# Molyneux’s problem transcript

Speaker 1

Molyneux wrote to Locke with the following question:

Suppose there was a man who was born blind and had ideas from the senses of touch and smell and hearing. So this man might have the idea of a square from the fact that he could touch squares. Molyneux, said suppose this man recovered his sight by a miracle. Would he then recognise the square that he saw as a square, or would he have to learn a new idea of the square. the visual idea of a square, which then he would have to figure out was the same thing as the idea that he'd got through touch?

This was a challenge to Locke because according to Locke, the ideas were specific to the specific senses.

An idea of the square that you got through touch could not be the same idea as the idea of a square that you got through seeing, but it seems very plausible that if someone saw a square and was touching a square, then would identify this immediately without reason to be the same thing.

So this was a challenge to Locke’s claim that ideas had to be associated only with particular senses.

This is an empirical question. It's a question that has to be answered by empirical science. The answer to the question is not obvious.

There are some occasions when people have recovered their sight, and in fact their visual experience then is extremely confusing to them. Although actually a source of great joy, but it's not as if the world suddenly seems obviously to contain the things that they thought it contained.

Locke may have been onto something here.

Speaker 3

Suppose a man born blind are now adult and taught by his touch to distinguish between a cube and a sphere. Suppose then the cube and sphere via place on a table, and the blind man to be made to see query whether by his sight before he touched them he could now distinguish and tell which is the globe which the cube?

Speaker 2

Locke drew an important distinction between primary qualities and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are those that are intrinsic to objects. Things like their size and shape and motion.

Secondary qualities are those that we perceive like colour and taste and smell that depend on our own sensory organs.

Now, in the case of secondary qualities, it seems pretty obvious that they are sense dependent colour is something that I perceive by sight but I can't smell it, I can't taste it. With primary qualities on the other hand, that is the qualities that are supposed to be there in objects such as shape and motion we might well feel that we can perceive those by different senses.

I can perceive the shape of something by sight, but I can also perceive it by touch and this is one of the things that makes us more inclined to think that it really is a quality of the object that what I see as shape or what I feel as shape really resembles a quality of the object. But does the idea of shape that I get through sight really resemble the idea of shape that I get by feel? Or are they really just two very different ideas?

This is a problem that was raised by a friend of Locke, William Molyneux in 1688. He put it like this:

suppose a man born blind and now adult and taught by his touch to distinguish between a cube and a sphere of the same metal and nighly of the same bigness. So as to tell when he felt one and tubber which is the cube and which the sphere.

Suppose then the cub and sphere placed on a table, and the blind man to be made to see. The question is whether, by his sight, before he touched them, he could now distinguish and tell which is the globe, which the cube?

This is a very interesting question and Molyneux pointed out to Locke that most of the people to whom he'd put the question said yes, he would be able to tell. A man who knew what a cube and a sphere felt like would be able to tell which of his visual ideas corresponded to the cube and which to the sphere.

And you might think, well, that's easy, isn't it? Because a sphere is symmetrical, it's the same from any direction. The cube has corners. Surely somebody getting those visual ideas would be able to tell the difference between the idea of a sphere and the idea of a cube?

But actually Molyneux said no, he wouldn't be able to because he's never had visual ideas before. He would not be able to associate the visual ideas of the cube and the sphere with the tactile ideas that he's got through his life, and Locke agreed.

Were Molyneux and Locke correct?

That is a very difficult question, and in the centuries.

Since Locke wrote Molyneux’s problem has provoked a great deal of research in cognitive psychology, and it remains of interest today.

