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Meaning and the Scepticist Worry – Locke’s Theory of Perception

By *L. von Lupke*

This essay gives a response to the scepticist worry that the resemblance between the outside world and our experience of it cannot be proven. Jonathan F. Bennett shows that this worry arises from an interpretation of John Locke as an indirect realist. This interpretation focusses on Locke’s distinction between our ideas of objects and these objects’ qualities themselves. Bennett shows that if we only ever have indirect access to real objects, there can be no recourse to empirical proof for the claim of the resemblance between the outside world and our experience of it.¹ J.L. Mackie claims that Bennett conflates two problems: that of acquiring a meaning for the term “outside world” and that of the justification for believing in the existence of this outside world beyond our experience. Mackie shows that these problems can be separated and answered.² This essay approaches the meaning problem, not by disproving Bennett’s scepticist worry, but by showing its triviality. It claims that the search for meaning beyond what our mind creates as meaning is in itself meaningless.

In this essay, I will show how Locke’s perceptual theory can give rise to sceptical consequences and subsequently evaluate how severe these sceptical consequences are. For this purpose, I will present a reading of Locke’s perceptual theory, which interprets Locke to be an indirect realist and which focuses on his distinction between ideas and qualities. Jonathan F. Bennett shows that this indirect realism gives rise to scepticism since there can be no recourse

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¹ Jonathan F. Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 69.

² Mackie, *Problems from Locke*, 55.

to empirical evidence supporting the claim of resemblance between experience and outside world. J.L. Mackie claims that Bennett's challenge conflates the meaning and the justification problem concerning the existence of an outside world and shows that these problems can be separated and answered. Finally, I will present my own approach to the meaning problem and show that while Bennett's sceptical worry is legitimate, it is overall trivial since an attempt to find meaning beyond what our mind creates as meaning is in itself meaningless.

The most common reading of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) holds that Locke has an indirect realist theory of perception. According to this reading, Locke postulates the existence of a real world outside of our perception, which contains real objects and to which we may indirectly have access. At the heart of this is his distinction between ideas and qualities. Ideas exist in the mind and are what the mind makes of the impulses from outside. Qualities instead are the powers within objects to cause ideas in our minds. Our ideas of objects are not like the objects themselves: "we may not think... that [ideas] are exactly the images and resemblances of something inherent in the subject."³ For Locke, the process of perception is one of the mind creating ideas from the impulses our senses receive from the outside.⁴ We do not have access to anything other than our ideas and are thus permanently separated from the objects that cause them. Locke justifies our belief in the existence of the outside world and our belief that we can have access to knowledge about it by claiming that some of our ideas – our ideas of primary qualities like extension, figure, number, and motion – resemble the qualities as they exist in the objects themselves.

The distinction between ideas and qualities in Locke gives rise to sceptical consequences because of his undetermined notion of resemblance and thus lack of explanation, and subsequently of justification, for holding that primary qualities resemble our ideas of them. Bennett's argument latches onto Locke's

³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Woolhouse, R. (ed.), (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 134.

⁴ Locke, *Essay*, 142.

distinction between ideas and qualities, Locke's undetermined notion of resemblance, and his simultaneous claim that our ideas of primary qualities resemble the real objects. Bennett claims that the question about the relationship between ideas and qualities as Locke puts it gives rise to sceptical consequences. Locke's notion of resemblance is of empirical nature so that the question of the resemblance between qualities and ideas is one of "setting the entire range of facts about sensory states over against the entire range of facts about the objective realm and then looking for empirical links between them."⁵ Bennett argues that this logical divorce between ideas and qualities (or objects) invites scepticism regarding the existence of a real world beyond our experience. Locke has set up the relation between ideas and real objects in such a way that his attempts to reject total scepticism on an empirical basis must fail. It fails because if all we ever have access to are our sensory experiences, or ideas, then we cannot bridge the gap between these ideas and an assumed reality of objects beyond our ideas of them. There is a veil of perception between our sensory experiences and the real world that we are unable to pass through.

Mackie critiques Bennett's representation of Locke's theory of perception and its sceptical consequences. He holds that Bennett conflates two separate problems in his assessment of Locke's theory; the meaning problem and the justification problem. The meaning problem asks this: "if all that we are directly acquainted with is ideas (or experiential content, or percepts, etc.) how can we meaningfully assert or even speculate that there is a further reality which they represent: how can we give meaning to the terms that will express this speculation?"⁶ The justification problem, on the other hand, is concerned with this question: "if all that we are directly acquainted with is ideas (etc.), how can they give us any good reason to believe that there is a further reality which they represent, or that such a further reality helps to cause our having of them, or that some of them resemble aspects of that reality while others do not."⁷ Mackie claims that Bennett conflates these questions in his veil-of-perception problem.

⁵ Jonathan F. Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 69.

⁶ J.L Mackie, *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 55.

⁷ Mackie, *Problems from Locke*, 55.

The first one, the meaning problem, is logically prior to the justification problem as it is clearly necessary to have a meaning of the concept “further reality” before attempting to justify a belief in it. However, Mackie argues that unless we adopt a verificationist account of meaning, the two problems are distinct from another.

The verificationist account holds that meaning of a statement is tied to its verification through empirical facts. The meaning of a statement is tied to the conditions under which it is true.⁸ This is implausible since, according to this account of meaning, there can be no meaning to sentences that do not concern observable reality. A statement like “God is almighty” is by this account meaningless, because whether God is almighty cannot be observed. Furthermore, meaning does not only derive from a statement’s truth-conditions but also from the structure of a sentence. There are therefore good reasons not to have a verificationist account of meaning. If we reject such an account, however, the two problems of meaning and of justification are distinct.

According to Mackie, the meaning problem can be tackled by adopting a constructive theory of meaning. Based on our experiences we can construct meaning. Meaning is not restricted to statements that can be evaluated per truth-conditions, but it flows from the structure of language and experience. Grammatical sentences can have meaning even if they do not express a statement that can be verified. We may first learn to use statements by paying attention to the context in which they are used. Yet, this is not the only way in which meaning can be given to linguistic expressions as we also recognise meaning from the structure and meaningful components of sentences, without considering how the statement made by the sentence as a whole can be verified.⁹ For Mackie, the meaning problem is solved if we examine how a constructive theory of meaning works in conjunction with the Lockean claim that our mind perceives only our ideas. He argues that our ideas of the world do not include the feature of self-awareness that they are ideas. Put plainly, when we perceive objects, we perceive them as being real and distinct from us. The fact that we

⁸ Mackie, *Problems from Locke*, 56.

⁹ Mackie, *Problems from Locke*, 57.

view them through our perception is not something we are aware of when perceiving the objects. From this it follows that our experience can provide us with meaning regarding the concept of a world outside of us. Even if we never directly have access to that world, we perceive the world as if we were directly accessing it and thus can attach meaning to the concept of a world beyond our experience.

Once the meaning problem has been answered, the problem concerning how to justify a belief in the existence of real, independent objects comes to the fore. Mackie uses an abductive argument to refute absolute scepticism. This argument claims that an “outline hypothesis” (so called because the details may vary from theory to theory) of the kind that our appearances of real objects are caused by real objects is the best explanation for our experiences of the appearances of real, independent objects around us. Because this “outline hypothesis” is the best explanation of our experience, we should infer its truth. This then provides us with an initial reason to believe in the existence of a world independent from our ideas and with a basis from which we can then justify a belief in further principles of explanation of our ideas and the world like the cause-and-effect model of explanation.¹⁰

Mackie answers Bennett’s scepticism worry by delineating the two problems it is composed of and answering these in turn. I agree with Mackie’s analysis of Bennett’s worry as one composed of two separate problems: the meaning and the justification problem. However, I want to give a different response to the meaning problem and on the basis of that response show that the justification problem is insignificant. Bennett’s scepticism stems from the worry that we cannot use our experiences as empirical proof for the resemblance between our ideas and the qualities in objects. It is the worry that we cannot be acquainted with the objects in themselves and indeed not even our sensory experiences,¹¹ and thus cannot have a meaningful account of what real, independent objects are. I want to take a different approach to the meaning problem that takes

¹⁰ Mackie, *Problems from Locke*, 65-6.

¹¹ Locke, *Essay*, 142.

Bennett's worry that we cannot have access to meaning beyond our experience seriously. As Locke puts it: "*So that wherever there is sense, or perception, there some idea is actually produced, and present in the understanding.*"¹² This suggests that the act of perception is already a productive act. By creating an idea of the sensory information, the mind forms an interpretation of the sensory information that enables it to think about and make further use of the information. The mind brings the sensory information into a shape with which it can work. In a sense, this brings about two veils of perception, since not only do we only have access to real, independent objects through our sensory information, but we also only have access to our sensory information through our ideas of them. This seems to increase the sceptical worries. However, the answer to the sceptical worries is to attack the basis of their demands. The sceptic demands that there be a bulletproof justification for believing in the resemblance between our experiences and ideas and the independent world. I argue that it is futile to attempt to have recourse to real objects or even to our raw sensory experience of them in order to justify our belief in a resemblance between the two, because it is exactly through this veil (or these veils) of perception that meaning and understanding become possible. Our brain's interpretation and formation of ideas from sensory information is what enables us to use these in our thoughts and minds. It is senseless to demand meaning and justification that go beyond the very act in which meaning and sense are created. With this approach to the meaning problem, the justification problem loses its significance since it is per definition of meaning meaningless to search for justification in believing in what we cannot have a meaningful understanding of. This answer differs from Mackie's since it does not attempt to refute the sceptic's worry but accepts it and tries to show that the worry is trivial. Bennett's sceptical worry is justified but not of overall significance since its search for meaning beyond what we can understand as meaningful is in itself meaningless.

I presented first Bennett's account of the sceptical consequences arising from Locke's perceptual theory and then Mackie's response to Bennett's sceptical worries. I then presented my own answer to the sceptical challenge raised by

¹² Locke, *Essay*, 142-3, italics in original.

Bennett and showed that the sceptical worry is based on a flawed belief in a possibility of meaning beyond our veil of perception. Because it is precisely the veil of perception that creates meaning, the search for a meaning beyond it is meaningless and the sceptical worry thus trivial.

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