

LOCKEAN EMPATHY

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Does having empathy involve getting the world right? In the early modern period, most philosophers would have said “no,” denying that empathy, sympathy, or compassion has what we would call epistemic value. Some, like Spinoza, thought empathy was contrary to reason, where reason’s verdicts are necessarily true (see *Ethics* 2p41, 4p37s1).¹ Others, like Hume, thought it was neither contrary to nor in accordance with reason, but instead based on “an arbitrary and original instinct” (see *Treatise* 2.2.7.1). To be sure, Hume and others gave empathy a central role in moral epistemology, but this typically coincided with their anti-realism about moral facts and properties (see, e.g., *Treatise* 3.1.1.26).² After the early modern period, though, the epistemic value of empathy was defended in several ways. Schopenhauer claimed that compassion involved metaphysical insight into the non-distinctness of individuals (Schopenhauer 1841). Others, including Max Scheler, argued that empathy

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to Locke are to the fourth edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Numbers indicate book, chapter and section. Primary texts by other early modern philosophers are referred to with an abbreviated title and with references to the relevant standard edition.

² Hume’s views of empathy (or, more accurately, sympathy) were of course more subtle than this summary suggests. Another interesting case is Descartes, who draws a striking connection between generosity and an appreciation of the class-transcending value of all agents capable of a virtuous will (*Passions* §154, see Brown 2006, Ch. 8).

played an essential role in our knowledge of other minds (Scheler 1973, see also Stueber 2006). This latter approach has been revived in the past few decades (e.g. Goldman 2006, but see also Steinberg 2014).

My aim in this paper is to offer a different defense of the epistemic value of at least one kind of empathy. Despite the dominant attitude towards empathy in the early modern era, the defense I offer uses only the philosophical resources of early modern empiricism, without appealing to moral facts or properties. More specifically: I argue that Locke's theory of ideas, on one natural reading, can be used to show that empathy has the same epistemic value or objectivity that Locke and many other pre-Berkeleyans thought ideas of shape and motion had. The core thought is straightforward: ideas of shape and figure were seen to be epistemically special (compared to, e.g., ideas of color) because they resembled qualities in their objects, and a similar resemblance holds when one is *pained* by another's *pain* or *pleased* by another's *pleasure*. It takes some care to spell out this thought and its textual basis in Locke, however. Among other things, for there to be a parallel between empathy and ideas of figure, pain must be a primary quality of the mind, just as figure is a primary quality of physical bodies.

Though my focus in this paper is historical, my ultimate aim is to show that there is a neglected but promising approach to defending the epistemic value of empathy. Contemporary discussions of empathy (and of compassion and sympathy) continue to draw inspiration from the history of philosophy (e.g. Nussbaum 2001, Prinz 2011), as do contemporary discussions of epistemic value (e.g. Zagzebski 1996, Kvanvig 2003). There is a case to be made that views influential philosophers *could* have held carry some epistemic weight (Ballantyne 2014). For these reasons, even if Locke did not make the defense of empathy I argue he could have, considering this defense can help us see an important but overlooked way of defending the epistemic value and objectivity of empathy.

Two terminological notes. First: the term “empathy,” like “compassion” and “sympathy,” has been applied to a variety of phenomena (for helpful discussions, see Scheler 1973 and Darwall 1998). The particular phenomenon I am concerned with involves a certain *success*. Empathy, in my sense, occurs only if the pains or pleasures of the subject resemble pains or pleasures in the object of empathy. This distinguishes the sort of empathy I consider from related (and overlapping) phenomena that do not require any kind of success, many of which have been called “empathy” by others. Second: for what follows, we need a phrase to describe ideas that, in Locke’s system, are *of* primary qualities and which *resemble* them. For Locke, this includes ideas of qualities like figure and bulk, but not ideas of color, taste, or smell. Adopting a phrase from 2.23, I call these “primary ideas.”³

In §1, I describe four interpretive assumptions my argument relies on. In §2, I argue that pain and pleasure can be seen as primary qualities of the mind on Locke’s view. In §3, I argue that Locke acknowledges the existence of something like empathy and that the ideas involved in empathy are epistemically on par with (e.g.) our ideas of three-dimensional figures. In §4, I show how this view of empathy sidesteps Berkeley’s famous objection to Locke’s theory of ideas. I conclude by discussing the possibility of a parallel contemporary defense of empathy and its metaethical significance.

1. Four assumptions

My argument appeals to four assumptions about Locke. There are reasons in favor of these assumptions, but not decisive reasons.

³ Locke uses the phrase “primary idea” only in 2.23.16-18. Nothing in my argument turns on whether my use of this phrase matches his.

The first assumption is that primary ideas have *some* sort of important objectivity or epistemic value. The closest Locke comes to saying this is his claim that with primary ideas, “we have by these an Idea of the thing as it is in it self” (2.8.23). A number of later philosophers thought ideas of things as they are in themselves had important epistemic value. The most notable example is Kant, who refers to Locke when explaining his claim that we have no cognition of things as they are in themselves.⁴ At the same time, Locke himself does not reserve any obvious labels for epistemic value for primary ideas. Ideas of colors are not primary ideas, but Locke states that simple ideas of colors can be true, adequate, and sources of knowledge (see *Essay* 2.32.14, 2.31.2, 4.4.3-4). There are reasons to wonder about the coherence and meaning of these statements,⁵ but they provide at least *prima facie* reason to question my first assumption. In addition, I should emphasize that the epistemic value of primary ideas does not obviously reduce to propositional knowledge in our contemporary sense (I return to this issue in §3).

My second assumption concerns Locke’s resemblance relation. I assume that it is sufficient for resemblance if (a) an idea and its object share some (relevantly non-trivial⁶) property and (b) the object is a (relevantly proximate) cause of the idea. Some of Locke’s readers have thought property-sharing is both sufficient and necessary for Locke’s resemblance relation.⁷ Other, though, have worried that identifying resemblance with

⁴ See *Prolegomena* 4:289. Lisa Downing glosses the distinctive epistemic value of primary ideas of bodies as “provid[ing] us with an accurate conception of the way bodies are in themselves” (Downing 1998, 390).

⁵ LoLordo 2008 argues that these statements are inconsistent with Locke’s larger views. For readings that take Locke’s statements to be much weaker than they initially seem, see Bolton 2004 and Ott 2012. If Ott’s proposal is right, then primary ideas are in fact the only ideas that represent objects truly or adequately.

⁶ An idea of green, for instance, has the property of not being God, but that does not appear to be enough for it to resemble a non-divine cat on Locke’s conception of resemblance.

⁷ E.g. Ayers 1991, Winkler 1992, and Jacovides 1999.

property-sharing leads to philosophical absurdity.⁸ My assumption is compatible with understanding Locke's notion of resemblance as property-sharing, as certain kinds of causation, or as a combination of the two. That means that my argument sidesteps much of the interpretive controversy.

The third assumption is that we should accept a literal reading of Locke's statement that "we know, and have distinct clear Ideas of two primary Qualities, or Properties of Spirit, viz. Thinking, and a power of Action; i.e. a power of beginning, or stopping several Thoughts or Motions" (2.23.30).⁹ That is, I assume that Locke holds that thinking and a power of action (the will – see 2.21.5) are primary qualities of spirits or minds. My main reason for thinking this is that thought and will seem to be intrinsic features of minds, and many interpreters have held that, for Locke, intrinsic properties are primary qualities (for more, see §2.2). This assumption could be challenged, though, since 2.23.30 is the only place in the *Essay* where Locke explicitly mentions primary qualities of spirit.¹⁰ In §2, I try to show that thought and will satisfy Locke's main criteria for primary qualities, but this will be less than a full defense of this assumption. It is not necessary for my argument that minds have secondary qualities, though I briefly consider this possibility in §2.4.

My fourth assumption is that ideas (in particular: pleasure and pain) are qualities of the mind. From a contemporary perspective, where the notion of mental states is applied

⁸ E.g. Wozzley 1964, Bennett 1971, Curley 1972, Hill 2004.

⁹ Cf. page 306(b) of the B draft of the *Essay*. These passages might be taken as implying that thought and will are the *only* primary qualities of spirit. But the parallel claim Locke makes about the primary qualities of body (where he lists only two) shows that he does not intend such an implication. Taking these claims at face value reinforces the view (argued in Downing 1998) that Locke does not simply derive the primary/secondary distinction from mechanistic metaphysics.

¹⁰ Some passages provide indirect support for this assumption. At 2.1.10, Locke states that the perception of ideas is to the soul as motion (a primary quality) is to the body.

liberally, this assumption may seem plausible enough. There is some textual support for it as well. Locke introduces qualities in terms that are not limited to bodies: “the Power to produce any Idea in our mind, I call Quality of the Subject wherein that power is” (2.8.8). If we take this as a sufficient condition for being a quality,¹¹ then we could argue that pleasure and pain are qualities, since, given reflection, it seems they result in us having ideas of them (see 2.20.1-5). At 3.4.16, Locke also appears to group pain and pleasure with extension, number, and motion, as things that he counts as qualities, in contrast to the “ordinary acceptation” of the term “quality.” That said, even if pleasure and pain are powers in some sense, they are not powers in the way that thought and willing are (see 2.21.6), and the 3.4.16 passage does not directly state that pain and pleasure are qualities. My fourth assumption could therefore also be challenged. All my larger argument requires, however, is that these interpretive assumptions are defensible.

2. Pain and Pleasure as Primary Qualities of Mind

My main claim in this section is that *if* thought and will satisfy Locke’s criteria of primary qualities, there are good grounds for thinking that pleasure and pain satisfy them as well. My focus here is on the determinable property of pleasure-and-pain (which I hyphenate for clarity), of which particular pleasures and pains are determinate instances. This is in line with Locke’s tendency to talk of determinable properties when listing primary qualities (see below).¹²

¹¹ Since Locke elsewhere denies that figure and bulk are powers (2.31.8), there is reason to deny this definition is meant as both necessary and sufficient (see Stuart 2003, 70).

¹² If pain-and-pleasure is itself a determinable of thought, and if determinables of a primary quality are themselves primary qualities, then there is a quick argument for the main claim of this section. The slower

In his discussion of the qualities of bodies, Locke provides several criteria for distinguishing primary qualities from secondary ones. While interrelated, these criteria are not obviously equivalent. One criterion is representational: primary qualities resemble our ideas of them. Applying this criterion requires determining when there is a relevant resembling idea of a given quality (a primary idea). Showing that there are such ideas for pleasure-and-pain is the task of §3. In this section, I consider four other apparent criteria for primary qualities: inseparability, being ‘really in’ their subjects, being more than ‘mere powers,’ and having a special explanatory role.¹³ It is not clear whether Locke saw these criteria as distinct or as equally important. For my purposes, though, it will be helpful to discuss each in turn. Some of these criteria apply more neatly to thought and will (and thereby to pleasure-and-pain) than others, but, overall, we can make sense of thought, willing, and pleasure-and-pain being primary qualities of the mind.¹⁴

2.1. First criterion: Inseparability

Locke introduces the notion of primary qualities as follows:

Qualities thus considered in Bodies are, First such as are utterly inseparable from the Body, in what estate soever it be; such as in all the alterations and

argument I give in the main text, however, is useful for appreciating the significance of a quality’s being primary.

¹³ What follows draws on Downing 2009 and Jacovides 2007. Downing 1998 argues that Locke’s category of primary quality is disjunctive. If Downing is right, then the argument in the present section would be easier, for pleasure-and-pain could fail to satisfy one criterion and still count as primary qualities.

¹⁴ Some philosophers, including Kant, seem to hold that whether a property is primary partly turns on whether it can be apprehended by more than one sense. Locke does not make that a criterion of a quality being primary, but even if he had, pain-and-pleasure would qualify (see 3.4.16).

changes it suffers, all the force can be used upon it, it constantly keeps; and such as Sense constantly finds in every particle of Matter, which has bulk enough to be perceived... Take a grain of Wheat, divide it into two parts, each part has still Solidity, Extension, Figure and Mobility... These I call original or primary Qualities of Body (2.8.9)

As Locke presents it here, inseparability has two sides: ubiquity within an entity (e.g. no change deprives a body of figure) and ubiquity across entities of the relevant type (e.g. all bodies have figure). In both cases, the claim is most plausible for determinable properties, not determinate properties; there is no particular figure that is ubiquitous within or across bodies, even if every body always has some figure or other.¹⁵

Locke does not believe that thinking is ubiquitous within a mind, since he denies we think during dreamless sleep. He describes, this, however, on analogy with motion: “The perception of Ideas being (as I conceive) to the Soul, what motion is to the Body” (2.1.10). Mobility, however, is a primary quality of bodies. So Locke’s analogical claim suggests that the capacity to think, though not the activity of thinking, is ubiquitous within a mind. The second type of ubiquity seems more straightforward: just as all bodies have a capacity to move, all minds have capacities to think and to will.¹⁶ Perhaps we can conceive of a mind without will, but Locke does not seem to take that possibility any more seriously than the possibility of unmovable matter. Finally, consider the division test that Locke mentions in 2.8.9, according to which division of an entity never eliminates primary qualities. It is hard to

¹⁵ Locke would presumably deny that determinable properties exist in any robust sense (see, e.g., 4.7.9).

¹⁶ Thought is not ubiquitous across all entities, if there is non-thinking matter. But then solidity is not ubiquitous across all entities, if there are non-solid minds.

know what the division of a mind would be,¹⁷ but the powers of thought and willing are not obviously eliminable by division. It seems that the division of an idea or volition, if possible, would only yield another idea or volition.

Assuming that thought and willing satisfy the inseparability criterion, therefore, consider how the determinable property of pleasure-and-pain would fare. Locke states that delight and uneasiness (which he identifies with pleasure and pain) “join themselves to almost all our Ideas, both of Sensation and Reflection” (2.7.2). Locke does not clarify the “almost,” but he seems to be leaving open the possibility of exceptions.¹⁸ Pain, however, is at least as ubiquitous as willing:

what is it that determines the Will in regard to our Actions? ... [it] is not, as is generally supposed, the greater good in view: But [instead] some... uneasiness a Man is at present under. This is that which successively determines the Will, and sets us upon those Actions, we perform (2.21.31)

So if willing is common in our mind, and ubiquitous across minds, then the determinable property of pleasure-and-pain would be similarly ubiquitous (via the determinate property of uneasiness)¹⁹. An infinite mind might be free from uneasiness, but Locke holds that God experiences pleasure (2.23.33, 3.6.11). So Locke seems to see pleasure-and-pain as ubiquitous across all minds, finite and infinite.

2.2. *Second criterion: Being ‘really in’*

¹⁷ Cf. Descartes’ discussion of the mind’s indivisibility in Meditation VI.

¹⁸ In 2.20.1, Locke states that there can be “Sensation barely in it self,” unaccompanied by pain or pleasure. He never suggests, however, that there could be willing without pleasure or pain.

¹⁹ The *capacity* to will may not require actual uneasiness, but it would require the capacity for uneasiness. A capacity for uneasiness would be analogous to the capacity for motion, which is also a primary quality.

Locke states that primary qualities are “really in” a body, “whether any ones Senses perceive them or no” (2.8.17, see also 2.8.23, 2.23.9, 2.31.2). These claims are plausibly related to his view that primary ideas represent objects as they are in themselves (2.8.23). Locke’s claim can be broken down into two: that primary qualities are *intrinsic* (and so perception-independent) properties of the entities that have them, and that they are *metaphysically fundamental* properties of those entities.²⁰ Locke's discussions of thought and willing suggest they are intrinsic properties of minds. It is perhaps less clear that willing is fundamental than that thought is. What is most important for my purposes, though, is that there are grounds for thinking that, just as figure is ‘really in’ bodies, pleasure-and-pain is ‘really in’ minds.

Locke claims that (determinate) pains and pleasures are simple ideas (2.20.1). It is plausible that ideas are intrinsic properties of the mind.²¹ Of course, there is a sense in which pains and pleasures do depend on “whether any ones Senses perceive them or no” (2.8.17), since they exist only if there is a perceiving mind. Yet there is also, for Locke, a loose sense in which pains and pleasures can exist “whether any ones Senses perceive them or no,” because he holds that attention to one's own mind occurs “pretty late” in childhood, where “the first Years are usually imploy’d and diverted in looking abroad” (see 2.1.8, though cf. 2.1.19). Unlike some relational properties, there is no temptation to say that pleasures-and-pain is an artifact of perceptions.

²⁰ Cf. Downing 2007, 356. I assume that a non-essential property might be metaphysically fundamental, since Locke does not seem to hold that pleasure-and-pains is an essential property of our minds (see 2.7.3). I also assume that a determinable property is intrinsic and fundamental (in the sense relevant to Locke’s criterion) if at least one of its determinates is intrinsic and fundamental.

²¹ This might not hold if Locke were a direct realist about perception (see Yolton 1984). Note, though, that Locke talks of ideas being found in the mind “within it self” (2.21.1) or “in it self” (2.32.5).

There are also grounds for taking simple ideas to be metaphysically fundamental. Locke says that simple ideas are “the Materials of all our Knowledge” (2.2.2). While Locke leaves open the possibility that matter might also have the power of thought (4.3.6), he rejects the idea that properties of thought could be reduced to properties of body (4.10.10).²² Locke does not consider the possibility of non-material properties to which ideas might reduce. So whatever, like pleasure-and-pain, is fundamental within thought is thereby fundamental full stop.

2.3. *Third criterion: Not mere powers*

Locke introduces secondary (and tertiary) qualities after introducing primary qualities. The former, he claims, are nothing but powers that exist in virtue of primary qualities:

Such Qualities, which in truth are nothing in the Objects themselves, but Powers to produce various Sensations in us by their primary Qualities... I call secondary Qualities. To these might be added a third sort... [including] the power in Fire to produce a new Colour, or consistency in Wax or Clay by its primary qualities (2.8.10, see also 2.8.14, 2.8.22-24, 2.23.7, 2.31.2, but cf. 2.8.17)

Thought and willing are powers (see 2.21.5), but they are not *mere* powers. Since they are fundamental, there are no further qualities in virtue of which thought and will hold (except

²² That is, presumably, why Locke thinks that God would have to *add* thought to matter (4.3.6). On the complications of superaddition see, e.g., Stuart 1998 and Downing 1998.

perhaps ideas like uneasiness). Moreover, these are not merely powers to produce changes in external entities, the way that all Locke's examples of secondary and tertiary qualities are. For the same reasons, pleasures and pains are also not mere powers. They are indeed something "in the Object" (in this case: the subject), though they may also, like some other primary qualities, be powers to produce ideas.

2.4. Fourth criterion: Special explanatory role

A further distinguishing feature of primary qualities is their explanatory role. Locke seems to think that the true explanations of (e.g.) how our sensations arise can appeal only to primary qualities (see 2.8.10).

For Locke, the metaphysically fundamental qualities of body have a special role in explaining our sensations. Locke's notion of explanation is not especially demanding. It is not a mark against an explanation of secondary qualities in terms of primary qualities that we cannot understand why, say, certain colors are annexed to certain motions of bodies (see 2.8.13).

The explanations of many of our sensations may not mention thought or will beyond the sensations themselves. But explanations of ideas of reflection would need to mention thought or will. After all, Locke thinks that our idea of the will comes from reflection on our own wills (see 2.6.1-2). Moreover, thought and will would also need to be mentioned in the full explanations of our ideas of *other* people's motions. The causal chain that leads up to one's perception of someone painting a mural involves the painter's thought and willing, and facts about thoughts and volitions cannot (for Locke) be reduced to facts about other properties.

As we saw above, Locke's explanation of our will appeals to pleasure-and-pain. By the present criterion, any quality that must be mentioned in explaining a primary quality must likewise be primary. So if the will is primary, then pleasure-and-pain must be as well. Uneasiness or pain, he says, is the "spring of Action" (2.21.34). That means the explanations of our actions and our ideas of our actions would be incomplete for Locke if they did not mention pain.

Before going on, it may be helpful to consider what would count as *secondary* qualities of the mind. Locke gives us no direct answer to this, but the preceding discussion gives some guidance. For instance, Locke does not directly discuss the quality of being charming. But based on his discussion of love at 2.20.5, it is tempting to think he would regard being charming as a non-ubiquitous mere power to bring about certain ideas in other minds that some minds have in virtue of their thoughts and volitions. If so, then being charming might count as a secondary quality of a mind.²³

3. Empathy and Resembling Ideas of Pleasure and Pain

In the last section, I set aside Locke's resemblance criterion for primary qualities: "the Ideas of primary Qualities of Bodies, are Resemblances of them, and their Patterns do really exist in the Bodies themselves" (2.8.15). In this section, I argue that pleasure-and-pain fulfills the resemblance criterion and that the ideas involved in empathy can be counted as primary ideas. I also consider four potential objections.

3.1. Primary qualities and resembling ideas

²³ Thanks to a referee for *SJP* for this example.

To apply the resemblance criterion, we need to know what it takes for some idea to be *of* a given quality. Locke's theory of intentionality is far from clear.²⁴ But for ideas of primary qualities, there is a tempting general answer: an idea is of some quality if it resembles it.²⁵ If the criterion in question requires only that the quality resemble *some* idea, then it straightforwardly applies to pleasure and pain. For though Locke may allow that there are non-painful ideas of pain at 4.11.6 (though see Stuart 2010, 59), pleasures and pains are themselves ideas, and so resemble other pleasures and pains.²⁶

Even if that is enough to show that pleasure and pain satisfies the criterion in question, there is a further question: When is an idea of some *token* quality? Even though, e.g., my idea of the shape of my copy of the *Essay* resembles the shape of other people's copies of the *Essay*, there is an obvious sense in which my idea is of the token book in front of me in particular. This suggests a distinction concerning the epistemic value of primary ideas. Say that an idea has *general* primary value when it resembles at least one primary quality somewhere. Say that an idea has *particular* primary value when it resembles some primary quality that is present in the world around us in roughly the way that, in virtue of having that idea, we take the world to be. The latter is the sort of thing that would be involved in normal perception (in our sense of "perception," not Locke's²⁷). An abstract idea (see 2.11.9), a dream, or a hallucination might involve ideas with general primary value, but not ideas with particular primary value.

²⁴ See Lennon 2007, 247-53 for a survey of interpretive options.

²⁵ Watson 1995 argues that Locke's general account of representation is resemblance. Ott 2012 takes a similar line, drawing the surprising conclusion that, for Locke, ideas of secondary qualities are not representations.

²⁶ Ott 2012, 1094 notes that resemblance explains how abstract ideas can represent non-abstract ideas.

²⁷ See Stuart 2010, 37-38.

Which ideas of figure have particular primary value? Locke does not directly address this issue, but his example of a piece of manna is suggestive:

A piece of Manna... is able to produce in us the Idea of a round or square Figure; and, by being removed from one place to another, the Idea of Motion. This Idea of Motion represents it, as it really is in the Manna moving: a Circle or Square are the same, whether in Idea or Existence; in the Mind, or in the Manna. (2.8.18)

Locke suggests something similar in discussing abstraction, which makes “the particular Ideas, *received from* particular objects, to become general” (2.11.9, my emphasis). Causation seems to be a crucial part of this picture.²⁸ Our idea of the manna’s token shape is of that shape because it resembles the shape and/or because that token shape helped cause that idea (Locke thinks of causal facts as fairly clear-cut). After all, Locke seems to appeal to causation in explaining how ideas of secondary qualities represent:

Secondary Qualities... are in the Bodies, we denominate from them, only a Power to produce those Sensations in us: And what is Sweet, Blue, or Warm in Idea, is but the certain Bulk, Figure, and Motion of the insensible Parts in the Bodies themselves, which we call so (2.8.15)

²⁸ Ayers claims that causation constitutes the representation relation for Locke (Ayers 1991a, 40), and Bolton 2004 defends a more sophisticated version of this reading. Teleosemantic readings of Locke (e.g. Ferguson 2001) deny that resemblance plus actual causal chains are sufficient for representation. All these readings are consistent with my larger argument.

Ideas of secondary qualities seem to represent token powers or qualities of bodies at least partly in virtue of being caused by them. But these ideas lack particular primary value, because they do not resemble anything in the body.²⁹

Of course, we should want more than a simple causal story. The causes of our ideas run far beyond what we take to be the objects of our perceptions. We would hope that Locke could identify certain parts of the causal chains as relevant. Perhaps the larger collection of ideas one has amount to a definite description that determines which token properties the particular ideas represent, or perhaps there is some higher-level interpretive act that determines this (see 2.31.1). For my purposes, however, these questions can be set aside.

3.2. Empathy involves primary ideas

If we accept that resemblance and causation form the core of Locke's view of intentionality, then we can ask which ideas of pleasures and pains have particular primary value. To start, consider Locke's discussion of love and hatred of animate beings:

Hatred or Love, to Beings capable of Happiness or Misery, is often the Uneasiness or Delight, which we find in ourselves arising from their very Being, or Happiness. Thus the Being and Welfare of a Man's Children or Friends, producing constant Delight in him, he is said constantly to love them (2.20.5)

Locke discusses the example later in explicitly causal terms: "a Father, in whom the very well-being of his Children causes delight, is always, as long as his Children are in such a

²⁹ This point generalizes. Since (e.g.) ideas of color resemble other ideas of color, it would seem that our ideas of color have something like general primary value even though color itself is a secondary quality.

State, in the possession of that Good” (2.20.7). To be sure, Locke does not explicitly say that others’ pains and pleasures produce this sort of delight, but rather “their very being,” happiness, welfare, and well-being. Locke defines happiness, goodness, and badness in terms of pleasure and pain, however (2.21.42). So we can read Locke as acknowledging the familiar fact that we are sometimes pained and pleased by others’ pains and pleasures.³⁰

Locke does not give a special term to the pleasure or pain that is caused by others’ pleasure or pain. But being pleased and pained by others’ pleasures and pains is one recognizable form of empathy or compassion. If the above interpretation is correct, then, on Locke’s terms, the ideas involved in empathy can possess particular primary value. When a father is pleased by his children’s pleasure, his ideas resemble particular qualities that were involved in the causal chain that gave rise to them. So, like ideas of token figures, these pleasures and pains’ have value in representing how things outside of her mind are in themselves. The same is not true with delight taken in another’s pain, or uneasiness in response to another’s pleasure. In these latter cases, the ideas do not resemble qualities in the causally relevant objects, though, like hallucinations, they can resemble qualities elsewhere.³¹ Other things being equal, that would give empathy a better epistemic status than callousness. This epistemic value would like the value of accurate perception.

Even with that in place, there are four reasons why one might deny that Locke could see the ideas involved in empathy as comparable to perceptions of figure: (1) that pleasure and pain are non-representational, (2) that our empathetic pleasures and pains do not sufficiently resemble those of the people we empathize with, (3) that the causal connection

³⁰ Though others’ pains and pleasures might be simple ideas, the ideas involved in empathy probably will not be. This is consistent with thinking that the latter ideas are of primary qualities.

³¹ A simple causation + resemblance account of what it is to represent particular pleasures and pains will face potential counterexamples, but similar counterexamples will arise for such an account of what it is to represent any kinds of token qualities or objects.

between others' pains/pleasures and our minds is indirect, or, relatedly, (4) that we have empathetic representations only in virtue of background knowledge. My next task is to argue that none of these objections is decisive.

3.3. *Objection: Can pleasure and pain be representational?*

In a Humean vein, one might think Locke holds that pleasures and pains are non-representational, appealing to passages such as 2.8.16:

He, that will consider, that the same Fire, that at one distance produces in us the Sensation of Warmth, does at a nearer approach, produce in us the far different Sensation of Pain, ought to bethink himself, what Reason he has to say, That his Idea of Warmth, which was produced in him by the Fire, is actually in the Fire; and his Idea of Pain, which the same Fire produced in him the same way, is not in the Fire.

One could read this as implying that pain is merely produced by the fire, but does not represent it.³² This implication would be justified if pain were non-representational. But if pain were non-representational, then there would be a disanalogy between the ideas involved in empathy and ideas of particular figures.³³

³² Likewise with Locke's discussions of pain and steel dividing our flesh at 2.8.13, manna producing pains at 2.8.18, and snow producing pain at 2.30.2. See Ayers 1991a, 63.

³³ Similarly, one might object that pains and pleasures at most represent ideas in our *own* minds. After all, Locke claim that our ideas of love and hatred arise from considering our own delight and pain (see 2.20.3-4). However, Locke allows that ideas an individual acquires from reflection, such as perception and active power (see 2.9.1-2, 2.21.4), can represent things outside her mind.

However, Locke's explicit claim in 2.8.16 is that pain is not in the fire, and that claim is neutral on whether the pain represents the fire. Moreover, even if the passages did suggest that the pain does not represent qualities of the fire, this would not show that Locke held that pain and pleasure are always non-representational. After all, Locke counts love and hatred as types of pleasures and pains, and his discussion can be read as saying that they represent other people's happiness or misery. Perhaps he thought that only some painful/pleasurable ideas were representational. Pleasures and pains might represent token qualities only when they resemble some token quality in the (relevantly proximate) part of the causal chain leading up to them.³⁴ In fact, something like that could be the best way to understand ordinary veridical perceptions of particular primary qualities. It is sufficient to accurately perceive some token square, for example, if one has an idea of squareness that resembles an object in the relevantly proximate part of the causal chain leading up to one's idea.³⁵

Finally, even if Locke did believe that pains and pleasures were always non-representational, it would be unclear what grounds he would have for that. They resemble qualities outside of an individual's mind and are produced by causal chains that (sometimes)

³⁴ One could say that pain and pleasure either represent successfully or do not represent at all. Alternatively, one could develop an account of misrepresentation in empathy, most easily in connection with a causal account of intentionality.

³⁵ A referee for *SJP* proposed the objection that this would allow for us to have primary ideas without realizing it, and that this might threaten their epistemic value. One reply would be to add a requirement that primary ideas be recognized as such. Another reply would be to allow that we can be wrong about the epistemic value of our ideas (as in cases where we mistakenly believe we are hallucinating or misperceiving).

involve those qualities. The central pieces of Locke's theory of representation do obviously support fine-grained distinctions about intentionality.³⁶

3.4. Objection: Do the ideas involved in empathy sufficiently resemble others' pains and pleasures?

Feeling empathy for someone in pain is obviously different from suffering from that pain oneself, and so does not perfectly resemble it. This might seem like enough to break the analogy between empathy and perceptions of figure.

However, Locke's treatment of pleasure and pain as simple ideas means that he must accept that, in cases where there is the right sort of match (e.g. empathetic pain, not pleasure, in reaction to another's pain) there is some degree of resemblance. More importantly, Locke cannot demand an exact resemblance even with ideas of the primary qualities of body. Being a corpuscularian, Locke held that the precise figures of bodies are much more complex than we normally perceive them to be.³⁷ Likewise, in perception, our ideas of figures are shaped by our spatial perspective relative to the objects. If Locke required exact resemblance for representation, then our typical ideas of figure would not represent anything at all. Yet Locke does count our typical ideas of figure as primary (see also his discussion of place at 2.13.7-10). So the imperfect resemblance between the ideas involved in empathy and others' pains and pleasures does not break the analogy with perceptions of figure. Perhaps we could say that the differences between the empathetic state and the pain reflect the empathetic subject's perspective.

³⁶ Locke also gives pain and pleasure a positive role in assuring us of the existence of mind-independent things (see 4.11.6). This does not directly imply that they are representational, but it does assign them an important epistemic role. For discussion, see Nagel forthcoming.

³⁷ See McCann 2011.

3.5. Objection: Is the causal connection between ideas involved in empathy and others' pleasures and pains too indirect?

Locke does not think that others' pains and pleasures are directly revealed to our minds. Plausibly, our empathetic reactions arise in virtue of corpuscular motions between us and others' bodies. Yet this might seem to make empathy significantly unlike perceptions of figure, for we naturally think of figures as directly revealed to the mind.

This objection might hold if Locke believed that perceptual states involve a direct relation between the perceiving subject and the perceived property of an object.³⁸ But though such direct realist readings of Locke have been defended, indirect/representational realist interpretations remain dominant.³⁹ According to this latter reading, in any perception, for Locke, the only things we are immediately aware of are our own ideas. In perception of figure, the ideas arise in virtue of corpuscular motions between us and the body we represent. In perceiving primary qualities like figure “‘tis evident some singly imperceptible Bodies must come from them to the Eyes, and thereby convey to the Brain some Motion, which produces these Ideas, which we have of them” (2.8.12, see also 4.2.11). So the fact that there is an indirect causal connection between others' pains and our sense organs does not distinguish the ideas involved in empathy from normal perceptions of figure.

3.6. Objection: Does the psychological complexity behind empathy distinguish its ideas from perceptions of figure?

³⁸ Even in that case, though, it is not clear the objection would matter. Provided that certain ideas reliably show us how things are in themselves, why should we care about the directness of their causal ancestry?

³⁹ See Chappell 2004.

Not only are others' pleasures and pains not directly transmitted to our minds, but whether we feel empathy depends on our background psychology. The above quote shows that Locke realized this, for Locke implies that the recognition of the people being happy and of the people as children or friends helps shape the delight. Even if this delight comes over us passively (as Locke puts it, we "find it in ourselves"), such a psychologically complex causal history may seem like enough to break the analogy I have proposed. Even if the analogy holds, moreover, one might worry that only this prior recognition has epistemic value, not the empathy itself.

We now know that psychologically complex processing is present in nearly all of our perceptual states.⁴⁰ To his credit, Locke had some awareness of this. In fact, he thinks that perception of three-dimensional figures happens only in virtue of background experience:

Ideas of Sensation often changed by the Judgment... When we set before our Eyes a round Globe, of any uniform Colour... 'tis certain, that the Idea thereby imprinted in our Mind, is of a flat Circle variously shadow'd... But we having by use been accustomed to perceive, what kind of appearance convex Bodies are wont to make in us; what alterations are made in the reflections of Light, by the difference of the sensible Figures of Bodies, the Judgment presently, by an habitual custom, alters the Appearances into their Causes: So that from that, which truly is variety of shadow or colour, collecting the Figure, it makes it pass for a mark of Figure, and frames to it self the perception of a convex Figure (2.9.8)

⁴⁰ For a helpful overview, see Cavanagh 1999.

This sort of psychological complexity is consistent, however, with the resultant idea of the three-dimensional figure resembling its object. So, at least psychological-speaking, the analogy between empathy and perception of shape holds up.

To be sure, the complexity behind empathy opens up the possibility of certain mistakes. Locke holds that Ideas and the “intention of the Mind... have no necessary connexion with the outward and visible Action” of another person (3.9.7). We might therefore be pained in response to someone who was crying, but who was inwardly happy. Broadly parallel mistakes are possible concerning globes, however: we might mistake a carefully-shaded flat disk for a globe. In cases like this, the ideas cease to have particular primary value. However, for a non-skeptical philosopher like Locke, the mere possibility of a mistake does not imply a lack of epistemic value (see 1.1.5-6, 4.2.14). When there is no mistake, our ideas represent things as they are in themselves, and so have particular primary value. Even when there is a mistake, moreover, they still have general primary value.

The globe case helps illustrate what is distinctive about the epistemic value of primary ideas, over and above the value of our background knowledge. It seems, as Locke describes it, that there is some sense in which we know that the flat, shadowed circle-looking object is a sphere prior to our coming to have a perception of a convex figure. But the fact that this resulting primary idea presupposes something like propositional knowledge does not obviously deprive it of epistemic value. For the primary idea gives us a sort of *imagistic* knowledge, and this is not obviously the same thing as propositional knowledge. In contemporary terms (see Cummins et al. 2014), this would make Locke a sort of epistemic pluralist, who does think there is a type of epistemic value that is not reducible to propositional knowledge. This kind of epistemic value would also therefore hold of empathy.

There may be some further relevant disanalogy between this sort of mental processing and that involved in empathy, but, at least on the resources of Locke's theory, it is hard to say what it would be.

4. Escaping Berkeley's Objection

The overall picture I have argued for is this. Pain and pleasure are primary qualities of the mind. When we are pained by others' pains and pleased by their pleasures, our ideas resemble qualities in the causal chain leading up to our ideas, and this gives our empathetic ideas particular primary value. If Locke accepted all that, then his view would imply that our stock of primary ideas includes more than just our ideas of the primary qualities of bodies. Since primary ideas represent how things are in themselves, this should be a welcome epistemological result. But there is a further virtue to showing how Locke could reach this conclusion about empathy: it means that, on Locke's own terms, some of our primary ideas escape the most influential objection to his epistemology.

The objection in question is Bishop Berkeley's insistence that "an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure."⁴¹ This objection has struck many non-idealist readers as showing that a central piece of Locke's theory of ideas is nonsense,⁴² or at least problematic.⁴³

Berkeley's objection, however, applies only when the quality that the primary idea is supposed to resemble is something non-mental. That holds for our ideas of the primary qualities of bodies, but not for the ideas involved in empathy. Another person's pleasure or

⁴¹ *Principles* 1.8.

⁴² E.g. Bennett 1971, 106.

⁴³ Michael Jacovides writes: "Berkeley's position that no idea could resemble a quality in an unthinking substance does not seem to occur to [Locke]" (Jacovides 1999, 489).

pain is itself an idea (in her mind), so an idea of ours can resemble it without conflicting with Berkeley's dictum. For Berkeley seems to implicitly accept that one mind's ideas can resemble another mind's ideas.

If we take Berkeley's objection as decisive for non-mental qualities, but otherwise retain as much of Locke's theory as possible, then we could arrive at the surprising result that since (as Kant claims⁴⁴) all our ideas of bodies are at best ideas of secondary qualities, our *only* primary ideas are those involved in empathy (and, perhaps, other ideas of other creatures' ideas). In effect, this would up-end the traditional epistemological priority of non-affective representations like shape over affective representations.

Conclusion

I conclude by noting two questions of larger interest that my argument raises. First: if a resemblance-based defense of the epistemic value of empathy is possible, then why did no early modern philosophers pursue this line of thought? After all, the modern period contains attempts to defend or ground morality in epistemic value and attempts to define morality in terms of empathy, and one would have expected someone to attempt a combination of these.⁴⁵

The second question is more philosophical: how could a related epistemic defense of empathy be made in contemporary terms? Since the Lockean defense of empathy I described sidesteps the most influential objection to Locke's theory of ideas, it provides grounds for

⁴⁴ *Prolegomena* 4:289.

⁴⁵ An example of the former attempt is Wollaston 1746. The ethical theories of David Hume and Adam Smith are the best-known examples of the latter attempt.

optimism about the possibility of a viable contemporary version.⁴⁶ One reason to consider this possibility is its connection to metaethics. Schopenhauer believed that morality could be grounded if empathy were the perception of others' pains and pleasures, though he believed only a radical metaphysical monism could allow such awareness.⁴⁷ A contemporary version of the Lockean defense of empathy, therefore, might provide the keystone for a more metaphysically modest Schopenhauerian grounding of morality.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Coplan 2011 suggests that empathy can provide “experiential understanding” of others. Montague 2014 appeals to resemblance (understood as “convey[ing] the intrinsic qualitative character” of something (Montague 2014, 45)), along with causation, in explaining how phenomenological properties, affective and otherwise, represent objective properties. Combining these proposals with the epistemic pluralism in Cummins et al. 2014 would provide at least the start of a contemporary analogue of the Lockean account I have described.

⁴⁷ Schopenhauer 1841. I discuss the relevant parts of Schopenhauer’s metaethics in “Schopenhauer and Non-Cognitivist Moral Realism.”

⁴⁸ This paper has benefited from comments and discussion with Jonathan Cottrell, Don Garrett, Dan Halliday, Tristram McPherson, Mike Raven, Sagar Sanyal, Jeff Sebo, Jonathan Simon, Sharon Street, Matthew Stuart, and two anonymous referees.

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