



LOCKE'S EPISTEMOLOGY, PART TWO

Representative Realism and Objections to Locke's
Epistemology

Locke's Theory of Perception: Representative Realism

- How is it that we come to have perceptual (“sensitive”) knowledge of the external world?
- The tenets of representative realism:
 1. There are mind independent sensible objects.
 2. These objects are material substances with primary qualities.
 3. We perceive these objects indirectly.
 4. We perceive directly only ideas.
 5. In cases of genuine perception, our ideas resemble the sensible objects that cause them.

Representative Realism continued

- Let's have a closer look at the tenets of representative realism.

I. **There are mind independent sensible objects.**

- ❖ A sensible object is an object that can be experienced through the five senses.
- ❖ To call an object “mind independent” is to say that the object is capable of existing unperceived or without association to minds.
- ❖ Physical objects v. ideas, pains, thoughts.

Representative Realism Continued

2) These objects are material substances with primary qualities.

- ❖ Sensible objects are substance/property (or “quality”) compounds.
- ❖ Sensible objects are composed of matter; this is in contrast with immaterial substances.
- ❖ A primary quality is a quality that is possessed by the sensible (physical) object.
- ❖ A secondary quality is a quality perceived by us and caused by the object but is not actually in the object itself.

RR continued: Primary & Secondary Qualities

- ❖ Primary and secondary qualities
 - o Examples of each:
 - ✓ Primary: solidity, size, number, motion, temperature, and shape
 - ✓ Secondary: color, smell, taste, sound, and hotness/coldness
 - o The nature of each:
 - ✓ Primary qualities are mind independent qualities of the sensible object.
 - ✓ Secondary qualities are caused by the interplay of primary qualities and perceptual apparatus of the perceiver. Secondary qualities are mind *dependent*.

“If a Tree Falls and No One is Around to Hear it, does it Make a Sound?”

- Locke’s position on secondary qualities requires that he hold that an unheard tree falling is soundless.
- It’s not as crazy as it sounds:
 - Secondary qualities are what you get when the primary qualities of physical objects interact with sense-perception processes of a perceiver.
 - So sounds are not just disturbances of the atmosphere or waves; rather sounds are what you get when sound waves are “processed” by a perceiver who hears..
- The same goes for all the secondary qualities: they exist only in our perception of objects.
- The somewhat unsettling conclusion, then, is that apart from minds, the world is soundless, odorless, colorless, and tasteless.

A Possible Solution

- A quandary:
 - It seems crazy to say there is no color, sound, taste, etc. without a perceiver.
 - Just a little reflection suggests that what we experience is the product of our cognitive processes—and not the world as it is apart from our perceptual processes.
- Resolution: secondary properties are the external causes of our experience.
 - Red, for example, will then be identified with a certain wavelength (that one that produces the sensation of red in us).
 - Problem: if that wavelength produces the sensation of green in aliens, then what they see is red even though it appears green.

Representative Realism (cont.)

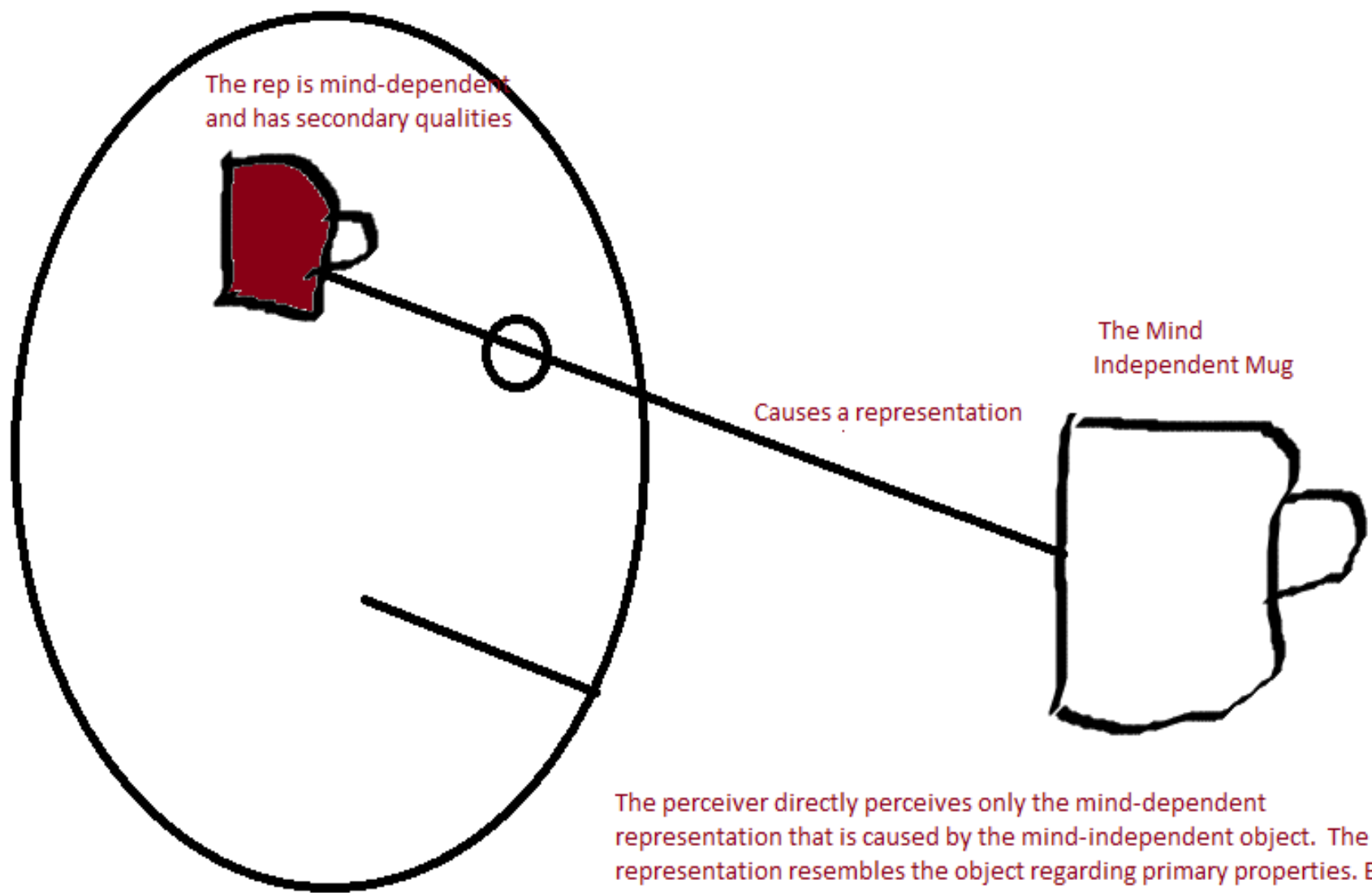
1. There are mind independent sensible objects.
2. These objects are material substances with primary qualities.
3. We perceive these objects indirectly.
 - ❖ To perceive an object indirectly is to perceive an object in virtue of perceiving something else.
 - ❖ Example: watching a baseball game on TV.
 - ❖ To perceive an object directly is to see that object without the mediation of another object.

Representative Realism (cont.)

4. We perceive directly only ideas (or mental representations).
 - ❖ When I see my coffee mug
 - ❖ what I'm seeing *directly* is a mental representation of the mug
 - ❖ The representation is caused by the interaction of light and my visual system.
 - ❖ Three aspects of perception:
 - ❖ Our experience
 - ❖ The external object
 - ❖ The interaction of our senses and the object via a medium

Representative Realism Continued

5. In cases of genuine perception, our ideas resemble the sensible objects that cause them.
 - Here's an artist's rendering of Locke's theory of perception...



The perceiver directly perceives only the mind-dependent representation that is caused by the mind-independent object. The representation resembles the object regarding primary properties. But the secondary properties of the representation are absent in the actual object.

Two Problems for Locke's View of Sensible Objects and Our Knowledge of Them

- The Problem of our Idea of Material Substance
 - Recall that Locke thinks that sensible objects are material substances with primary qualities.
 - All we experience in perception are the qualities of sensible objects.
 - E.g., my experience of the mug of coffee on the table is an experience of its color, size, shape, weight, texture, warmth, etc.
 - Recall also Locke's empiricism: all of our knowledge and our ideas must be derived from experience.

A Problem continued

- So, putting these things together we get:
 - We only have ideas and knowledge of what we experience.
 - When we perceive sensible objects, we perceive only their qualities.
 - Material substance is not a quality.
- Now for a little logic test: what do the three claims above entail?
- Answer: we have neither knowledge about nor ideas of material substance.
- But Locke obviously thinks he has some idea of material substance. He recognizes that this is a problem and says that we have only a negative idea of material substance: “it is something I know not what.”

Two Problems Continued

- Problem 2: The Veil of Perception
 - All of our experience is experience only of our ideas.
 - On Locke's view, the sensible objects themselves exist independently of our perceiving them.
 - What is Locke's reason for thinking that the causes of our sensible ideas are anything like our sensible ideas?

Our Knowledge of the Existence of the External World

- “The knowledge of our own being we have by intuition. The existence of a God, reason clearly shows...The knowledge of the existence of any other thing we can have only by sensation”
- Locke then recognizes that there is no necessary connection between any idea of sense and physical object.
- So then, how can he be sure that our ideas of sense are caused by physical objects?
 - I. Because those who lack a means of perception lack the relevant ideas of sense.
 - II. Ideas of sense are independent of the will of the perceiver.
 - III. The testimony of the senses.

Our Knowledge of the External World Continued

- In the end, we have limited knowledge of the existence of physical objects: we have knowledge only when we are then perceiving them.
- All other beliefs we have are matters of probability. We should believe only what is probable on our evidence.
- Our degree of conviction should be proportional to the evidence we possess.