

Essay Guideline: Locke's Inference to the Best Explanation

Essay question: According to Locke, how can we be sure that the world is as it appears?

Before beginning this essay, read the John Locke chapter of the text. It's the one entitled, "John Locke." It's in the text.

Outline:

- I. Briefly outline Locke's representative realism:
 - a. The external world exists independently of us.
 - b. We are aware of it only indirectly, by means of mental representations.
 - c. Because of the veil of perception, we cannot directly assess the accuracy of those representations. We must rely upon an inference to the best explanation to determine whether these representations are accurate.
- II. Briefly describe the distinction between primary and secondary qualities:
 - a. Primary qualities are those that are really "out there" in the object. These include size, shape, motion/rest, number, and structure.
 - b. Secondary qualities are those that arise from the interaction of an object's primary qualities and the observer's sensory systems. They are *not* "out there" in the object. Secondary qualities include smell, taste, sound, color, and feelings of warmth or coldness.
 - c. The issue of the accuracy of our mental representations applies *only* to primary qualities.
- III. Present and explain the causation thesis:
 - a. Causation thesis: A mental state is a representation of an object only if it was caused by that object.
 - b. This thesis has nothing to do with whether the representation is accurate.
 - c. Its purpose is to filter out non-representative mental states (e.g., hallucinations).
- IV. Present and explain the resemblance thesis:
 - a. Resemblance thesis: A mental representation is accurate only if it is caused in the right way.
 - b. Its purpose is to rule out inaccurate mental representations (e.g., illusions).
- V. Present and explain the inference to the best explanation:
 - a. A mental state that has all of the following characteristics is very likely to meet the requirements of the causation and resemblance theses:
 - i. Vivid
 - ii. Stable
 - iii. Detailed
 - iv. Coherent
 - v. Involuntary
 - b. Many of our ordinary experiences meet these conditions, and thus are probably accurate representations of the world.
 - c. Locke acknowledges that this argument does not offer *proof* of the accuracy of our representations. Instead, it merely makes this probable.