Ideas vs. Qualities:

(Look at Bk. II, Ch. viii, Paragraph 8--p. 54)

Ideas exist in our minds. They are what we are immediately related to in any conscious experiences. Locke, like Descartes, distinguishes what is in our minds from (metaphysically) “real” objects that exist in world outside of our minds, a world that would exist whether or not there were any minds at all.

Qualities are the “powers” in objects to produce ideas in our minds. So qualities are just the properties that exist in (are the properties of) objects that exist outside our minds. These objects would continue to exist, and continue to have whatever qualities or properties they have, whether or not there were any minds at all. Objects have all sorts of qualities. Different qualities ‘in’ the object are the causes for various ideas or sensations in our minds. So, for example, it is the shape of an object (it’s property or quality of having some particular shape) that causes us to have a particular idea or sensation of shape. Likewise, it is the color of an object (it’s property or quality of having a particular color) that causes us to have a particular ideas or sensation of color.

All of this should make sense. And a fundamental part of the above distinction is this: ideas exist in minds (and can’t exist in the world outside of minds) while qualities exists in the objects that exists outside of minds (and so are never identical to the ideas they cause to exist in our minds). Ideas are in our minds; Qualities are not--they are in the world outside our minds.

Remember this last point because Locke very often speaks in a way that suggests something entirely different. But regardless of how Locke sometimes speaks, the distinction itself seems absolutely clear.
Primary vs. Secondary Qualities:

Listed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Qualities</th>
<th>Secondary Qualities (a.k.a. sensible qualities)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>size</td>
<td>color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shape</td>
<td>sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weight (mass)</td>
<td>taste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>texture</td>
<td>smell</td>
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<tr>
<td>motion</td>
<td>feel</td>
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<tr>
<td>place</td>
<td>warmth or coolness</td>
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The distinction: There are two independent ways Locke distinguishes primary from secondary qualities. These ways are related, but not identical. And Locke only vaguely implies how each is relevant to the other.

Reducible vs. Non-reducible

According to the “atomic” theory (in its most basic form), big things are composed of collections of little things. So, for example, a table is “nothing but” (is reducible to) a collection of small things. These small things are “tiny particles” out of which big things are composed. The fundamental (or smallest) small things out of which everything else is composed have been historically known at “atoms.” (“Atom,” in Greek, simply means uncuttable.)

If big things are composed of small things, then the properties of big things must ultimately be explained in terms of the properties of the small things out of which they are composed. So, if big things are “reducible” to small things, then the properties of bigs things must be “reducible to” (explainable in terms of) the properties of the small things out which big things are composed. So, there are the ultimate or foundational properties of small things, and then all
other properties (if they really are properties of big things) must be reducible to the properties of small things.

What are the fundamental or ultimate properties of small things--of atoms? It is the job of science to tell us what specific properties atoms actually have. But note, the distinction between fundamental and reducible properties is part of any atomistic explanation. Different scientific theories will hypothesize different specific fundamental properties, but all atomist theories will distinguish between fundamental properties and reducible properties.

Now, if you take a look at the list of what Locke calls primary qualities you will see that these are the fundamental properties of atoms for Newtonian physics. (Or very close to it.) For Newton, atoms were little chunks of stuff occupying space, so the fundamental properties of these chunks were properties that such “chunk” would have: size, shape, weight (mass), texture (this is really just a kind of shape), motion, and place. So on this Newtonian picture, these are the “original” (or fundamental) properties of all things. Any other properties, if they are real, must be reducible to these fundamental properties. That is, all other properties must (because of the very nature of atomistic explanations) be reducible to this “primary” qualities. In the end, all other properties “really are” just collections of these primary qualities.

So, those are the primary qualities. Secondary qualities, nevertheless (given what Locke says in paragraph 8) are still qualities--that is, they are still powers in object to produce ideas in our minds. But if what we have said above is correct, these secondary qualities (which are “in” the objects”) “really are” just collections of primary qualities.

This is part, but not all, of how Locke distinguishes primary from secondary qualities.

Understanding what else Locke says about the distinction can get confusing because of the language Locke uses. But, once again, there are places in the text where he explains the distinction is a clear way, where he says exactly what (I claim) he really means. One such place
is paragraph 15, where Locke claims (I am paraphrasing here) that our ideas of primary qualities are resemblances of them but our ideas of secondary qualities are not.

Before saying more, note clearly what he is saying here: the difference between primary and secondary qualities (of the difference he is describing here) has to do with the ideas they cause in our minds. That is, the difference is not so much in the qualities themselves, but in the kinds of ideas they cause in us. Primary qualities are the qualities (of objects) that cause ideas in our minds where these ideas (in our minds) actually resemble the qualities (in the object) that caused these ideas in our minds. Secondary qualities, on the other hand, are the qualities (of objects) that cause ideas in our minds where these ideas (in our minds) do not resemble the qualities (in the object) that caused these ideas in our minds. So, given what he says here, both primary and secondary qualities are “in” objects (not in our minds). Our ideas of primary qualities are resemblances of those qualities, while our ideas of secondary qualities are not resemblances of those qualities.

Now just take that last sentence, and add to it what we said about. Our ideas of secondary qualities are not resembles of those qualities in the object that caused us to have those ideas. Furthermore, the secondary qualities themselves (which are “in” the objects and not “in” our mind) are reducible to primary qualities. According to any atomic theory, any non-ultimate qualities (such as Locke’s secondary of sensible qualities) are, in the end, nothing but collections of primary qualities.

This is about as clearly as I can explain Locke’s position. Note, on this explanation, it is just plain false to say that secondary qualities exist in the mind. The reason Locke is sometimes thought to say this--and the reason Locke himself very clearly suggest this--has to the natural confusion that exists in the words we use to talk about these things. It just so happens that the very words in question -- words like “sound,” “shape,” “color,” “temperature,” etc., are sometimes use to refer to ideas our sensation that exist only in our minds, and at other times are used to refer to the qualities of objects in the world that typically causes these kinds of sensations.
in our minds. So, we want to make the distinction perfectly clear, but the words that we have become accustomed to using can very easily and without notice slip back into mixing them up.

This happens all throughout Locke’s text. And it directly influences Berkeley’s understanding of what Locke means.