

If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a ...



Locke would attempt to answer this question with his dualist account of perception and his theory of primary and secondary qualities. He believes that all the sense data that we perceive comes from one of these two groups. He claims that primary qualities actually represent the material things as we perceive them, these qualities are solidity, extension, figure, motion and number. However, Locke thinks that secondary qualities, (such as texture, colour, sound and taste), have no relation to the objects from which they come.

So it can be said that if sensation was to be taken away then all that would be left of any material thing would be its primary qualities. Therefore, secondary qualities are merely 'powers to produce sensations in us' which can only be brought about by changes in the primary qualities of a body. These powers differ from the (bare or mere) powers that Locke saw as a tertiary qualities, such as the power of sunlight to melt ice. To Locke, these powers serve to add weight to his claim that secondary qualities are not present in the objects that they come from, for example, grass affects our mind by causing an idea of 'greenness' in the same way that sunlight can affect ice by causing it to become water.

Locke believes that an objects qualities cause ideas which we falsely associate to that object, whereas in reality our ideas of objects are merely ideas about the collection of the objects qualities. Locke's work on this subject was similar to Boyle's as both wanted to at least question the commonly held assumption that all the sensible qualities of material things had a separate reality from that which we sense. In fact, much of the grounding for Locke's views comes from Robert Boyle's studies on the <https://assignbuster.com/if-a-tree-falls-in-a-forest-and-there-is-no-one-there-to-hear-it-does-it-make-a-noise/>

corpuscularian hypothesis, this was an attempt to analyse material objects by analysing their smallest indivisible particles (corpuscles). In Boyle's opinion all material things contain the same matter which can be divided and extended as well as being impenetrable, because of this Boyle claims that differences in the arrangement and motion of the corpuscles must be responsible for differences in the properties of the objects. Similarly to Locke, Boyle believed that material objects have sensible qualities, which are reliant upon other qualities, but this does not mean that what we sense is present in the objects. In fact the qualities that we assume bear a direct resemblance to the object are dependant on our means of interpreting sense data.

For example, a banana only becomes yellow under certain sensory conditions in the same way that a pin only becomes painful to a human under certain conditions. Therefore, yellowness is no more a quality of a banana than painfulness is of a pin. Despite this, Boyle is confident that at least some sensible qualities of an object are directly relative to its material qualities such as shape and size. It can be said that both Locke and Boyle would more than likely agree to answer the question of whether a tree falling in a forest with no one is there to hear it, makes a sound by claiming that sound is only a sensation in the mind and does not exist in the material forest.

According to his theory, Locke would say that the vibration of air particles caused by the falling tree can in no way be considered sound, if the vibrating air particles do happen to reach an auditory sense organ then they can go on to cause a sensation of sound inside the mind of the affected creature. All that exists outside the mind, in this scenario, is a quality and a power, Locke <https://assignbuster.com/if-a-tree-falls-in-a-forest-and-there-is-no-one-there-to-hear-it-does-it-make-a-noise/>

would also emphasise the differences between the vibrating air particles which are very much external and the sound sensation which exists only in the mind. Locke would be able to justify his theory further with the aid of modern science, where transducers can change electricity into visible light and radio waves into audible sense data, in a very similar fashion to that which Locke seems to believe our sense organs operate. George Berkeley and Locke agreed about the empiricist doctrine and particularly that all we can know are ideas and that these ideas come from experience and sensation, however, Berkeley was much more of an idealist than either Locke or Boyle. He finds fault with Locke's theory on qualities because he feels that if we accept that material objects give rise to sensation and all we can know is ideas, then we must also accept that we cannot know that there is a material world where these ideas are have their original route, which Locke's theory is reliant on.

Consequently, Berkeley believes that ideas can only resemble ideas. This leads to a criticism of the specific distinction that Locke chose to make between primary qualities and secondary qualities, Berkeley's opinion is that Locke's primary qualities are no more relative to the world than his secondary qualities. For example, Locke claims that size (extension) and shape (figure) are primary qualities and therefore exist outside the mind in the material world, however looking at objects from different physical perspectives, such as observing from different distances and angles, can radically alter these qualities in our minds. Locke's theory that primary qualities exist objectively is also challenged on his point that that we cant think of objects without their primary qualities, whereas we can think of

objects without their secondary qualities. Simply trying to conceive chocolate as being chocolate without its smell, taste, colour and texture delivers a strong challenge to this key argument.

With reference to the title question, Berkeley would agree with Locke that if nobody is present to hear the tree falling, then it cannot make a sound because nobody is there to perceive it. Furthermore, he believed objects to be a collection of perceptions that as humans we name and categorise, his famous phrase 'esse est percipi' or 'to be is to be perceived' sums up his theory. A criticism of Berkeley can be made on this point because if there is nobody present in a forest when a tree falls, and we assume Berkeley's theory of why the tree does not make a sound is correct, then we can only conclude that the tree, the ground, and in fact the whole forest would not exist as well as the sound simply because none of these things are being perceived. This seems to result in a strange world where objects can flash in and out of existence dependant on where someone happens to be looking.

However, Berkeley is capable of countering this argument by either by agreeing that such a world would be very odd but still entirely plausible or by claiming (as he in fact did) that God will always be present in the forest and His collection of perceptions are what we know as the material world and nature. However, it is easy to argue back to this because if God is always present in nature and perceives everything, then surely Berkeley's original view that the falling tree would not make a sound with nobody present is wrong, as God would perceive the sound. Other than on these points it is generally agreed that Berkeley's theory is extremely resistant to criticism; 'though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it'

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(Boswell, 1979, b3). This represents the view of many people who have read Berkeley's theory and deciding they did not want to accept such a sceptical theory with no evidence (aside from skepticism itself) to prove it.

In essence though Berkeley's argument is far more logically sound than that of either Boyle or Locke, who have obvious discrepancies in their accounts, whereas the only criticisms of Berkeley's arguments seem to come from the fact that philosophers and intellectual thinkers are extremely unwilling to accept the theory of global skepticism that acceptance of Berkeley's account would almost certainly entail. Berkeley himself would not have wanted to accept global scepticism as the be all and end all of human understanding, however he was able to use religion almost as an escape from the physically and morally empty world of scepticism. Increasingly philosophers since Berkeley's time are unwilling to fall back on God in an attempt to make scepticism seem to be a more agreeable explanation of the world. However, to try to use Locke's 'Essay Concerning Human Understanding' as a preferable option to Berkeley's theory is almost pointless as Locke also draws on scepticism, albeit a far more diluted form of scepticism, he then tries to deny scepticism with relation to primary qualities and for many philosophers this is far too much of a contradiction to see past.

Perhaps Locke's biggest problem in his Essay was the obstacle of language, however he was aware of this issue, he knew that language is almost completely debilitated when being used to attempt to describe something that is and always has been unobservable (in his case primary qualities and powers). This is easy to forget when analysing Locke because it is plain that his aim is to find truth, but human understanding is limited and trying to <https://assignbuster.com/if-a-tree-falls-in-a-forest-and-there-is-no-one-there-to-hear-it-does-it-make-a-noise/>

discover truth about something that is unperceivable seems impossible.

Moreover, the fact that something is inexplicable does not mean that it is false. In conclusion, Locke's answer to the question of the falling tree is far more difficult to accept than Berkeley's, or at least it is far easier to refute Locke's views than those of Berkeley.

There are obvious fallacy in Locke's essay, such as the failure to distinguish between primary and secondary qualities, and these make his theory seem very unlikely, even when the problem of language is taken fully into account.