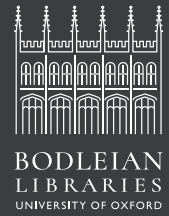


Locke UNLOCKED

A Look at John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

PRIMARY
AND
SECONDARY
QUALITIES



Modelling The Idea Two Tops at Rest / Colour Wheel

Photo: Cliff Landesman



The Philosophical Idea

“Qualities thus considered in bodies are:

First, such as are utterly inseparable from the body... These I call original or primary qualities of body; which I think we may observe to produce simple ideas in us, viz. solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number ...

Secondly, such qualities which in truth are nothing in the objects themselves but powers to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities, i.e. by the bulk, figure, texture, and motion of their insensible parts, as colours, sounds, tastes, etc.”

Bk II, Ch VIII, 9-10

Tops spin or rest motionless in place. They are long or short in length. Many have a round shape. These are properties of tops and other physical things. A colour wheel, on the other hand, has segments with different colours. Some segments might be red, and others green or blue.

Locke thought that certain properties, such as motion, size, shape, and number are primary, in that they are inherent in the objects. On the other hand, properties such as colour, taste, smell, and sound, are secondary because they depend on a person's subjective sensory experience. For Locke, secondary qualities, while real properties of an object, are not inherent in the objects. Rather, secondary qualities are powers an object has to produce certain sensations in us. A sharp needle may prick us and cause us pain.

We say the needle is painful, but we don't think being painful is an inherent property of the needle. Needles merely have the power to cause us pain. Locke thought colours were like being painful and unlike being round.

Explore the idea



Listen to the podcast

<https://visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/event/locke-unlocked#collapse3386586>



Look at the resource 'Is colour real?'

<https://explore.org/question-detail/do-we-all-see-colour-in-the-same-way#1767>



Discuss these questions:

- 1 What do you understand by the terms 'primary' and 'secondary'? Students might point towards different types of schooling, sources in history, colour etc. Explore these ideas.
- 2 Can you come up with other examples to illustrate primary and secondary qualities?
- 3 Consider the Mary's Room thought experiment in the resource 'Is colour real?' Is the way things seem to us the same as the way they actually are?

Take it further



Watch the TED-Ed animation within the article 'Is colour real?' Do you think there are fundamental limits to what we can know about something we can't experience, as the animation suggests?



Look through some of the other materials which feature in the question: 'Do we see colour the same?'

<https://explore.org/question-detail/do-we-all-see-colour-in-the-same-way>. Choose one topic and research it further.



Watch the lecture by Peter Millican, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oxford, which puts Locke's ideas in a wider context.

<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/61-introduction-primary-and-secondary-qualities>

Research the ideas of George Berkeley (1685 – 1753). How does his idealist philosophy compare with Locke's views?

