

**BERKELEY'S ASSESSMENT OF
LOCKE'S EPISTEMOLOGY^{1, 2}**

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ABSTRACT³

In this essay, the author analyses Berkeley's conformity and inference argument against Locke's theory of perception. Both arguments are not as decisive as traditionally has been perceived and fail to engage in Locke's actual position. The main reason for this is that Berkeley does not see that Locke's position is compatible with the non-inferential nature of perceptual knowledge.

1. Introduction

Among the many different criticisms that Berkeley has of Locke's philosophy are a number of epistemic arguments, each designed to show that Locke cannot account for sensitive knowledge. More specifically,

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² I am indebted to Martha Bolton for valuable discussion of reliability accounts of knowledge in Locke and Berkeley. I am further much indebted to Margaret Atherton, Georges Dicker, and Richard Glauser, for very insightful comments given when this paper was presented at the University of Rennes conference on Berkeley, October, 2003. Finally, I am also indebted to Steffen Ducheyne and an anonymous referee for their comments.

³ NOTE FROM THE EDITOR: the abstract to this paper has been composed by the editor.

they are supposed to show that if Locke's theory of perception is correct, then we do not have any perceptual knowledge of objects. These arguments have not received as much attention as, for example, Berkeley's attack on abstract ideas, though it seems to me that they are equally important. Berkeley's claim that his philosophy *can* explain how we come to have knowledge of objects gets some of its force from the supposed failure of Locke's theory.

In this paper I will examine anew two of Berkeley main epistemic arguments against Locke. The first, what I will call the *conformity argument*, holds that if Locke's theory of perception is correct, then we have knowledge of objects only if we are sure that conformity obtains between currently experienced ideas and some features of the object. Berkeley thinks we are never in a position to be sure that the needed conformity holds, so that Locke's theory leads to the result that we have no knowledge of objects.

The second argument, what I will call the *inference argument*, contends that on Locke's theory of perception, one has knowledge of objects only if one can make a warranted inference from one's currently experienced ideas to some belief or statement about the object. Berkeley thinks that this inference would not be warranted so that, once again, we reach the conclusion that on Locke's theory of perception, we never attain perceptual knowledge of objects.

Berkeley's arguments have generally been regarded as decisive. Philosophers from Hume to the present day have tended to accept them, particularly the inference argument.⁴ I believe, however, that these arguments are much less forceful than they might initially appear. Indeed, the conformity argument as it usually has been construed does not strictly appear in Berkeley's texts. What he actually presents is a somewhat different argument that completely fails to engage what Locke had defended. The inference argument also fails to engage Locke's actual position, I maintain, because it wrongly asserts that Locke holds that perceptual (sensitive) knowledge of objects requires an inference from currently experienced ideas to a belief about the object. It also fails as a

⁴ Reid's general indictment of the ideal theory makes up what has come to be called the "veil of perception" problem, which has often been thought to refute indirect realism.

philosophical argument, taken separately from what Locke actually held. What Berkeley does not see is that the representative realist theory of perception that he takes Locke to hold is compatible with perceptual knowledge of objects being non-inferential.

2. Context

Berkeley's target with the epistemic arguments to be discussed, I have said, is Locke. I do not want to deny that Berkeley may have had other philosophers in mind as well when he formulated these arguments – perhaps he was also thinking of Descartes or Malebranche, for example. Here I take no position on these possible additional targets of Berkeley's arguments, and thus have nothing to say about the effect of his arguments on their respective positions. Further, even identifying Locke as a principal target of Berkeley's criticisms on these epistemic points is a matter that calls for close textual analysis and interpretation in which I will not here engage. I will instead assume that this case can be successfully made.

Connected to this is the fact that Berkeley's Locke is reckoned to hold a representative realist theory of perception. On this point one might be tempted to assess Berkeley's criticisms by noting that right at the outset Berkeley has taken a wrong step because Locke does not really defend representative realism. Rather, according to this line of thought, Locke is really a direct realist about perception, and within that position ideas of sensation are not themselves objects, and hence they are not perceived objects. Accordingly, physical objects and not ideas are the things that are typically immediately perceived. Berkeley's epistemic criticisms are thus ineffective, not because they are weak arguments against representative realism, but because they attribute to Locke a theory that Locke simply did not accept.

I confess to having great sympathy with this direct realist reading of Locke. In this paper, however, I will not follow the lead of the different commentators who have proposed this interpretation, for I am mainly interested in *Berkeley's* Locke. That is, I am interested in Locke

as Berkeley understood him, and in whether *that* Locke is undermined by the arguments Berkeley presents.⁵

3. The Conformity Argument

The conformity argument is set out in *Principles* 86 which I here quote nearly in full:

And first as to ideas or unthinking things, our knowledge of these has been very much obscured and confounded, and we have been led into very dangerous errors, by supposing a twofold existence of the objects of sense, the one *intelligible*, or in the mind, the other *real* and without the mind: whereby unthinking things are thought to have a natural subsistence of their own, distinct from being perceived by spirits. This which, if I mistake not, has been shown to be a most groundless and absurd notion, is the very root of *skepticism*; for so long as men thought that real things subsisted without the mind, and that their knowledge was only so far forth *real* as it was conformable to *real things*, it follows, they could not be certain that they had any real knowledge at all. For how can it be known, that the things which are perceived, are conformable to those which are not perceived, or exist without the mind. (*Principles*, 86; emphases in original)⁶

There is a companion argument in the *Three Dialogues*, presented by Philonous:

It is your opinion, the ideas we perceive by our senses are not real things, but images, or copies of them. Our knowledge therefore is no farther real, than as our ideas are the true representations of those originals. But as these supposed originals are in themselves unknown, it is impossible to know how far our ideas resemble

⁵ The direct realist reading of Locke may be found in Lowe, 1995 and Yolton, 1970. That Locke's ideas of sensation are not objects of immediate perception is defended in Vere Chappell, "Locke's Theory of Ideas," in Chappell, 1994.

⁶ Passages from Berkeley cited in the text are to Jessop & Luce, 1948-57. The quoted passage from *Principles* 86 appears at Works, II: 78.

them; or whether they resemble them at all. We cannot therefore be sure we have any real knowledge. (*Three Dialogues*, in *Works*, II, p. 246)

On the face of it, this argument from the *Dialogues* begs the question against Locke, as it assumes that objects (the “supposed originals”) are not known. To avoid this problem, Berkeley’s term “unknown” in the phrase “these supposed originals are in themselves unknown” must mean something else, most likely “unperceived.” Such a reading would align this argument with a point made in a related argument presented at the end of the first *Dialogue*:

Phil. But neither is this all. Which are material objects in themselves, perceptible or imperceptible?

Hyl. Properly and immediately nothing can be perceived but ideas. All material things therefore are in themselves insensible, and to be perceived only by their ideas.

Phil. Ideas then are sensible, and their archetypes or originals insensible?

Hyl. Right. (*Three Dialogues*, in *Works*, II, p. 206.)

This passage is followed by a statement of a version of the likeness principle:

Phil. But how can that which is sensible be like that which is insensible? Can a real thing in itself *invisible* be like a *color*; or a real thing which is not *audible*, be like a *sound*? In a word, can anything be like a sensation or idea, but another sensation or idea? (ibid.; emphases in original)

In all of these passages Berkeley takes the Lockean position to affirm a likeness between ideas and insensible or imperceptible objects, and it may rightly be protested that this is to mistake Locke’s theory. Locke holds only that objects are not perceived in the way ideas are, that is to say immediately, and not that objects are insensible. However, it is doubtful whether Berkeley makes this simple error. For he has Hylas say “[...] material things therefore are in themselves insensible, and to be perceived only by their ideas”. This suggests that he is perfectly aware that Locke’s position is that objects are perceived indirectly and by means of ideas, not that they are altogether unperceived. Interestingly,

this point does not matter to Berkeley's overall argument for, as the last-quoted passage makes clear, the likeness principle is quite general and applies to all putative likenesses between ideas and non-ideas, whether or not these latter items are sensible in some way.

These latter passages from the first *Dialogue* may be taken as some evidence that Berkeley means by "unknown originals" something like "unperceived originals," where the latter most likely means "not perceived immediately".⁷ Even with this understanding, however, the conformity argument as presented in the *Dialogues* differs from that of the *Principles*, because the former attributes to Locke the requirement that one know about a resemblance between ideas and objects, where the latter speaks more generally of knowing that there is a conformity between ideas and objects. The latter is preferable, for it more squarely lines up with what Locke held. Only some simple ideas are ever claimed by Locke to resemble some features of objects, while all simple ideas are said to be conformable to objects. So I will concentrate on the *Principles* version of the argument.

In this argument Berkeley mentions two different conformities: one is between our knowledge and real objects, while the second, given in the last sentence of the passage, is between experienced ideas and objects. Further, as he is speaking of real knowledge, it is clear that he has in mind Locke's discussion of the reality of knowledge in *Essay* IV, 4. There Locke does speak of conformity between our ideas and objects, but not at all of a conformity between our knowledge and objects. Hence, it appears that Berkeley's conformity argument is a non-starter, as it fails to engage anything Locke was actually defending. Moreover, there are

⁷ This argument involving the likeness principle may be thought of as a third epistemic argument against Locke. For Berkeley uses it, not to conclude that the representative realist theory is false (because its representation claim is not true), but rather that the theory implies that there are no material objects. Hence, he says, Hylas' principles lead to scepticism about objects, no doubt on the grounds that one cannot have knowledge of objects if there are no such things. This is how Berkeley concludes the argument at the end of the first Dialogue: "You are therefore by your principles forced to deny the reality of sensible things, since you make it to consist in an absolute existence exterior to the mind. That is to say, you are a downright sceptic." (Works, II: 206.) I do not further pursue this argument here. For brief discussion of it see my 2000), chapter 9.

additional problems with the argument, which we can see by stating the argument as Berkeley presents it.

1. We have real knowledge of objects only if there is conformity between our knowledge and objects.
2. We cannot know that there is conformity between our ideas and objects.
- 3 Hence, we cannot be certain that we have real knowledge of objects.

The first problem, already noted, is that premise (1) does not engage Locke's actual views. Beyond that, premise (2) does not deny the consequent of (1). One reason is that the two premises are alluding to two different conformities, so the argument strictly commits an equivocation. But even if the conformities alluded to in these premises were the same, (2) would still not deny the consequent of (1). Premise (2) denies that we can *know* about a certain conformity, not that there is no such conformity of the sort affirmed in (1). Lack of knowledge of a conformity does nothing to deny the existence of a conformity.

There is yet another problem with the argument. As the full passage from *Principles* 86 makes plain, Berkeley's contention is that Locke's theory leads to scepticism; that is, to the result that we do not have knowledge of objects. However, this is not how Berkeley states the conclusion of the conformity argument. Rather, Berkeley speaks in (3) of our not being certain that we have real knowledge,⁸ and that is perfectly compatible with our actually having such knowledge. To see this, imagine that being certain that p is tantamount to knowing that p, not an unreasonable assumption for the early eighteenth century. Then Berkeley's conclusion in (3) merely asserts that we do not know that we have knowledge of objects. It is of the form $\sim K(K(p))$, and of course many sentences of this general form are perfectly consistent with

⁸ At one point Locke speaks of being certain that one has real knowledge, which is of the form S is certain that S knows that p. See Essay, IV: 4, 6, in Nidditch, 1975: 565. Perhaps this led Berkeley into stating his conclusion of the conformity argument in a similar fashion. References to Locke will appear in the text in the usual way, citing *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in Nidditch, 1975.

sentences having the form $K(p)$. Four year old Brianna may not know that she knows that her brother's name is Patrick, because she lacks the concept of propositional knowledge. But certainly she knows that her brother's name is Patrick. Thus, the conclusion Berkeley states in (3) is completely compatible with the *denial* of scepticism about objects. So, even if the conformity argument as given in *Principles* 86 proves something, it hardly proves that Locke's theory leads to scepticism.

4. Another Try

By being charitable to Berkeley we can come up with a different conformity argument. Two instances of charity concern premise (1) which speaks of a conformity between our knowledge and objects. As premise (2) speaks of a conformity between ideas and objects, which is more in line with what Locke accepted, we can change (1) to make it line up both with Locke and with Berkeley's own second premise. In effect, this is taking Berkeley's phrase "...their knowledge was only so far forth *real* as *it* was conformable to *real things*" so that the term 'it' is really not referring back to 'knowledge' as we had earlier construed it but is actually standing in for 'ideas.'

A second case of interpretive charity concerns what we may think of as *strong conformity*, the sort that demands that one *know* that one's ideas conform to objects. This is what is denied in premise (2). Premise (1), however, refers merely to *weak conformity*, that is, to the mere presence of a conformity between ideas and objects. Therein lies the equivocation noted earlier. One change would be to make use of strong conformity in both premises. Doing that requires another change in (1), and assumes that strong conformity was uppermost in Berkeley's mind—not an unreasonable assumption since Berkeley certainly alludes to it in *Principles* 86. On the other hand, Berkeley may have had weak conformity in mind all along and if he did, we would want to change the argument so that weak conformity was used throughout.

Even with these possible changes noted, however, there is the problem that the original conformity argument Berkeley presents is invalid because he overstates the conclusion. As we have seen, he claims that we could not be certain that we have real knowledge of objects. However, we can provide reasons to think that this statement is not what

Berkeley aims to establish. Berkeley touts his own immaterialist position as avoiding the sceptical results that he thinks attend Locke's theory. What he claims is that according to his theory, one does have knowledge of objects and that it is acquired in perception. Here is one passage where this point is made:

I am of a vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my senses, and leave things as I find them. To be plain, it is my opinion, that the real things are those very things I see and feel, and perceive by my senses. These I know, and finding they answer all the necessities and purposes of life, have no reason to be solicitous about any other unknown beings. (*Works*, II: 209)

This passage comes on the heels of a discussion of scepticism, where Hylas is said to hold views that lead to scepticism, while Berkeley holds a view supporting the opposite, non-sceptical position. What is thus suggested is that Berkeley takes scepticism *per se* to be the thesis that there is no perceptual knowledge of objects. Hence, it would be in keeping with Berkeley's thinking if we recast the conclusion of the conformity argument so that it states a sceptical position directly, rather than the overstated conclusion he seems to endorse. Making all of these changes, both charitable and interpretive, yields two different ways to understand the conformity argument:

- 1a) We have real knowledge of objects only if we know that our ideas conform to objects.
- 2a) We do not know that our ideas conform to objects.
- 3a) Hence, we do not have real knowledge of objects.

- 1b) We have real knowledge of objects only if our ideas conform to objects.
- 2b) Our ideas do not conform to objects.
- 3b) Hence, we do not have real knowledge of conform to objects.

I am inclined to think that the second of these arguments, making use of weak conformity, is not what Berkeley is presenting in *Principles* 86. The reason is that when Berkeley states the companion argument in the *Dialogues*, his claim is that one would not be able to know that a resemblance obtains between ideas and objects. This is a form of strong

conformity, analogous to that given in *Principles* 86 and presented here in (2a). Another reason is that Berkeley really gives no reason to think that (2b) is true. Of course, the likeness principle is used by Berkeley to try to show that the alleged *resemblance* between some ideas and features of objects is mistaken. But resemblance is a special narrow form of conformity, and showing that no ideas resemble features of objects does not by itself show that ideas fail to conform to objects. More to the point, Berkeley simply does not defend (2b); indeed, he pays it no attention, so far as I am aware. So we can focus attention on the conformity argument just stated in terms of strong conformity.⁹

Berkeley seems on safe ground with this argument because Locke certainly seems to accept the strong conformity claim in its first premise. Locke says that,

Where-ever we perceive the Agreement or Disagreement of any of our *Ideas* there is certain Knowledge; and where-ever we are sure those *Ideas* agree with the reality of Things, there is certain real Knowledge. (*Essay*, IV, 4, 18; Nidditch, 1975, p. 573)

There are, however, two good reasons to be doubtful of Locke's commitment to strong conformity. First, even this last passage is not a *clear* endorsement of strong conformity. It would be if we interpreted the term 'where-ever' as expressing a bi-conditional, since after all the first premise (1a) of the conformity argument under investigation claims that knowledge of conformity is a necessary condition on real knowledge. But it is also reasonable to interpret the passage above as expressing merely a sufficient condition, to the effect that if we are sure that (know that) our ideas conform to objects, then we have real knowledge of objects. If this

⁹ One may think that by the term "conform" in premise (2b) Berkeley really means "resemble", so that the argument using weak conformity needs greater scrutiny. After all, so construed, we are sure that Berkeley argues over and over that (2b) is true. Ideas do not resemble objects, he thinks, because an idea can only resemble another idea. However, such an understanding of this argument also requires changing (1b) so that it, too, uses the term "resemble", yielding "We have real knowledge of objects only if all of our ideas resemble objects". Doing this, however, creates a premise that Locke did not hold, for he held that only some simple ideas resemble features of objects.

is the correct reading of this passage, then of course it does nothing to express endorsement of (1a).

There is, moreover, textual evidence in favor of attributing to Locke at most an endorsement of weak conformity. He says at one point,

‘Tis evident, the Mind knows not Things immediately, but only by the intervention of the *Ideas* it has of them. Our *Knowledge* therefore is *real*, only so far as there is a conformity between our *Ideas* and the reality of Things. (*Essay*, IV: 4, 3; Nidditch, 1975: 563)

Further, Locke draws a parallel between the reality of knowledge and real truth. He says,

Though what has been said in the fore-going Chapter, to distinguish real from imaginary Knowledge, might suffice here, in answer to this Doubt, to distinguish *real Truth* from *chimerical*, or (if you please) *barely nominal*, they both depending on the same foundation; (*ibid.*, IV: 5, 8; Nidditch, 1975: 577)

Slightly farther on in this passage Locke notes what this foundation is:

And therefore Truth, as well as Knowledge, may well come under the distinction of *Verbal* and *Real*; that being only *verbal Truth*, wherein terms are joined according to the agreement or disagreement of the *Ideas* they stand for, without regarding whether our *Ideas* are such, as really have, or are capable of having an existence in Nature. But then it is they contain *real Truth*, when these signs are joined, as our *Ideas* agree; and when our *Ideas* are such, we know are capable of having an Existence in Nature; (*ibid.*)

In this passage the necessary condition for real truth is agreement of the ideas with things; and, as this is claimed to be parallel with the case of real knowledge, Locke’s point is that one has real knowledge only if one’s ideas conform to or agree with things in nature. This is just weak conformity rather than the strong variety attributed to him by Berkeley in the conformity argument. This argument, then, fails to engage Locke on his own terms.

It is possible, of course, that Berkeley thinks that Locke is committed to strong conformity regardless of whether he actually and openly endorsed it. If so, his thought would doubtless be that some doctrines Locke surely accepts further commit Locke to strong conformity.¹⁰The most likely candidate for this role in Locke would naturally be the representative realist theory of perception that Berkeley takes Locke to hold. On this way of thinking, Berkeley's thought would be that,

- (A) If the representative realist theory of perception is correct, then one has real knowledge of objects only if one knows that one's ideas conform to the objects.

¹⁰ Another defense of Berkeley, due to Richard Glauser, would be to say that he certainly argues for something that implies (2b), or at least does so in conjunction with a truism. The truism is that an idea conforms with an object only if the idea conforms with one or more of the object's qualities. And surely Berkeley argues, for instance at Principles 14, that there are no mind-independent qualities with which an idea might conform. These two points jointly imply (2b), even in a wide sense of conformity. Further, since Locke accepts (2a), he could not avoid the skeptical result of (3b).

The force of this argument depends on the cogency of Berkeley's argument in Principles § 14 for the thesis that there are no mind-independent qualities. There he appeals to perceptual relativity arguments, and notes that if they work to show that secondary qualities are not mind-independent, then the same sorts of arguments will show that neither are the primary qualities. However, in Principles § 15, Berkeley concedes that the relativity arguments support only a weaker claim, namely that we do not know by sense what an object's true qualities are. So, this attempt to shore up Berkeley's use of a weak conformity argument runs aground.

It is just barely possible, though hardly likely, that Berkeley thinks Locke is committed to strong conformity either because (1) strong conformity is an epistemic truth to which all theorists are beholden, or because (2) strong conformity is a truth that must be accepted by all who endorse the theory of ideas. I do not discuss these possibilities both because there is no textual basis for thinking Berkeley held such views and also because both of these possibilities seem so plainly false and therefore would do nothing to advance Berkeley's conformity argument.

If this statement is true, then Berkeley's conformity argument would gain in force against Locke; for, we have assumed, with Berkeley, that Locke does accept the representative realist theory.

I can think of just one argument for statement (A). Suppose one thinks that the representative realist theory requires that any perceptual knowledge there might be would in all cases be inferential. As we find below in the discussion of the inference argument, this is something Berkeley apparently accepts. If perceptual knowledge is inferential, then naturally one premise in such an inference would be a statement indicative of knowledge of currently perceived ideas. An inference from currently experienced ideas *alone*, however, will not yield either deductively or inductively any statement about an object.¹¹ For any such inference to work, the inference basis would need to be supplemented with a statement concerning knowledge of the conformity between one's ideas and objects. Hence, if representative realism requires that all perceptual knowledge of objects is inferential, then statement (A) is very likely correct. In that case, Locke would be committed to the first premise of the conformity argument, even though he did not outright endorse it.

The flaw in this argument, it seems to me, comes in its first step: representative realism does *not* require that all perceptual knowledge of objects is inferential. Nor, indeed, does Locke think that perceptual knowledge of objects is inferential. Both of these points will be discussed below in connection with the inference argument. Their relevance here is that if they are correct, then the above argument for statement (A) breaks down. If that is so, then premise (1a) of the conformity argument is left unsupported. It is not accepted by Locke; and we have no good reason to hold that Locke is committed to the truth of that premise. Berkeley's conformity argument can be dismissed as an ineffective criticism of Locke.

¹¹ This claim is denied by some Locke commentators, e.g., Mackie, 1980: 62-69 (chapter 2). Mackie tries to show that a broadly explanatory argument will do the trick, and of course this would be an inductive argument. I will not here examine Mackie's arguments, for as will emerge I have another reason to be suspicious of this argument for statement (A). Berkeley anticipates an argument like Mackie's in Principles 19.

5. The Inference Argument

The inference argument as Berkeley presents it can be understood either as a claim about what Locke actually held and the implications of that position, or as a claim about what representative realism implies regardless of what Locke may have said. Here is the argument from the *Principles*:

But though it were possible that solid, figured, moveable substances may exist without the mind, corresponding to the ideas we have of bodies, yet how is it possible for us to know this? Either we must know it by sense, or by reason. As for our senses, by them we have knowledge only of our sensations, ideas, or those things immediately perceived by sense, call them what you will: but they do not inform us that things exist without the mind, or unperceived, like to those which are perceived. This the materialists themselves acknowledge. It remains therefore that if we have any knowledge at all of external things, it must be by reason, inferring their existence from what is immediately perceived by sense. But what reason can induce us to believe the existence of bodies without the mind, from what we perceive, since the very patrons of matter themselves do not pretend, there is any necessary connection between them and our ideas? (*Principles* § 18, in *Works* II: 48.)

This compact passage presents an argument that has been exceedingly influential, having been accepted as sound in something like this form by legions of philosophers from Hume down to modern times.¹²

There is no reason to think that in asking whether we know about bodies *by sense* Berkeley is making the point that, by themselves, the senses are “cognitive silent.” He acknowledges that we have knowledge of ideas by sense, so he certainly thinks that knowing by sense is a legitimate category. The most likely thing Berkeley would have in mind is that knowing by sense is knowledge gained without inference from some other piece of knowledge or evidence. The key first question then becomes: is Berkeley right in saying that the materialists acknowledge that we do not have non-inferential knowledge of bodies, but only have such knowledge of ideas?

¹² See footnote 76, where the connection to the veil of perception is raised.

No doubt Berkeley is right if he is thinking of Descartes and Malebranche, and maybe if he has Hobbes in mind.¹³ What shall we say of Locke? Is sensitive knowledge of bodies, by Locke's lights, always inferential, and based upon one's knowledge of currently perceived ideas? Here we are taking Berkeley to be making a straightforward exegetical or interpretive point vis-à-vis Locke, and wondering if he is correct.

Certainly Berkeley has had a lot of fellow-travelers who have also supposed that sensitive knowledge in Locke is inferential.¹⁴ A text in support of this view is this:

'Tis evident, the Mind knows not Things immediately, but only by the intervention of the *Ideas* it has of them. Our *Knowledge* therefore is *real*, only so far as there is a conformity between our *Ideas* and the reality of Things. (*Essay*, IV: 4, 3, Nidditch, 1975: 563)¹⁵

This passage certainly looks as though the sort of intervention Locke has in mind is an epistemic one, and that would make sensitive knowledge in his estimation inferential. However, the passage actually admits of another reading, according to which the intervention is really *perceptual*, rather than epistemic. On that reading, Locke would be saying that objects are not themselves immediately perceived, but are only perceived by means of perceptual intermediaries. If this is the point here made, then the passage is actually silent regarding whether sensitive knowledge is inferential or not.

At one point in the *Philosophical Commentaries* Berkeley claims that contrary to Locke, *he* can legitimately claim *intuitive* knowledge of

¹³ Here the importance of being clear about Berkeley's intended targets, alluded to earlier, becomes pressing.

¹⁴ One recent fellow-traveller on this point is Meyers, 2001. Mackie also reads Locke this way, and then goes on to try to shown that the needed inferences can be successfully made. See note 83.

¹⁵ Note that here Locke affirms only weak conformity as a necessary condition on real knowledge.

physical objects. We might think, then, that by the term ‘knowledge by sense’ he means ‘intuitively know by sense.’ In *that* case Berkeley would be completely *right* to say that Locke, too, concedes that we do not know about objects *by sense*. Locke takes sensitive knowledge of objects to be quite distinct from intuitive knowledge of ideas and of the self.

However, in *Principles* 18 Berkeley notes that if we do not have perceptual knowledge of objects *by sense*, then such knowledge would have to be gotten by inference. With the current understanding of “know by sense”, though, this is a mistake. One can know by sense without essential reliance on inference even though one’s knowledge is not intuitive. This option is not closed off just by reading “know by sense” as “have intuitive knowledge”.

Another passage where Locke seems to endorse the requirement of inference for sensitive knowledge is this:

There can be nothing more Certain, than that the idea we receive from an external object is in our Minds; this is intuitive knowledge. but whether there be any thing more than barely that Idea in our Minds, whether we can thence certainly infer the existence of any thing without us, which corresponds to that Idea, is that, whereof some men think there may be question made, because men have such Ideas in their Minds, when no such things exists, no such object affects their senses. (*Essay*, IV, 2, 14; Nidditch, ed., p. 537)

Here Locke seems to be saying this: I immediately experience an idea. This event leads me to believe that there is something external corresponding to that idea and no doubt causing me to experience that idea; and so I infer that there is some specific object – a table perhaps – that fills this corresponding, causal role. Thus do I know that there is a table present.

We can be sure that the experience of the idea plays the *causal* role of inducing belief in an object, at least much of the time. The question, though, is whether it also plays an epistemic role, for Locke, of being the inference basis for a warranted belief about the existence of an object. On *this* point, how Locke follows this passage is instructive. He says,

But yet here, I think, we are provided with an evidence that puts us past doubting. (*ibid.*)

He goes on to explain not what the warranted inference would be, but rather in effect why that inference is unnecessary. He speaks of being conscious that a perception in clear light is different from one in the night; and that a waking perception is different from that in a dream. To the perhaps Cartesian objection that we cannot know with certainty that a fire is without us, Locke says that,

[...] we certainly find, that Pleasure or Pain follows upon the application of certain objects to us, whose Existence we perceive or dream that we perceive, by our Senses, this certainty is as great as our Happiness or Misery, beyond which we have no concernment to know, or to be. (ibid.: 537)

Locke then draws a conclusion from these observations, and it is instructive:

[...] I think, we may add to the two former sorts of Knowledge (intuitive and demonstrative) this also, of the existence of particular external Objects, by that perception and Consciousness we have of the actual entrance of Ideas from them [...] (ibid.: 537-538)

Here Locke's point is that perception of the objects is sufficient to yield knowledge of the existence of the objects. A similar point is made in IV, 2-3:

Secondly, that we can have no knowledge, farther than we can have Perception of that Agreement or Disagreement: which Perception being, 1. Either by *Intuition*, or the immediate comparing any two Ideas; or, 2. By *Reason*, examining the agreement of two Ideas, by the intervention of some others; or, 3. By *Sensation*, perceiving the Existence of particular things. (ibid.: 539)

So on balance, the chief passages where Locke seems to insist that sensitive knowledge *requires* inference from ideas do not support such a reading; and, in or near those very same passages Locke stresses a contrary point, viz., that we gain knowledge of the existence of bodies by perception of those very bodies. Inference from ideas, of course, *may* in

rare cases operate to support a belief in bodies, but not in general, and typically such inference is simply not needed.¹⁶

The upshot is that Berkeley is just (again) misunderstanding Locke's position when he says in the inference argument of *Principles* § 18 that we do not know bodies by sense and that the materialists all agree to this. Locke does not so agree, and he is certainly one of the core materialists Berkeley is discussing and trying to criticize.

Now, just as in the case of the conformity argument, Berkeley may not strictly be making an exegetical or interpretive point about Locke when he gives the inference argument. He may, rather, be making a philosophical point to the effect that a representative realist theory of perception is stuck with no better than inferential knowledge of external bodies; and that the needed inferences are at best precarious. In what follows I will consider the first of these points, and try to show that the representative realist theory properly understood is perfectly consistent with non-inferential knowledge of bodies.¹⁷

6. Representative Realism and Knowledge of Objects

The representative realist theory holds that objects are perceived mediately or indirectly, by means of the immediate perception of one or more ideas that stand in a causal relation to the perceived object. On one standard interpretation of representative realism, indirect perception of an object is actually a judgment that some object is then present. More exactly, perception of the object is a judging that is occasioned by the immediate perception of some ideas. Veridical perception of an object

¹⁶ In *Essay* IV: 11, Locke takes up concurrent reasons in support of one's belief about a presently perceived object, and concurrent reasons certainly are inferential. I take Locke's point there to be that concurrent reasons are needed to establish the general reliability of the senses, and not to be an endorsement of the thesis that sensitive knowledge of objects is inferential and based upon concurrent reasons. On this point I am indebted to some correspondence with Georges Dicker.

¹⁷ I briefly consider whether these inferences really are precarious in "Degrees of Certainty in Locke's Account of Knowledge," (unpublished).

thus has two elements: the sensory element confined to the experience of ideas; and the judgmental element pertaining to the judgment that an object is present. Strictly speaking it is the judgment that *is* the perception, provided that the judgment is caused by the event of immediately perceiving the relevant ideas. Merely immediately perceiving the relevant ideas, by itself, is not perception of an object, not even if those ideas stand in the right causal relation to the object.

If this is the way in which we understand representative realism, then it is quite plausible to hold that the theory itself demands that sensitive knowledge of objects requires inference. The judgment that is the perception of an object, on this reading, in effect is an inference from the immediate perception of the ideas to a belief about an object. Thus Berkeley would be right: the representative realist theory requires that all sensitive knowledge of objects is inferential, and then the full force of the inference argument could be brought to bear.¹⁸

The standard interpretation is not the only way to understand representative realism. An alternative account is suggested by Locke:

To ask, *at what time a man first has any Ideas*, is to ask, when he begins to perceive; having *Ideas*, and Perception being the same thing. (*Essay*, II, I: 9; emphasis Locke's)

Locke's statement here seems to rule out the standard representative realist account, and this for two reasons: first, it makes no mention of judgment as an element of perception; and second, it identifies perception with the sensory element alone. That is, the sensory event, which is the event of immediately perceiving one or more ideas, just is the event of perceiving an object.¹⁹

¹⁸ If Locke held representative realism in this form, and also held that sensitive knowledge of objects is typically non-inferential, as I have argued above, then he would be holding inconsistent views.

¹⁹ I take the term "perceive" in the phrase "when he begins to perceive," to be referring to perception of objects, a reading that is essential for the alternative account to be here elaborated. At *Essay* II, IX: 3, Locke makes a similar claim, there identifying actual perception of pain with having ideas of pain. This is something like an identity of events: the event of perceiving the pain is the very

We can think of this way of understanding perception as a *constitution theory*, because it identifies the event of perceiving an object with the event of experiencing ideas. More exactly, it is a representative realist theory nonetheless, because perception of objects is still dependent on and mediated by the immediate perception of ideas. The event of perceiving an object consists in nothing more than the event of immediately perceiving some ideas. Of course, the converse does not hold. One can experience some ideas without thereby perceiving an object, for example in a case of hallucination. Thus, the experience of some ideas will count as a perception of an object only when those ideas are causally connected in the right way with that object.²⁰

To help situate this version of representative realism we can consider a version of direct realism once defended by Chisholm. Chisholm advocated the “adverbial” account of the sensory element in perception as opposed to anything like ideas or *sensa*. On an adverbial theory, adverbial events of sensing are not themselves *perceived* entities, even though at least one such adverbial event is an ingredient in each perceptual experience. It is the fact that adverbial events are not perceived that allows Chisholm’s theory to be a species of direct realism.

As in the constitution version of representative realism, Chisholm identifies the event of perceiving an object with an adverbial event of sensing in a certain way. This is done in two steps. First, Chisholm defines the non-comparative sense of ‘appears’ in terms of sensing:

X appears [...] to S means that S senses [...] with respect to X.²¹

same event as having ideas of pain.

²⁰ It is a delicate question just how the causal relation is to be understood. Presumably the causal chain starts at the object and ends with the event of experiencing some ideas. Another presumption doubtless would be that the causal chain not be deviant. Locke famously thought that some ideas resemble real qualities of objects, but it is not clear that resemblance would play any role in the perception of an object on the constitution construal of representative realism.

²¹ Chisholm, 1957: 125.

Here the term “X” stands in for some object, and the blank following the term ‘appears’ is filled in with some term for a sensory quality such as blue color. The blank following ‘senses’ is filled in with the relevant adverb such as “blue-ly” and the phrase “with respect to” is a causal one, indicating that the adverbial event is caused by the object X. Thus, if X is a blue door, the above general expressions would be instantiated to “The door appears blue to S means that S senses blue-ly with respect to the door.” Further, the door would be said to be the proper causal stimulus, so that the causal chain going from the door to the event of S sensing blue-ly does not proceed through any deviant route.

The second step deals with what Chisholm calls the “non-propositional sense of “perceives”, reflected in expressions like “S perceives O”, where the perception verb takes a grammatical direct object as complement. He says,

We may now define the simplest of the non-propositional senses of “perceive”: “S perceives X” means: X appears in some way to S. (Chisholm, 1957: 149)

Since the relevant notion of appearing is itself defined in terms of sensing, as noted above, then the identity we find in Chisholm for non-propositional perception boils down to this:

“S perceives X” means: S senses < > with respect to X.

where again the blank “< >” following the term “senses” is filled in with a special adverbial modifier.

In Chisholm, then, perception of objects is wholly constituted by the sensory component, understood as caused in a certain manner by the perceived object. The sensory component, in turn, is thought of as an adverbial event of sensing, one that itself includes no element of inference or judgment. In structure, Chisholm’s direct realist theory is parallel to the constitution version of the representative realist theory. When one perceives a blue door, this event of perceiving the door is identified in Chisholm’s theory with the event of sensing blue-ly with respect to the door, and it is identified in the representative realist theory with the event of experiencing some ideas that stand in the “right” causal relation to the door. The only key difference between these two theories

is that in Chisholm's theory adverbial events of sensing are not perceived, thereby allowing his account to qualify as a version of direct realism.

To see that Chisholm's account of the perception of objects is also compatible with our having non-inferential knowledge of perceived objects we need only note how the story would be told with a reliable process theory of knowledge. (Here I speak of a reliability theory of knowledge, rather than of warrant or justification as is usually the case.) The perceptual event of sensing blue-ly with respect to the door typically would cause in S the belief that there is a door before her. This counts as knowledge for S provided that the belief is true, and provided that the process type which takes the causal relation between the sensing event and the belief as a token is reliable. Such a belief-inducing process type will qualify as reliable when more of its belief outputs turn out to be true than otherwise.

If this is what it is for a person to acquire perceptual knowledge, then it is plain that Chisholm's version of direct realism is perfectly consistent with non-inferential perceptual knowledge of objects. Exactly the same holds for the constitution version of the representative realist theory. That theory, too, is consistent with non-inferential knowledge of objects because it is consistent with a reliable process account of perceptual knowledge.

We can now return to the question of Berkeley's inference argument. We found that, understood as aimed at doctrines Locke actually held, the argument is a failure since Locke did not maintain that sensitive knowledge of objects actually is inferential. But Berkeley may have meant that some feature of representative realism itself demands that all sensitive knowledge be inferential. On *one* way of understanding that theory, Berkeley would be right. If the representative realist theory is one which includes an element of judgment in all perception of objects, then it is quite plausible to suppose that sensitive knowledge of objects is inferential. However, that is just one version of representative realism. Another version, the constitution theory as elaborated above, does not require that sensitive knowledge of objects is inferential. On the contrary, such a theory is consistent with non-inferential sensitive knowledge, so long as we interpret the acquisition of sensitive knowledge along the lines of the reliable process theory. So Berkeley is ultimately incorrect on this point: the general category, representative realist theory of

perception, does *not* entail that sensitive knowledge of objects is inferential because not all instances of this general category have this entailment. Hence, even when we interpret Berkeley's inference argument to be making not an exegetical or interpretive point but rather a philosophical one, aimed generally at representative realism, the inference argument must be counted a failure.²²

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²² I have not argued in this paper, that the constitution version of representative realism is actually Locke's theory, as that was beside the philosophical point of whether representative realism requires inferential knowledge of objects. But I do think that a plausible case can be made that something like the constitution theory is Locke's own theory of perception. I discuss the constitution version of representative realism in Locke more fully in "On Some Philosophical Accounts of Perception". In the former article the constitution theory is referred to as an identity theory. Interestingly, though Berkeley seems to have completely missed the possibility of connecting representative realism with non-inferential knowledge of objects, he himself seems to have endorsed something like a reliability account of knowledge of objects. This line of thought is suggested in Principles § 31, where Berkeley says that the general stability of "laws of nature" holding between experiences of ideas of certain types underwrites our knowledge of objects. I think Locke also adopted a reliability account of sensitive knowledge; this point is defended in "Locke's Account of Sensitive Knowledge". The general question of whether Locke's theory of perception leads to scepticism requires that we be clear about just what Locke's theory of perception is.

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