

Scepticism and the World of Sense (Summary)

Alistair Young

Matter, traditionally, has often been analysed in terms of spatial properties like length, breadth and depth, and extension in time (Descartes, for example), and often in these terms together with the notion of force (Locke, for example). The addition of force seems to emphasise the involvement of touch in the analysis (Locke, again). Force seems to be something felt. The epistemology of matter, therefore, might take touch as a starting point. As I shall argue, however, difficulties arise.

I consider two (apparently plausible) conditions which have to be satisfied if an object is to count as material. These conditions are, firstly, that the object should exert force and then, secondly, that, in one sense of 'resistance', it should offer resistance. An example would be that it resists being moved (i.e. that it resists in that it has inertia). A sceptic might agree that, with the sense of touch, we can feel things outside us exert forces on various parts of our bodies. Now, if we are not being subjected to perceptual error, these parts of our bodies must offer resistance in the sense above. If there is a force, there must be some resistance to it. But there seems to be no way, when we use touch, in which we can know anything else satisfies the second condition. When an object resists my attempts, say, to move it, I do indeed feel forces – forces which impede and hinder the movement of that part of my body which I use to make the attempt. But I do not seem to feel, as something direct and additional, the object's resistance to being moved, here, that is, its inertia.

Now it is difficult to generalise from one's own body, where the presence of resistance can be established, to other objects. And so something like an other minds problem arises, this time in respect to what one would uncritically take to be other pieces of matter. The sceptic's opponent seems to need some proof that his own body doesn't constitute an isolated exception among physical things. An empiricist account of matter, therefore, certainly if it is confined to the sense of touch, seems to be inadequate. The deficiency is not so much that it fails to provide a sufficient condition, but that it can't even satisfy one of the necessary conditions of what counts as a material object.