

# Relativity of Perception

© 2005 Damon Woolsey

Note regarding citations: All citations come from the same text (listed in the references section), so I have found it more convenient to list citations by the page number in the text, followed by the book/ chapter/ section number of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (e.g. 221, 4/1/5 = pg. 221, Book 4, Chapter 1, Section 5)

There seems to be a certain amount of relativity to our perceptions of the external world. John Locke was aware of this, but he tried to solve the problem in a rather arbitrary, *ad hoc* manner. While Locke was in fact a theist, he thought there to be a mind-independent external world (created by God) that serves as the source of our perceptions. George Berkeley in turn exploited this concept of relative perception in an attempt to do away with the material world, and replace it with God as the direct source of our perceptions. Could it be, however, that they are both wrong; that there is neither a material world nor a God? Here I will examine the relativity of perception. I will not consider those perceptions that we refer to as hallucinations, but only those that would be considered veridical. In the past, many have tried to exploit hallucinatory perceptions, but to do so is to attack a strawman and does little if any damage to the materialistic position.

When I speak of the relativity of perception, there are two kinds of relativity that I have in mind. The first is in obtaining a perception, wherein one thing is related to another (e.g. light is absorbed/reflected off an object), which I shall refer to as *relative perception*. The second is in discriminating (comparing) different kinds of the same mode of perception (e.g. distinguishing red from green), which I shall refer to as *relative discrimination*. The implications of each are astounding, but taken together they call into question our very concept of reality itself. It seems to be the case that this relativity is a

bigger problem for the materialistic view than Locke imagined, but it does not necessitate the existence of a deity either, as Berkeley would have it.

A great mystery is the way in which we consciously perceive the external world. I won't concern myself at the moment with the nature of consciousness, but rather focus on the physical interactions of objects within the external world that are required for perception (i.e. relative perception). To make this evident, imagine yourself in a world where there was no light, so that you could not see anything. Imagine also that there was no atmosphere in which sound waves could travel, so that you could not hear anything. Then imagine that there was no movement, so that you could not touch, smell, or taste anything. In this world, every physical object is completely cut-off from every other. Even though you would be well equipped for perception, there could be none. Physical interaction is an absolute requirement for perceptions of any type. Various frequencies of light waves must be reflected/absorbed for sight, objects must vibrate within an atmosphere for sound, and our bodies must come into physical contact with various substances for touch, taste, and smell.

The qualities of objects in the external world, *the way in which we perceive them*, are what Locke calls *secondary qualities*, or what contemporary philosophers would call qualia. These qualities are "nothing in the objects themselves, but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities" (187, 2/8/10). *Primary qualities*, however, are "utterly inseparable from the body", and include such things as "solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number" (187, 2/8/9). Regarding the distinction between the two, Locke writes, "...the ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves, but

the ideas produced in us by these secondary qualities have no resemblance to them at all" (188, 2/8/15). The link between primary and secondary qualities is what Locke refers to as *powers*: "...the aptness we consider in any substance to give or receive such alterations of primary qualities as that the substance so altered should produce in us different ideas from what it did before" (206, 2/23/9). These three concepts, primary qualities, secondary qualities, and powers, make up our concept of substance (206, 2/23/9).

Locke was well aware of what I have referred to as relative discrimination:

*Of abstract relations between ideas.* -- *Secondly*, The next sort of agreement or disagreement the mind perceives in any of its ideas may, I think be called *relative*, and is nothing but the perception of the *relation* between any two ideas, of what kind so-ever, whether substances, modes, or any other. For, since all distinct ideas must eternally be known not to be the same, and so be universally and constantly denied one of another, there could be no room for any positive knowledge at all, if we could not perceive any relation between our ideas, and find out the agreement or disagreement they have one with another, in several ways the mind takes of comparing them. (221-222, 4/1/5)

Locke notes, "...that if a child were kept in a place where he never saw any other but black and white till he were a man, he would have no ... ideas of scarlet or green..." (179, 2/1/6) But what if a child were raised in an environment that was all green? Would he, having spent his entire life in such a place, have any concept of green, or even know what a color is at all? I suspect that he would not. It seems to be impossible to have a concept of one thing, without having a different example of the same type to compare it to. One example that we can all perhaps appreciate (or not!) is odor. Everyone has been, on occasion, in a room wherein there is a repugnant odor. At first it is strong and repulsive, but after a time we become accustomed to it, so that we no longer notice it. It seems as though, if a given quality is ubiquitous, it becomes a

baseline for discrimination, and as such is no longer discriminated in itself. If we (i.e. the substance wherein consciousness resides) were in fact made of the same substance as everything else in the external world, then we would have little or no method of discriminating the nature of this substance. This point leads us to reconsider our notion of what philosophers have referred to as *substance*.

Locke's entire motivation for positing the existence of "substance" is neatly summed up in the following passages:

...not imagining how these simple ideas can subsist by themselves, we accustom ourselves to suppose some *substratum* wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *substance*... (204, 2/23/1).

...our complex ideas of substances, besides all these simple ideas they are made up of, have always the confused idea of something to which they belong and in which they subsist. And therefore, when we speak of any sort of substance, we say it is a thing having such or such qualities... (204-5, 2/23/3)

Locke distinguished between two types of substance. One is *corporeal substance*, in which the primary qualities inhere, and the other is *spiritual substance* wherein the operations of our minds take place. This distinction seems to be rather *ad hoc*, the only purpose being to avoid the same problems of explaining conscious perception that plague all materialistic views. To illustrate this flaw, it is necessary to follow the process from substance to perception. First, there are substances with primary qualities. When two substances interact, a change is affected in one by the primary qualities of the other. This change is the secondary quality, that which we actually perceive. But this secondary quality is nothing more than a change in a substance. When such a change occurs in a spiritual substance, *some sort of miracle happens*, and conscious perception occurs. What is so special about the spiritual substance that conscious perception can

occur, whereas it cannot in material substance? Locke cannot say, and instead seeks to avoid the problem of substance that he himself created:

It is plain, then, that the idea of corporeal substance in matter is as remote from our conceptions and apprehensions as that of spiritual substance or spirit; and therefore, from our not having any notion of the substance of spirit, we can no more conclude its nonexistence than we can, for the same reason, deny the existence of body; it being as rational to affirm there is no body, because we have no clear and distinct idea of the substance of matter, as to say there is no spirit, because we have no clear and distinct idea of the substance of a spirit. (205, 2/23/5)

There is no more justification for believing in the existence of *concrete* material objects than there is for believing in God. Of course, there must be *some* reason for our perceptions, but is it material objects, God, or something else altogether different? Is Locke really making an inference to the best explanation, or just to the easiest one? Locke goes on to write, "...the idea we have of spirit, compared with the idea we have of body, stands thus: The substance of spirit is unknown to us; and so is the substance of body equally unknown to us" (207, 2/23/30). Since we have no more idea of spiritual substance than corporeal substance, could it be that they are one and the same? I believe that they are. What they consist of is still the subject of some mystery, but there are clues all around us, if we but pay very close attention to our perceptions.

Having examined the notion of perception from Locke's perspective, let us now turn to *conscious perception*. It is clear that relative perception can only lead to a change in a substance. We can follow this train of changes for as long as we like, and never come to understand conscious perception. Even if we propose a substance of spirit, we still have nothing more than a change in this substance, and the problem of how to explain conscious perception remains. The only conclusion I can draw from this is that our very notion of conscious perception is entirely false; that is, there is no such

conscious perception. But now the burden falls on me to explain why it seems to be the case that we do have conscious perceptions. I believe that there is but one thing of which everything consists, but it is not anything that could be called *material* substance. Given the ubiquitous nature of this substance, I see no reason to think that we, as conscious entities, are not made of the same sort of stuff as everything else in the known universe. The logical conclusion is that we *are* substance, and through the process of relative perception, a change is effected in us, thereby changing our *selves* in the process. We don't perceive objects in the external world; our very being includes an aboutness regarding those objects. Or, perhaps substance is just a process whereby information is computed, in which case we are informational processes. Of course, this is all highly speculative and quite counterintuitive, but it seems to be a possibility worth pursuing.

## References

Baird, Forrest E., Walter Kaufman 2003; *Philosophic Classics Volume III: Modern Philosophy*; Prentice Hall, New Jersey.