mind, we do not directly experience external objects as opposed to perceptions. Questions concerning the 'real nature' of objects or bodies belong to the province of natural - rather than 'moral' - philosophy, which indeed has reasonable hypotheses to offer (T 48). As for our idea of body, this comprises nothing more than the ideas of the several distinct sensible qualities of which an object is composed (T 219) - which qualities are to be included will of course depend on our view of the primary/secondary quality distinction. Hume is forced to acknowledge that the philosophical distinction between objects (or the sensible qualities of which they are composed) and perceptions arises neither from the senses nor the understanding (T 2); but this is still to be contrasted with a metaphysical doctrine like that of substance which not only fails to find any support either in reason or experience, but is an *unintelligible chimera* of which we can literally have no idea (T 222, 234).

(ii) Hume's Rejection of Naive Realism

In order to reveal the falsity of Naive, or Direct, Realism Hume is prepared to rely on various data which reflect the relativity of perception. In his discussion 'Of Scepticism with Regard to the Senses', Hume argues on this basis that we are prevented from ascribing a continued and independent

existence to the objects of perception. The 'experiments' which Hume takes to show that our perceptions (sic) are not possessed of an independent existence reflect the fact that our perceptions - or, to use a more neutral form of expression, the ways in which objects appear to us in perception - are dependent upon, or relative to, a variety of circumstances unrelated to the objects themselves. Hume mentions (T 210,211) physiological factors, such as the case of double vision induced by pressing the eye with a finger; the way in which our bodily condition may affect the colours which objects appear to have; and the effect of our position in relation to the object upon its apparent shape and size. Whatever its merits, the gist of the argument seems clear, viz these *experiments* show that certain of our perceptions, at least, reflect the conditions under which an object is perceived rather than the qualities of the object itself; these perceptions *are of the same nature*, i.e. are not distinguished qua perceptions, from other perceptions we experience; therefore, all our perceptions exhibit the same dependence or relativity, and none of them may be ascribed a continued and independent existence.

Hume also addresses himself to the theory of Naive or Direct Realism in 'Of the Academic or Sceptical Philosophy' (Enquiry Concerning Human Nature, XII). Hume refers here to the belief that *an external universe, which depends not on our perception, is presented by the senses*<sup>6</sup>. However,

*The slightest philosophy... teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets through which these images are conveyed, without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object* (E 152).

Hume takes this to be established by a particular aspect

of the relativity of perception, namely, the effect upon the apparent size of an object of our distance from it. This is supposed to show that it is an image of the object - the appearance it presents to us - that we perceive, rather than the object itself. Since we cannot ascribe an independent and continued existence to what is directly perceived, there remains only the Representative theory as a *new system* according to which we must distinguish between perceptions, as 'interrupted' and 'perishing', and objects as preserving a continued and distinct existence.

## II

### PRIMARY AND SECONDARY QUALITIES

Hume believes that the issues raised so far, concerning the nature of perception and its objects, are echoed in the philosophical distinction between primary and secondary qualities (*another sceptical topic of a like nature* E 154). His most detailed discussion of this distinction occurs in *Of the Modern Philosophy*. I will deal with it in two parts: first, Hume's exposition of the doctrine<sup>7</sup>; and second, Hume's criticisms of the doctrine<sup>8</sup>.

#### 1. The Doctrine

Hume begins by referring to a view of the status of the secondary qualities (i.e. colour, sound, taste, smell, heat and cold, qualities associated with the different modes of perception) which is clearly meant to reflect the account given by Locke (An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Bk II, Ch VIII). On this account, or Hume's version of it, these qualities are *nothing but impressions in the mind, deriv'd from the operation of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the objects* (T 226).

Hume says that he finds only one of the reasons commonly offered for this view to be satisfactory, viz. the variation of the impressions involved, while the external objects apparently remain unchanged. Thus, once again we are referred to various ways in which the appearance of things to the senses is affected by our bodily condition, our situation or position in relation to these things, and so on. Hume continues his exposition in the following way: *The conclusion drawn from them (instances of this kind) is likewise as satisfactory as can possibly be imagin'd (T 227). This is that since many of our impressions have no external model or archetype, and since These impressions are in appearance nothing different from the other impressions of colour, sound, etc., all such impressions have a like origin. This leaves us with the primary qualities as the only real ones, to which a continued and independent existence may be ascribed. The qualities to which Hume refers here are extension, solidity, figure, motion, cohesion, and - in deference to Newton - gravity.*

## 2. Hume's Criticisms

On the face of it, the above amounts to an endorsement by Hume of the Lockean distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Yet it is evident that the passage cannot, after all, be taken at face value, for it is immediately followed by the verdict that by means of this system *instead of explaining the operations of external objects ... we utterly annihilate all these objects, and reduce ourselves ... to the most extravagant scepticism concerning them (T 228). In other words, this aspect of the modern philosophy reveals it as an instance of the kind of philosophy which Hume has already condemned as false (T 222-224). Indeed, according to Hume, this is only one of the 'many*

objections' which we might make to the system. Why, then, does the modern philosophy lead to such drastic consequences? Hume's answer is as follows:

*If colours, sounds, tastes, and smells be merely perceptions, nothing we can conceive is possess'd of a real, continu'd, and independent existence; not even motion, extension and solidity, which are the primary qualities chiefly insisted on (T 228)*

As Hume attempts to show in the sequel, the ideas of the so-called primary qualities ultimately depend on those of the secondary qualities, so that after the exclusion of colours, sounds, heat and cold from the rank of external existences, there remains nothing, which can afford us a just and consistent idea of body (T 229). Since Hume evidently regards this as a kind of reductio ad absurdum proof of the falsity of the modern philosophy (which is, after all, meant to be providing an account of body), he cannot be taken to subscribe to the primary/secondary distinction as drawn by Locke.

We may see from the above that there is a problem in interpreting Hume's position with regard to the primary/secondary quality distinction. If Hume is not, after all, endorsing the distinction, as drawn by Locke, then how are we to understand him? Does he wish to hold that both secondary and primary qualities enjoy only a subjective status so that we are, presumably, left with no idea of body or external existence? Or is he saying that the secondary qualities - or, at least, certain of these qualities - are objective to the same extent as the primary qualities? The former of these two readings has recently been proposed by John Bricke in his book Hume's Philosophy of Mind<sup>9</sup>. According to Bricke, the target of Hume's arguments in this section of the Treatise is the belief common to both Naive Realism and the Representative

theory that there are objects independent of perception, in particular, physical objects<sup>10</sup>. This requires us to see Hume as arguing to the conclusion that both primary and secondary qualities are properties only of perceptions, via the premiss that secondary qualities have this purely subjective status. On this account, Hume is endorsing part of the system (cf. his exposition of the doctrine, referred to above, that our impressions of colour, sound, etc. are nothing but 'internal existences'), while rejecting its other crucial aspect (that the remaining - primary - qualities are the only ones which really belong to body). Now there is, I would suggest, nothing in the words Hume uses here to justify the view that while he is endorsing the first part of the system, he is not also endorsing its corollary. Bricke tries to support his interpretation of Hume as denying the existence of external objects by referring<sup>11</sup> to a passage where Hume apparently condemns the belief in external existence as being *contrary to reason* (E 155). We find, however, that Hume immediately qualifies this by saying that the belief is contrary to reason only *if it be a principle of reason, that all sensible qualities are in the mind, not in the object* (E 155). So the question remains of whether Hume does in fact wish to ascribe such a status to the secondary qualities. In view of the consequences which, according to Hume himself, would result from doing so (the 'annihilation' of objects, etc.), I wish to propose a different interpretation which, in any case, conforms to Hume's system as I described it earlier.

The suggestion I am making, then, is that while Hume does reject the primary/secondary quality distinction, his rejection of it is associated with a commitment to the reality of both kinds of quality. In other words, I take Hume to be saying only that if secondary qualities are ascribed a purely subjective

status, on the basis of the relativity of perception, we will then be forced to draw a similar conclusion in regard to the primary qualities and hence 'in a manner' to annihilate matter or external objects. The argument is reported succinctly in *Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy* (Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Section XII). If we accept the view of *modern enquirers* that secondary qualities exist only as perceptions of the mind, without any external archetype which they represent, a similar account must be given of the supposed primary qualities (E 154) (cf. Berkeley, Of the Principles of Human Knowledge, 'After the same manner as modern philosophers prove certain sensible qualities to have no existence in matter, or without the mind, the same thing may be likewise proved of all other sensible qualities whatsoever'<sup>12</sup>). It is not possible here to discuss in detail the arguments by which Hume attempts to support this claim. In brief, they reflect Hume's account of the idea of space or extension (T 3-4) as a complex one, the impressions which it copies being of coloured points disposed in a certain manner (cf. Berkeley's discussion of extension in New Theory of Vision). Hence, we find that in attempting to explain the idea of extension we must either make reference to the secondary quality of colour, or rely upon the notion of solidity as a feature of the physical points (or atoms) which make up real extension. In the latter case, however, Hume argues that since we are unable to provide any independent account of the idea of solidity, we would only *run in a circle* if we tried, by resort to this idea, to account for extension (T 229). The case would be different if the idea of solidity or impenetrability could be derived directly from the sense of touch but, apart from other considerations, the same kind of argument which shows that what we

directly perceive in sight, hearing, etc. are impressions rather than qualities of objects or bodies, serve also to prove that our impressions of touch are to be distinguished from solidity as a quality of objects (T 231).

On my interpretation Hume is arguing hypothetically that if colour, sound, etc., are ascribed to perceptions alone then, since the ideas of primary qualities are inseparable from those of secondary qualities, extension, motion, and solidity would also be deprived of a real existence. The correctness of this interpretation turns on the question of whether Hume does in fact accept the Lockean claim concerning the subjectivity of the secondary qualities. I feel that there are two important considerations to be taken into account here. The first is that, with the apparent exception of the passage with which I have been mainly concerned (T 226-227), Hume nowhere denies the objectivity of the secondary qualities. It is true that he does compare his account of the virtues and vices to the Lockean view (*i.e.* that of the *modern philosophy*) of secondary qualities (T 469); but this is by no means to endorse that view. The second point I would make is that Hume is prepared to treat secondary qualities as being, like primary qualities, properties of bodies or objects. For example, *A particular colour, taste, and smell are qualities all united together in this apple* (T 2); *the colour, taste, figure, solidity and other qualities, combin'd in a peach or melon, are conceiv'd to form one thing* (T 221). What, then, of the controversial passage from T225-231? It is important to note, first, that in the corresponding reference to the primary/secondary quality distinction from the first Enquiry (E 154), there is no suggestion that Hume himself subscribes to the view of the *modern enquirers* concerning the secondary qualities, or the arguments

offered on behalf of that view. Nor can we see Hume as endorsing here (T225-231) the Lockean account of secondary qualities if he regards it as an instance of the false philosophy which leads to *extravagant scepticism*. It may not, after all, seem so surprising that Hume nevertheless describes one of the arguments offered on behalf of this account as *satisfactory*, when we bear in mind that, according to Hume, this kind of argument certainly proves something. For, as we have seen, he thinks that it shows that we experience colours, sounds, etc. as impressions in the mind, rather than qualities of objects. Hence the rejection of Naive Realism. And given that many of these impressions have no external archetype, causal reasoning would, indeed, lead us to conclude that our impressions of sensation are all on the same footing. This is why Hume concludes the section by referring to the contradiction involved in endorsing both the principles by which we come to subscribe to the continued existence of external objects, and those which result in the philosophical doctrine of sensible qualities like colour and sound as secondary (T 231).

Hume's position might usefully be summarised in terms of the categories which he himself employs in characterising the different kinds of impressions conveyed by the senses, and the views of the *philosophers* and the *vulgar* concerning the status of these impressions (T 2; T 192).

	Philosophers	The Vulgar
Primary Qualities	Yes	Yes
Secondary Qualities	No	Yes
Pains and Pleasures	No	No

Have an External Existence?

The interesting feature of Hume's position is that we find him aligned with the vulgar against philosophers as

represented by, for example, Locke. Hume accepts Berkeley's criticisms of Locke on this point: if we are to ascribe a subjective status to secondary qualities then it may be shown, partly by argument ad hominem, that a similar conclusion in regard to the primary qualities will follow. Unlike Berkeley, however, Hume is not prepared to accept that secondary qualities do have the status only of perceptions (or 'ideas'). That Hume should be on the side of the vulgar seems appropriate in view of his judgement that *the true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge* (T 223).

### III

#### CONCLUSION

Space permits only a few brief comments on the account I have given of Hume's view of perception, objects and external existence. It is necessary at least to mention one of the more idiosyncratic features of Hume's epistemology, namely, his distinction among secondary qualities between those which exist in extension - colour and, presumably, heat and cold - and those which do not - smell, taste and sound (T 235-239). The basis for Hume's creation of two classes of secondary quality is, once again, his account of the idea of space or extension as arising from experience in the form of impressions of sight and touch. But Hume evidently believes that the qualities associated with the other senses do exist as genuine features of bodies or objects and, indeed, that they are inseparable from the qualities of colour and tangibility (T 5; T 237). I must also acknowledge the fact that the view of perception and its objects which I have ascribed to Hume

is one with which he himself expresses dissatisfaction. In so far as it embraces the notion of a 'double existence' it goes beyond experience (in the form of perceptions), and finds no basis in human nature (T 193). But unless we take Hume to deny the existence of external objects, his verdict on this system is that it is, at worst, unverifiable. We should not, I suggest, be surprised by Hume's own admission that he is unable to vindicate the only view of perception which appears to remain when, on the basis of arguments from the relativity of perception, he finds himself forced to reject Naive or Direct Realism. What we may learn from Hume's discussion, I believe, is that the abandonment of Naive or Direct Realism prevents us from providing any satisfactory explanation of the nature of external existence and, hence, of the relation between perception and its objects.

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1. A Treatise of Human Nature, I ii 5, p 63. All references are to the Selby-Bigge edition, henceforth to be referred to as T.
2. T 64; cf Introduction to Treatise, p xviii.
3. T 67; cf also T 239.
4. For example, T 27, 28 and 239.
5. T 241; cf also T243, 20.
6. An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, p 151. All references are to the Selby-Bigge edition, henceforth to be referred to as E.
7. T 226-227; cf E para. 122.
8. T 227-231; cf E para. 123.
9. Hume's Philosophy of Mind, Edinburgh, 1980.

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10. Ibid., pp. 16-19.

11. Ibid., pp. 16-17.

12. A New Theory of Vision and Other Writings, London, 1969, p 119.