

*BOOK 4*

LOCKE ON KNOWLEDGE AND GOD

# LOCKE'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Locke begins *Book 4* with a definition of knowledge:

“Knowledge is ... nothing but the perception of the connection and agreement, or disagreement and repugnance, of any of our ideas. In this alone it consists.” [p.339]

Think about how we use the word ‘knowledge’ in ordinary contexts and about how odd this definition is.

Locke goes on to claim that this knowledge is sometimes direct and sometimes indirect. He calls it *intuitive knowledge* when it is direct, and *demonstrative knowledge* when it is indirect.

As an example of knowledge that is direct Locke cites that “Three are more than Two, and equal to One and Two.”

As an example of knowledge that is indirect, Locke refers to the fact that a triangle’s three angles are equal to two right angles. This degree of knowledge requires proof.

He then identifies a third “degree” of knowledge which he calls ‘*sensitive knowledge*’. This is knowledge of “the existence of particular external objects, by that perception and consciousness we have of the actual entrance of ideas from them.”

Note, however, that this violates his own definition of *knowledge*.

In cases where these degrees of knowledge are not present, according to Locke, we have only *belief* or *opinion*.

His distinction between knowledge and belief is quite similar to our distinction between *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge.

Locke’s basic idea here is that in those cases where the nominal essence of a thing is also its real essence we can have knowledge of it, but when the nominal and real essences are different we cannot have knowledge of it.

With respect to substances like gold and lead, his position is that although they have observable and discoverable properties like their malleability and their solubility in some acids but not in others, we cannot know of their real essences. So, of these we may have beliefs but we cannot have knowledge.

On the other hand, with respect to geometrical figures, since their nominal and real essences are identical, we can have knowledge of these. A triangle is not a material thing, but a shape.

## Skeptical Objections:

If knowledge lies in the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our own ideas, won't the reasoning's of the drunk and sober man be equally certain?

Locke answers this by saying that “Our knowledge ... is real only so far as there is a conformity between our ideas and the reality of things.” [p. 356]

And we can be assured that this is the case: a) with all simple ideas, since the mind is passive vis-à-vis them, and b) with all of our complex ideas which are not about substances, since these are their own archetypes.

But does this really answer the question? We want to know why the drunk is wrong when he thinks there is a snake on the wall and we think it is only a rope. I.e., what is the difference between perceptions that are veridical and those that are not?

The closest that Locke seems to come to a reply to this is that “It is ... the actual receiving of ideas from without that gives us notice that something does exist at that time without us, which causes that idea in us, though perhaps we neither know nor consider how it does it.” [p. 363] And he then goes on to suggest that veridical perceptions are just qualitatively different from perceptions that aren't.

But this doesn't seem to solve the problem, first because the drunk may well think that his perceptions are just as veridical as ours, and second because the skeptic will ask how we know that *any* perceptions are veridical.

So Locke seems to have no satisfactory answer to the question of how we know that we are actually receiving ideas from without, and not dreaming or hallucinating.

Note also here that Locke is simply helping himself to the assumption that we know that our ideas of substances are caused by substances.

Some of the things Locke claims that we cannot know:

Although we do have intuitive knowledge of self, we cannot know whether or not matter can think, or whether the soul is or is not immaterial.

“We have the ideas of matter and thinking, but possibly shall never be able to know whether any mere material being thinks or not, it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own ideas, without revelation, to discover whether omnipotence has not given to some systems of matter fitly disposed a power to perceive and think, or else joined and fixed to matter so disposed a thinking immaterial substance.” [p. 346]

So Locke is a skeptic when it comes to the mind/body problem.

We cannot know what the connection is between the secondary qualities and the primary qualities upon which they depend.

“We are so far from knowing what figure, size, or motion of parts produce a yellow color, a sweet taste, or a sharp sound that we can by no means conceive how any size, figure, or motion of any particles can possibly produce in us the idea of any color, taste, or sound whatsoever; there is no conceivable connection between the one and the other.” [p. 348]

We cannot know what the necessary connection is between cause and effect.

“Though causes work steadily in this, and effects constantly flow from them, yet their connections and dependencies being not discoverable in our ideas, we can have but an experimental knowledge of them.” [p. 354]

But the problem isn't just that we don't know what the connections are, it is also that Locke doesn't seem to have given us a reason for thinking that there are any connections.

This point is going to be extremely important when we come to Hume and Kant. What, we might ask, makes us think that there is a necessary connection? He simply assumes it without going into it. In fact, throughout the work he assumes all kinds of causal relations, for example, that the primary qualities of objects cause the ideas of primary qualities in our minds. As we will see, Hume denies that there is a necessary connection and maintains that we just habitually assume a connection; while Kant will maintain that it is a presupposition we cannot help but make.



# LOCKE'S GOD

When he wrote the Essay, Locke thought that the Ontological Proof for the existence of God needed to be supplemented with his own versions of the Cosmological Proofs. Later, however, he rejected the Ontological Proof on the grounds that the existence of a thing couldn't be proved from an idea alone.

Locke's versions of the Cosmological Proof proceed as follows:

# A FIRST FORMULATION:

## Part 1:

P1) Something cannot come from nothing. (Known *a priori*)

P2) He exists as a thinking thing.

P3) If something exists, then either it is eternal or it has a beginning in time.

P4) If something has a beginning in time, then by the causal principle it owes its existence to something external.

P5) But this same argument can then be run through with this second being.

C1) From eternity there has been something.

Note: There is an equivocation here. The conclusion that follows is that (a) There has never been a time when nothing existed. But Locke needs the stronger conclusion that (b) Some one thing has always existed.

## Part 2:

P6) If x is the causal source of the properties of y, then x contains these properties in itself. (This is the “heirloom” model of causality.)

## Part 3:

P7) No material being (without outside interference) could be a thinking thing.

P8) Nothing exists that could cause this thinking thing to think.

C2) An eternal thinking being exists.

With respect to P6 and P7 Locke asserts that , “... it is impossible to conceive that ever bare incogitative matter should produce a thinking intelligent being as that nothing should of itself produce matter.”

Yet elsewhere he maintains that mind might just be matter.

And, if I am not mistaken, he commits several fallacies in trying to support these premises. For example, on p. 361 he evidently commits the fallacy of composition when he maintains that , “... if they will not allow matter as matter, that is, every particle of matter to be cogitative as well as extended, they will have as hard a task to make out to their own reasons a cogitative being out of incogitative particles.”

# A SECOND FORMULATION:

P1) Everything not from eternity (i.e., everything that hasn't always existed) has a beginning.

This seems tautological.

P2) Everything that has a beginning must be produced by something else.

This is a particularly strong version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. But what right does Locke have to employ it if it isn't innate?

C1) There must be something that has always existed.

Someone on the Net has suggested that Locke doesn't mean "something in particular" here, but "something in general." This makes no sense to me, unless he means to be suggesting that the conclusion should be read as "something or other." But it is clear from the next premise that Locke does mean something in particular.

P3) Something that has always existed must be the unified source for all things that do begin from something else.

P4) Something that has always existed as a unified source for all things that do begin from something else must have knowledge.

C2) God (as an eternal all-knowing being) exists.

# A PROBLEM WITH LOCKE'S GOD:

Locke claims that we have demonstrative knowledge of the existence of God. But God is a substance, and he claims that we have no knowledge of substances. This looks to me like a straight forward contradiction. Am I missing something here?

However, although we can have demonstrative knowledge of the existence of God, human understanding is limited, and some revealed truths, e.g., “that the dead shall rise, and live again” are above reason. If it is a revelation from God it is, of course, bound to be true, “But whether it be a divine revelation, or no, reason must judge.”

Surprisingly enough, when it comes to morality, Locke maintains that, because the relevant ideas are modes, whose real essences we either do or can come to know, he thinks that it may be possible to “place morality amongst the sciences capable of demonstration: wherein I doubt not, but from self-evident propositions, by necessary consequences, as incontestable as those in mathematics, the measures of right and wrong might be made out.” [p. 350]

Such a moral science would be based, first, on the idea of God as “a supreme being, infinite in power, goodness and wisdom,” and on the idea of ourselves as beings with understanding and rationality, and who are created by and dependent on God. From this it self-evidently follows both that we can understand God’s will and that we should obey it: we “as certainly know that man is to honor, fear, and obey God, As ... that three, four, and seven, are less than fifteen.”

Unfortunately, despite the urging from his friend William Molyneux, he never attempted to construct a system of morality.