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Locke and Substance

In his work “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” John Locke forms a problematic explanation of the world by bridging empiricism and idealism. He creates concepts such as substance and uses those concepts to form an explanation about our perceptions of the world. However, there are many philosophers, such as George Berkeley, who in their own attempts to explain our perceptions of the world, are quick to point out the flaws in Locke’s argument. While Locke argues for an unknowable substance and the distinction of primary and secondary qualities, Berkeley's objection creates a much more convincing argument for the world by successfully removing many of Locke’s weaker arguments.

Berkeley writes that people tend to think that a combination of qualities makes an object. For instance, humans think that a door is substance that moves in a particular way and is relatively flat, long, and narrow. But Berkeley argues that substance is more than a combination of qualities. These qualities are attached to a substance that is an “unknown support of those qualities we find existing.” (Locke 360) In other words, these qualities do not exist independently, but are attached to a substance. This substance acts a foundation, supporting these qualities. However, not much is known about the substance itself. Locke writes that “the substance is supposed always something besides the extension, figure, solidity, motion, thinking, or other observable ideas, though we do not know what it is.” (Locke 360) Locke writes that we even cannot be sure that the mind and the body are different substances. He argues that humans have ideas of their bodies and also ideas of their spirit. Locke writes that “it is for want of reflection that we are apt to think that our senses show us nothing but material things. Every act of sensation when duly considered, gives us an equal view of both parts of nature, the corporeal and spiritual.” (Locke 364) Essentially, Locke argues that little is known about substance, beyond the ideas and qualities that it contains, to the point that we do not even know if the mind and the body are different substances.

He argues that humans perceive two types of qualities in substances- primary qualities and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are qualities that are a part of the substance itself. Locke writes that primary qualities “are utterly inseparable from the body in whatever state it is, such as in all the alterations and changes it suffers, all the force can be used upon it, it constantly keeps.” (Locke 333) These qualities include motion, shape, and size. Meanwhile, secondary qualities are supported by the primary qualities. Secondary qualities are “qualities which in truth are nothing in the object themselves but power to produce various sensation in us by their primary qualities” (Locke 333) These qualities include taste, smell, and color. Essentially, primary qualities are extended while secondary qualities are not extended and created by the primary qualities.

Despite several good arguments against Locke’s view of substance, the most compelling argument was made by George Berkeley. Berkeley argues against Locke’s primary and secondary qualities. Berkeley argues that because it is impossible to imagine primary and secondary qualities separately, that they cannot be separate. He writes that he “desire[s] anyone to reflect and try whether he can, by an abstraction of thought, conceive the extension and motion of a body without all other sensible qualities.” (Berkeley 449) Since they cannot be imagined separately, there should be no distinction between them.

Berkeley also argues that everything consists of ideas. Therefore, all qualities are simply ideas. This is significantly different than Locke, who believes that some qualities are extended in a substance while others are not extended. Berkeley argues that “it is impossible for me to see or feel anything without an actual sensation of that thing, so it is impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation or perception of it.” (Berkeley 448) He argues again, that since the object and the sensation are not distinct from each other, that objects and sensations are the same thing. He agrees that qualities are combined in substance, but that this substance is also an idea. He writes that “it seems no less evident that the various sensations or ideas imprinted on the senses, however, blended or combined together (that is whatever objects they compose), cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them” (Berkeley 447)

Berkeley’s argument is successful because he removes the somewhat arbitrary distinction between primary and secondary qualities. The distinction between Locke’s primary and secondary qualities was arbitrary because it had some flaws. For instance, he argued that primary qualities remained unchanged despite any force applied to the substance. Yet, he claimed that size and shape were primary qualities. The size and shape of a substance can be easily changed through some force. It can even be argued that size and shape are more easily changed than some of the qualities that Locke’s claims are secondary, like smell and taste.

Berkeley’s argument is also successful because it removed Locke’s argument for an unknown substance. While there is no evidence against the existence of Locke’s substance, there is certainly no evidence for the existence of substance, beyond that the substance is needed to close a hole in Locke’s argument. Locke seems to argue for the existence of substance purely because there needs to be something more than qualities. If there is nothing more than qualities then a change in one quality means that there is a new substance. This means every time someone cuts a carrot, the carrot is a new substance because the carrot changed shape. Even Locke did not seem entirely convinced by this argument. Within his essay, he wrote that when we “proceed beyond these simple ideas we have from sensation and reflection, and dive further into the nature of things, we fall presently into darkness and obscurity, perplexity and difficulties, and can discover nothing further but our own blindness and ignorance.” (Locke 366) In other words, even Locke seemed to recognize the weakness of his substance argument.

In conclusion, Locke formed an interesting explanation of a world, but his argument for it was weak. He tried hard to explain the world in a way that could bridge the gap between idealism and empiricism, but this gap created some holes that Locke could not successfully explain. Berkeley formed another explanation of the world that removed many of the weaker parts of Locke’s argument, including a lot of empiricism in Locke’s argument. In the end, it was the idealism prevailed, bringing into doubt the importance of our senses of the world.

Bibliography

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