

24.201 Topics in History of Philosophy: KANT

Primary and Secondary Qualities in Kant

1. *Primary and Secondary Qualities.* Many philosophers and scientists have distinguished the 'primary' qualities of objects, such as their shape and size, from 'secondary' qualities, such as colour and taste. The distinction receives its most famous expression in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Primary qualities are supposed to be objective, intrinsic, categorical; secondary qualities are supposed to be subjective, relational, dispositional. We came across the distinction in Kant's *Prolegomena Refutation of Idealism*, where he compares his own philosophy with that of Locke.

2. *Are the qualities of phenomena primary or secondary?* We get conflicting answers from Kant. According to Kant, phenomenal properties are all secondary qualities (see quotation i, from the *Prolegomena*) and they are all primary qualities (see quotation ii) from the *Critique*). How can they be both? An additional problem: if Kant makes all the qualities secondary, his philosophy ends up looking very like Berkeley's, as we saw when we looked at his 'Refutations of Idealism'.

i. That it can be said of many of the predicates of outer things, without detriment to their real existence, that they belong not to these things in themselves but only to their appearances...is something that was generally accepted and admitted long before Locke's time, but more so afterwards. To these predicates belong heat, colour, taste, etc... I for weighty reasons also count as mere appearances, in addition to these, the remaining qualities of bodies which are called *primariae*, extension, place, and space in general with all that depends on it (impenetrability or materiality, shape, etc.). (*Prolegomena*, Ak. IV. 288; tr. Lucas 45.)

ii. The taste of a wine does not belong to the wine's objective properties, not even if by the wine as an object we mean the wine as appearance, but to the special constitution of sense in the subject that tastes it. Colours are not properties of the bodies to the intuition of which they are attached, but only modifications of the sense of sight, which is affected in a certain manner by light...Taste and colours...are connected with the appearances only as effects accidentally added by the particular constitution of the sense organs. (A28) The knowledge of things as actual does not, indeed, demand immediate *perception* (and therefore, sensation of which we are conscious) of the object whose existence is to be known...from the perception of the attracted iron filings we know of the existence of a magnetic matter pervading all bodies, although the constitution of our organs cuts us off from all immediate perception of this medium. (A226/B273)

Resolution: phenomenal properties are in one way secondary, because they are dispositional and relational. This matches in part the traditional profile of a secondary quality. Phenomenal properties are in another way primary, because they are objective and scientific. This matches in part the traditional profile of a primary quality. Putting these different aspects together, phenomenal properties are roughly what Locke called the 'qualities of a third kind', i.e. *tertiary qualities*. This dissolves the apparent contradiction; and it yields a philosophy which is nothing like Berkeley's, since tertiary qualities can be as mind-independent as you like. Corollary: Ignorance of things as they are in themselves is best interpreted as ignorance of categorical and intrinsic properties. In other words, this solution to the problem we started with provides further support for ascribing Humility to Kant.

3. *What are Kant's 'primary' qualities?* They are of two basic kinds: dynamical (involving forces) and spatial. See the Postulates of Empirical Thought A225/B273-A266-B218; Axioms of Intuition and Anticipations of Perception A162/B202-A176/B218.

4. *Some metaphysical principles/prejudices*

Intrinsicness requirement: If there are relations, there must be intrinsic properties — (a) grounding those relations (strong); or (b) somewhere or other (weak). Kant seems to accept (b) but not (a). Primary qualities have been traditionally cited to serve this role.

Categoricity requirement: If there are dispositions, there must be categorical properties — (a) grounding those dispositions (strong); or (b) somewhere or other (weak). Kant seems to accept (b) but not (a). Primary qualities have been traditionally cited to serve this role too.

5. *Objectivity and the primary, secondary and tertiary qualities.* In 'Things Without the Mind', Gareth Evans argues that a commitment to objectivity requires more than an overarching spatial framework and the possibility of reidentifying particular things (as Strawson had said): it requires something like a 'primitive mechanics', which involves something like a primary/secondary quality distinction. However, even if we grant Evans the argument that something is needed beyond secondary qualities, he is mistaken in thinking that this something needs to be the primary qualities: after all, the *tertiary* qualities are just as objective and scientific as the traditional primary qualities are: they are mind-independent; they can provide resources for a primitive mechanics; they could be catholic, i.e. could be the properties essential to all matter.