**An Essay Concerning Human Understanding** - John Locke

Introduction

In this section, Locke simply outlines the goals of his book which are “to inquire into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent” (p.22).

He considers it useful for us to ascertain before all other endeavours the exact capacity of the human mind and where its limits are because without this we might be tempted into “meddling with things exceeding its comprehension” (p.24). This is one reason why there are many questions and disputes, because people are “extending their inquiries beyond their capacities” (p.26).

However, he does point out that unwarranted scepticism regarding the mind is also uncalled for saying that disbelieving everything because we cannot be certain of anything is like someone who refuses to use their legs to move because they have no wings to fly.

Finally, Locke defines ‘idea’ as “whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks” (pp.26-27).

Book I – Neither Principles nor Ideas Are Innate

This first book is all about refuting the notion that “there are in the understanding certain innate principles… stamped upon the mind of man” (p.27). The two examples Locke uses in the first section on **speculative** (or ‘theoretical’) **principles** are “What is, is” and “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be”.

The **first argument** usually given for this notion is the one from universal consent. The first problem with it is that it doesn’t *prove* certain ideas are innate. The bigger problem is that Locke doesn’t feel there are any ideas “to which all mankind give an universal assent.” (p.28) Obviously, these innate principles are not known to children, the mentally handicapped, illiterate, “savages”, etc. One might argue that children are just unaware of these innate principles in their own minds. Locke doesn’t buy this; “imprinting, if it signify anything, being nothing else but the making certain truths to be perceived.” (p.29) A mind cannot have an innate idea and not know it. Nor can we say that what is innate is the “capacity of knowing” (p.30) because then every single truth people come to know will have to be considered innate.

The **second argument** is that these innate truths are perceived by children only when they come into the use of reason. This fails by way of Locke’s first argument above but also for two other reasons. First, if reason is needed to uncover innate truths, then how are they different from all other truths which people reason about? Indeed, reason is “nothing else but the faculty of deducing unknown truths from principles or propositions that are already known” (p.31), but this is the exact opposite of what innate truths are supposed to be. Second, even when people acquire the use of reason (i.e. when children become adults), they don’t always or necessarily come to know these supposedly innate truths.

A **third argument** given is that as soon as the innate principles are proposed, they are understood. Locke rejects this because there are many propositions assented to as soon as they are heard and no one suggests all of these are innate. Nor can it be said that those “less general” principles are assented to only as consequences of the “more universal propositions which are looked on as innate principles” (p.38) because in many cases the former are accepted without knowledge of more general maxims. Indeed, a child knows many things; e.g. “the nurse that feeds it is neither the cat it plays with, nor the blackmoor it is afraid of” (p.43), and yet obviously doesn’t know the principle outlined earlier; viz. “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be”.

Locke continues from this to argue that assent to propositions on first hearing them is actually a proof that they are not innate. If they were truly innate, why would they need to be heard about from other people? Surely, if innate is to mean anything, it must mean something like present in the understanding? Hence, the fact that people assent to them only after being taught them is proof they are learned and not innate. In addition, if there really are innate principles, they ought to “appear fairest and clearest in those persons in whom yet we find no footsteps of them” (p.44); i.e. those “least corrupted by custom, or borrowed opinions” (p.44), e.g. children and the illiterate. Unfortunately, we find no general, innate principles in these groups; rather, they are the “language and business of the schools and academies of learned nations” (p.45).

Locke now turns to consider innate **practical principles**. He argues these enjoy even less universal agreement than the speculative principles from earlier. It is also clear they “require reasoning and discourse, and some exercise of the mind, to discover the certainty of their truth.” (p.46) In other words; “Moral rules need a proof, ergo not innate.” (p.48)

The **first argument** Locke considers here **for innate practical principles** is that although people deny them in practice, they admit them in their thoughts. Locke rejects this because “the actions of men [are] the best interpreters of their thoughts” (p.47) and there is no point in having innate *practical* principles that don’t get put into action.

He also makes an interesting point here when he acknowledges that there are “natural tendencies imprinted on the minds of men [e.g. will and appetite]… but this makes nothing for innate characters on the mind, which are to be the principles of knowledge regulating our practice.” (p.48) Innate practical principles would be felt as strongly as our “natural tendencies” are. Moreover, these natural urges are nothing like innate *moral* principles because “if they were left to their full swing they would carry men to the overturning of all morality. Moral laws are set as a curb and restraint to these exorbitant desires” (p.56).

A **second argument** rests on conscience as a guide to our innate practical principles. Locke rejects this because to the extent that people have differing morals (exposing children, eating children, murders in duels, etc.), their consciences are pricked (they feel remorse) by different things.

Locke also notes as a mark against the theory that those who maintain there are such things as innate practical principles cannot tell us what they are. He also recycles the argument from earlier that if practical principles were innate, there would be no need to teach them. Something which is clearly false.

A **third argument** holds that although there are innate principles, they may be corrupted. First, this conflicts with the claim from the first section that innate principles are knowable by universal consent. Second, we would, once again, find them more clearly in children and the uneducated than in educated adults, but this is not the case.

In this final section of Book One, Locke notes that principles cannot be innate unless the ideas in the principles are also innate. This is an even bigger hurdle to overcome because few people would be willing to claim that we are born with innate ideas. He focuses on the idea of God and notes first how it is not universal, but even if it were, this would be no more proof of its innateness than the fact that ideas like fire, the sun, heat, or number must also be innate because they are universally assented to.

Book II – Of Ideas

In this section Locke will flesh out his understanding of *idea* with a taxonomy of sorts, and examine a few illustrative examples. The most important insight is the revelation that **all ideas we have, and *can* possibly have, come from experience and experience alone**. There are **two such experiential “fountains of knowledge”** (p.87, boldface added). The first is external, from the senses, called ***sensation***, and the second is internal, from the mind reflecting on the ideas it has, called ***reflection***. There is “nothing in our minds which did not come in one of these two ways.” (p.88)

A central plank in Locke’s book is that the soul lacks ideas until it begins to sense (i.e. there are no innate ideas) and to this end he attacks the notion that “the soul always thinks… and that actual thinking is as inseparable from the soul as actual extension is from the body” (p.90). He acknowledges that while awake, the soul “is never without thought” (p.92) but rejects the idea that in a dreamless sleep there is any thinking going on because “If a sleeping man thinks without knowing it, the sleeping and waking man are two persons.” (p.93) He also rejects the argument that one can think without being aware of it, noting that this as inane as saying “that a man is always hungry, but that he does not always feel it… hunger consists in that very sensation, as thinking consists in being conscious that one thinks.” (p.98) The conclusion is that the soul doesn’t think “before the senses have furnished it with ideas to think on” (p.99).

Ideas can be further divided into two types: **simple** and **complex**. Simple ideas are those which are irreducible. They can’t be invented at whim. As a proof of this, Locke would have one “try to fancy any taste which had never affected his palate; or frame the idea of a scent he had never smelt” (p.102). Complex ideas are made from combining simple ideas.

* **Simple ideas**:
  + Those which come into the minds by one sense only (**light**, **sounds**, **hardness**, etc.) Locke goes into some detail here regarding the idea of **solidity**.
  + Those which enter the minds by more than one sense (**space or extension**, **figure**, **rest**, **motion**)
  + Those which are derived from reflection only:
    - **Perception** (or thinking)
    - **Volition** (or willing)
  + Those suggested by both sensation and reflection:
    - **Pleasure** and **pain** – these feature as motives for our actions. Without these “we should have no reason to prefer one thought or action to another” (p.111). This also gives a reason for the existence of pain, i.e. as a warning of harm.
    - **Existence** – from the fact that ideas are in our minds
    - **Unity** – from the way we can consider something as one thing
    - **Power** – the ability to affect/change, and be affected/changed by, other bodies
    - **Succession** – ideas always coming and going “without intermission” (p.114)

Simple ideas of the sensations reveal that external bodies have what Locke calls **primary** and **secondary** qualities. Primary qualities are those “utterly inseparable from the body” (p.117); i.e. solidity, extension, figure, mobility and these give us the simple ideas of solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number. Secondary qualities come from things’ “power to produce various sensations in us by their primary qualities” (p.117). Examples include colours, sounds, tastes, etc. There is also a **third** quality Locke mentions in passing, being the ability of things to produce change in objects other than humans; e.g. the “power in fire to produce a new colour, or consistency, in wax or clay” (p.118). An important consequence of the above is that the “ideas of the primary alone really exist… The secondary exist in things only as modes of the primary.” (p.120)

Locke now looks in some detail at how we come to possess knowledge. The first step is **perception** and this arises through sensation, although mere stimulation of a sense organ is insufficient – the mind must also notice it. Raw sensation may be altered by judgement and this then results in an altered perception. This is not necessarily bad though. One innocuous example is the way shadow in a painted form can create the perception of depth where there is none.

The next step is **retention** – “keeping of those simple ideas which from sensation or reflection it [the mind] hath received” (p.132) – and this happens in two ways; via **contemplation**, which is simply keeping the idea in mind; and **memory**. Other faculties important for knowledge include **discernment** (distinguishing between different ideas), **comparing**, **compounding** (making complex ideas), **naming**, and **abstraction** (forming universal concepts from particular beings).

The next section turns to **complex ideas**. There are three ways of forming complex ideas; (1) combining several simple ideas, (2) comparing two ideas without uniting them to obtain a relation, (3) separating the individual ideas that constitute a real thing, i.e. abstraction.

* Complex ideas can be grouped under three headings:
  + **Modes** – these are complex ideas which “contain not in them the supposition of subsisting by themselves, but are considered as dependences on, or affections of substances” (p.148)
    - **Simple modes** – variations of only one simple idea; e.g. a dozen (the idea of a single unit multiplied twelve times)
    - **Mixed modes** – ideas formed by combining a number of different ideas
  + **Substances** – “combinations of simple ideas as are taken to represent distinct particular things subsisting by themselves” (p.149)
    - Single
    - Collective
  + **Relations** – “the consideration and comparing [of] one idea with another” (p.149)

*Modes*

Locke now runs through some of the **simple modes** (which are actually complex ideas) that can be derived from simple idea of **space** (**immensity**, **figure**, and **place**). In this section, Locke gives three arguments for the possibility of a vacuum. In the first, he imagines a person placed at the edge of space (the “extremity of corporeal beings” (p.159)) and notes that they could nevertheless extend their hand out into a space which was empty before they put their hand in it. In the second, he imagines God stopping all motion and annihilating something so that what is left in the place of the annihilated thing must be an empty vacuum. Thirdly, he imagines dividing a solid object in such a way that the pieces can be moved about within the exterior boundary of the thing. The only way such movement could be possible is if the space occupied by the piece removed (to allow internal movement of the remaining pieces) were empty; i.e. a vacuum.

Locke next turns to time to investigate the simple idea of **duration**. First of all, its simple modes are “any different lengths of it whereof we have distinct ideas, as hours, days, years, &c., time and eternity.” (p.165) We get the idea of duration from reflection in which we note the constant train of ideas that flow through our minds. This gives us the idea of **succession**. Apprehending the ‘distance’ between these successive ideas is what gives us the idea of duration.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As proof of this, Locke notes that we have no perception of duration except when “ideas… take their turns in our understandings” (p.166). Indeed, when we sleep, and the succession of ideas stops, all perception of duration ceases with it. This also explains what happens when we focus on one idea intently, thereby eliminating our notice of the succession of ideas in our mind, and lose our grip on duration, failing to notice the passing of time.

Locke emphasises that we get the idea of succession from reflection on the ideas in our minds, not from motion. The reason is because even when we look at a body moving we perceive “yet no motion at all unless that motion produces a constant train of successive ideas” (p.167). This is evident from the fact that very slow and very fast motions are unperceived because they do not cause a “constant train of new ideas to follow one another immediately in our minds” (p.168).

**Time** is a simple mode of duration and is simply how we measure it. Here Locke emphasises that while we measure time by the motion of bodies, time is not the measure of motion. To measure motion, one also needs space and must also take into account the “bulk of the thing” (p.175). Motion is only useful as a measure of duration in the way “it constantly brings about the return of certain sensible ideas, in seeming equidistant periods.” (p.175)

Extending our ideas of time (minutes, hours, days, etc.) allows us to imagine duration “where nothing does really endure or exist” (p.180), e.g. tomorrow or next year. Adding these ideas of time together produces in us another simple mode of duration; **eternity**.

In the next section, Locke discusses the simple ideas of **duration** and **expansion** together. Expansion is distance or space as an abstract conception, distinguished from **extension** which expresses distance within solid matter and so includes the idea of **body**. The central premise here, foreshadowing Einstein just a little, is that expansion and duration “mutually embrace and comprehend each other; every part of space being in every part of duration, and every part of duration in every part of expansion.” (p.188) Locke remarks that the way these ideas are combined like this is unusual.

Space and expansion are alike in a number of ways. First, expansion is not “bounded by matter” (p.181); i.e. there can be space without a body occupying it, nor is duration bounded by motion. Secondly, time is to duration what place is to expansion, namely fixed points which allow us to orient ourselves within the “uniform infinite oceans of duration and space.” (p.183) Third, completely failing to foreshadow Einstein, Locke holds that “All the parts of extension are extension, and all the parts of duration are duration” (p.186); i.e. they are each unmixed with other ideas. Fourthly, although expansion and duration have parts, these parts cannot be separated from one another. All points of time are connected and the parts of space also make one great connected totality.

There are however two differences between the two. First, the idea of length we have of expansion operates in three dimensions whereas duration is but a single length extended in one. Second, no two parts of duration exist together, rather they follow each other in succession. The parts of expansion on the other hand, all exist together and are incapable of succession.

Locke holds **number** to be the “simplest and most universal idea” (p.189) because it is applied in any and everything we do. The simple modes of number (**couple**, **triple**, etc.) are the most distinct from each other than any those of any other idea and for this reason “demonstrations in number are the most precise.” (p.189) It is also the way we measure all things which are measurable.

**Infinity** is a mode of **space**, **duration**, and **number**. But how do we realise it? Descartes thought that a finite being can only have knowledge of the infinite if God (an infinite Being) places it in him or her. Locke disagrees. We clearly have the idea of finitude and its measurements (space: metres, feet, etc.; duration: seconds, hours, etc.) and it is no great step to imagine adding more of these units “without ever coming to an end of his additions” (p.195). There is no infinity of other ideas (e.g. infinite sweetness or infinite whiteness) because only “the ideas that are considered as having parts, and are capable of increase by the addition of any equal or less parts, afford us, by their repetition, the idea of infinity” (p.197).

Locke does distinguish however between an infinity of space and space infinite. The former is “nothing but a supposed endless progression of the mind, over what repeated ideas of space it pleases” (p.198); the latter is a contradiction because it supposes that one “have actually in the mind the idea of a space infinite” (p.198). It follows from this that we can have no complete idea of infinite space; the object of our thought (the infinite space) will always be greater than the idea we can have of it; as soon as we try to crystallise and complete our idea, the infinite space we are imagining must necessarily exceed it; “it being always enlarging, always advancing, - the idea is still imperfect and incomplete.” (p.203) The same holds for duration (time) and number (quantity) and the idea of an eternal being (God). Locke offers a short argument against someone who thinks they do have a positive idea of an infinite number. He asks whether they could add to it or not. If they say they can, it is clearly not infinite and if they say they can’t, then they must not have a complete idea in mind.

Turning now to **simple modes of thinking**, Locke recounts a number of these such as sensation, **remembrance**, **recollection**, **contemplation**, and **reverie**. The interesting thing in this section is where Locke disagrees with those who claim that thinking is the essence of the soul (we might update this word to be ‘mind’). Since our thinking admits of varying degrees of attention and even ceases entirely during sleep, Locke supposes it can’t be our “essence”, which by definition ought to be something fixed and unvarying. Thinking is rather the action of the soul.

The foremost simple modes of **pleasure** and **pain** are **good** and **evil**, both being defined only in reference to pleasure and pain. Good is that “which is apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us; or else to procure or preserve us the possession of any other good or absence of any evil.” (p.214) Evil, on the other hand, is that “which is apt to produce or increase any pain, or diminish any pleasure in us: or else to procure us any evil, or deprive us of any good.” (p.214) This moral disposition makes Locke a hedonist.

Over the next couple of pages, Locke runs through a number of different passions (**love**, **hatred**, **desire**, **joy**, **sorrow**, **hope**, **fear**, **despair**, **anger**, and **envy**) and defines them with reference to pleasure and pain. All except envy and anger (which contain “some mixed considerations of ourselves and others” (p.216)) are common to all people because they concern pain and pleasure exclusively.

**Power** in a thing is, as we have seen “the possibility of having any of its simple ideas changed, and… the possibility of making that change [in other things]” (p.218). Locke divides power into **active** and **passive**; the former being the power to affect change, and the latter being the power to receive it. We get the idea of passive power from everything around us but the idea of active power is derived only from reflection. This is because all action arises from two ideas; thinking and motion, and neither of these concern external bodies. Thinking is obviously reflective in nature. Motion is not derived from external bodies because “A body at rest affords us no idea of any active power to move; and when it is set in motion itself, that motion is rather a passion than an action in it.” (p.220) Rather, we understand motion from the experience that “barely by a thought of the mind, we can move the parts of our bodies, which were before at rest.” (p.220)

This section gets really interesting from here as Locke moves into a discussion on freewill. First, he notes there are two powers in the mind or spirit he calls **will** and **understanding**. Understanding is the power of perception and comes in three kinds: 1) The perception of ideas in our minds, 2) The perception of the signification of signs, and 3) The perception of agreement or disagreement between these ideas. Will, is the “power which the mind has thus to order the consideration of any idea, or the forbearing to consider it; or to prefer the motion of any part of the body to its rest, and vice versa…” (p.221). So, will is our capacity to direct our own minds to any thought or prefer the motion of the body (or a part thereof) to its rest. This obviously reflects the only two ideas we can have of our active power outlined earlier; viz. thinking and motion. An important point here is that these two powers are *faculties* of the mind and not real beings.

Any action that follows directly from the will is **voluntary**, an action that is performed without a prior willing is **involuntary**. Importantly, voluntary is the contrary of involuntary, not of necessity. Locke’s example is of a paralysed individual *voluntarily* preferring to remain seated instead of moving, even though they can’t in fact move.

The definition of **liberty** and **necessity** follows from the fact that all actions we can have any idea of reduce to thinking and motion, and entails that “so far as a man has power to think or not to think, to move or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a man free.” (p.222) Conversely, “Wherever any performance or forbearance are not equally in a man’s power; wherever doing or not doing will not equally follow upon the preference of his mind directing it, there he is not free…” (p.222)

On the basis of this, Locke finds the question of whether the will is free or not, to be “altogether improper” and as ridiculous as asking a man “whether his sleep be swift, or his virtue square” (p.225). He argues that “liberty, which is but a power, belongs only to agents, and cannot be an attribute or modification of the will, which is also but a power.” (p.225) He continues, “to ask, whether the will has freedom, is to ask whether one power has another power, one ability another ability; a question at first sight too grossly absurd to make a dispute, or need an answer.” (p.226)

This confused way of thinking supposes that it is the will that wills. In effect, it makes the will “a substance, an agent… since freedom can properly be attributed to nothing else.” (p.226) We might as well then concoct a “speaking faculty, and a walking faculty, and a dancing faculty, by which these actions are produced” (p.227). It is then “as proper and intelligible to say that the power of speaking directs the power of singing” (p.227).

We ought not to ask “whether the will be free, but whether a man be free… For how can we think any one freer, than to have the power to do what he will?... For such a preferring of action to its absence, is the willing of it: and we can scarce tell how to imagine any being freer, than to be able to do what he wills.” (p.229)

So, when people inquire as to whether the will is free Locke takes them to actually be asking whether a person is free to will. This, he answers this in the negative. We are not free to will. Remember that our freedom consists in being able to follow through on what we will; *whether* we will or not is out of our control; “it is unavoidably necessary to prefer the doing or forbearance of an action in a man’s power, which is once so proposed to his thoughts; a man must necessarily will the one or the other of them…; upon which preference or volition, the action or its forbearance certainly follows, and is truly voluntary. But the act of volition, or preferring one of the two, being that which he cannot avoid, a man, in respect of that act of willing, is under a necessity, and so cannot be free…” (p.230). Another example Locke gives here is of a man walking. This man is free to continue walking or to stand still (i.e. his continued walking or standing still will follow from his willing one way or the other), but he “is not at liberty, whether he will determine himself to walk, or give off walking or not: he must necessarily prefer one or the other of them” (p.231).

Those who have confused ideas about freedom will next ask whether the man “be at liberty to will which of the two he pleases, motion or rest?” (p.232) This is of course, absurd, because it is the same as asking “whether a man can will what he wills, or be pleased with what he is pleased with?” (p.232)

But, one might still reasonably ask what it is that determines the will or “What moves the mind, in every particular instance, to determine its general power of directing, to this or that particular motion or rest?” (p.233) The answer according to Locke is nothing more than the uneasiness a person is feeling in that instance. There are two sides to uneasiness; one side is the uneasiness caused by pain in the current situation, and the flip side is that of the absence of a good. This uneasiness is exactly what we call **desire**. Locke (along with all Buddhists) believes that all desire is fundamentally a state of unease and anyone who looks at their desire will see this to be true. However (unlike all Buddhists), he doesn’t see this as a bad thing for desire is the “spring of action” (p.236) and someone completely lacking uneasiness would never see any reason for doing anything.

Because people are motivated only by uneasiness (desire), knowledge of the greater good or what is virtuous is never enough by itself to act as motive for the will. Until a man “feels an uneasiness in the want of it [righteousness], his will will not be determined to any action in pursuit of this confessed greater good” (p.237). This is why it is so hard for people to change certain behaviours even though they wish to. Locke’s example is of a drunkard who sees the problems his drinking causes, knows where the “greater good” (p.237) lies, and even resolves to stop drinking when sober, but as soon as the uneasiness (desire) settles over him at that time when he usually drinks, all of his lofty promises go out the window. Uneasiness is so strong because “the removal of uneasiness is the first step to happiness” and because “that alone is present and, it is against the nature of things, that what is absent should operate where it is not.” (p.238)

If one then asks what it is that motivates desire, Locke answers, happiness. Everybody desires happiness and he defines this as nothing more than the presence of pleasure and/or the absence of pain. However, he thinks the “philosophers of old” were mistaken in searching for a single *summum bonum* (highest good) because “every one does not place his happiness in the same thing, or choose the same way to it.” (p.251)

Locke also reaffirms his hedonism here when he asserts that **good** is whatever produces pleasure in us, and **evil**, whatever produces pain.

Although Locke has already asserted that we are not free to choose whether to will or not (because by the time we are aware of it, we *must* will one way or the other), there is one circumstance in which we are “at liberty in respect of willing; and that is the choosing of a remote good as an end to be pursued.” (p.253) The reason is that in a situation like this, we are not required to make a decision immediately, but rather can suspend the act of our choice and examine the options to decide which one will really make us happy. Of course, we still must make a choice at some stage, but we have a certain amount of freedom in that we don’t need to make the choice *now*.

The last thing of interest here is where Locke asks whether “it be in a man’s power to change the pleasantness and unpleasantness that accompanies any sort of action?” (p.262), i.e. can we change our preferences or tastes? Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, he says we can. Habit and custom are our allies in this; “any action is rendered more or less pleasing, only by the contemplation of the end… but the pleasure of the action itself is best acquired or increased by use and practice… Habits have powerful charms…” (p.263).

*Substance*

Locke defines **substance** as the “support of those qualities we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist… without something to support them” (p.278).Interestingly though, we don’t actually have a “clear or distinct idea of substance in general” (p.279). It is only because we can’t imagine how the qualities that make up particular substances “should subsist alone… [that] we suppose them existing in and supported by some common subject” (p.279).

For the same reason, concerning operations of the mind (thinking, reasoning, fearing, etc.), Locke supposes we have just as “clear a notion of the substance of spirit, as we have of body” (p.280). Moreover, in comparison with the corporeal, “I do more certainly know, that there is some spiritual being within me that sees and hears… an immaterial thinking being.” (p.288)

Three sorts of ideas make up our complex ideas of substances; primary qualities, secondary qualities, and active and passive powers. Locke asserts here that if we could see the primary qualities down to their “minute parts” (p.283), the secondary qualities would disappear and we would be left merely with the primary; i.e. shape, size, figure, etc. This fact that our perception is limited in this way isn’t a problem for Locke because he thinks God has designed us this way for optimal functioning; e.g. “If our sense of hearing were but a thousand times quicker than it is, how would a perpetual noise distract us.” (p.285)

The primary ideas we have peculiar to body are “the cohesion of solid, and consequently separable, parts, and a power of communicating motion by impulse.” (p.289) Those peculiar to spirit are “thinking, and will, or a power of putting body into motion by thought, and, which is consequent to it, liberty.” (p.289). Finally, “the ideas of existence, duration, and mobility, are common to them both.” (p.289)

By way of objection to materialists who feel they can comprehend matter but not spirit, Locke argues that they don’t, in fact, know what matter is. No one can explain “how he is extended, how the solid parts of body are united, or cohere together to make extension.” (p.291)[[2]](#footnote-2) In addition, the communication of motion by thought is as equally unintelligible as the communication of motion by impulse. No one can explain how motion can pass from one moving body to another.

There are three kinds of substances for Locke; God, finite intelligences, and bodies.

*Relation*

In this section, Locke examines a number of relations including, cause and effect, relations of time, and relations of place and extension, but the most interesting is the chapter on **identity and diversity**. These appear here because when “considering anything as existing at any determined time and place, we compare it with itself existing at another time, and thereon form the ideas of identity and diversity.” (p.311)

A few basic insights first; “one thing cannot have two beginnings of existence, nor two things one beginning; it being impossible for two things of the same kind to be or exist in the same instant, in the very same place; or one and the same thing in different places.” (p.312)

Locke declares the “principium individuationis” (the individuating principle, the thing which makes a thing separate from all other things) to be existence because this “determines a being of any sort to a particular time and place, incommunicable to two beings of the same kind.” (p.313) He goes on to describe how an atom is the “same with itself” (p.313) at any instant of its existence. Likewise, if a group of atoms join together to make a mass, “whilst they exist united together, the mass, consisting of the same atoms, must be the same mass, or the same body, let the parts be ever so differently jumbled.” (p.313) If an atom is added or taken away, then it is no longer the same mass.

So what about **living creatures** then? Well, **“their identity depends not on a mass of the same particles, but on something else. For in them the variation of great parcels of matter alters not the identity”** (p.314, boldface added). An oak growing from a little sapling to a great tree is always the same tree, as is a colt growing into a horse. “The reason whereof is, that, in these two cases – a mass of matter and a living body – identity is not applied to the same thing.” (p.314) The identity of a mass of matter concerns only how the particles cohere and are united but the identity of a living body concerns the organisation of the parts so as to allow it to have the same continued life. For a living thing then, the particles of matter it is comprised of may change without altering its identity.

Locke now turns to the difference between man and person. **Man (or ‘human being’)** is the “same continued life communicated to different particles of matter, as they happen successively to be united to that organized living body.” (p.316). On the basis of this he rejects the idea of transmigration of souls.

**Personal identity**, on the other hand, must look at what ‘person’ stands for. Locke defines person as “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places” (p.318). This is achieved by consciousness, which Locke defines as the way we are always, not just perceiving, but aware that we are perceiving. This is also what we call our “self”. It is this; i.e. consciousness, that comprises personal identity.

“[A]s far as any intelligent being can repeat the idea of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action; so far it is the same personal self” (p.320). If I am conscious of the actions of Napoleon, then that is sufficient for me to be the same person with Napoleon.

Some other conclusions of this position are that if the same consciousness can be transferred to a different thinking substance, then two thinking substances can be the same person. Conversely, the same immaterial substance can be two distinct persons if that immaterial substance can somehow lose all consciousness of its past existence and begin a new account afresh. If the soul (immaterial substance) and the consciousness of a prince should somehow be transferred to the body of a cobbler, for Locke, this would mean the cobbler would now be the same person as the prince but the prince would be a different man (man = soul + body).

All notions of justice, reward, punishment, etc. are founded on personal identity, not substance. So if I have lost all memory of some events, although we can say I am the same man who committed them, we cannot say I am the same person. For this reason, we don’t punish a person deemed insane and is why we say “such an one is “not himself,” or is “beside himself”” (p.327).

Other kinds of relations Locke mentions include proportional relations, natural relations (in consideration of the thing’s beginning or origin), instituted or voluntary relations (arising from human will or societal agreement), and **moral relations** (the conformity or disagreement our actions have to a rule by which we are judged).

Locke divides moral rules or laws into three categories; divine, civil, and, the law of opinion or reputation. Through our relation to the first, we establish sin or duty. The second, establishes whether we are criminal or innocent. The third, virtue or vice.

*Clear and Obscure, Distinct and Confused Ideas*

**Clear ideas** are those that the memory “can produce… to the mind whenever it has occasion to consider them” (p.346). To the extent that the ideas “want anything of the original exactness, or have lost any of their first freshness” (p.346), they are **obscure**. **Distinct ideas** are those that are clearly differentiated from other ideas, while **confused ideas** aren’t sufficiently so. The idea of infinity is one example Locke uses to demonstrate an idea that can never be clear nor distinct.

*Real/Fantastical, Adequate/Inadequate, and True/False Ideas*

**Real ideas** are those that have a foundation in nature as opposed to **fantastical** which do not. **Adequate ideas** are those that “perfectly represent those archetypes which the mind supposes them taken from” (p.358).

Simple ideas are always adequate because they are “nothing but the effects of certain powers in things” (p.358). Ideas of modes and relations are also adequate. Modes, as understood from a name, may be inadequate if the idea of the mode does not match the idea the first author applied to it. Our ideas of substances are never adequate.

**Truth** and **falsehood** only apply to propositions, not ideas. Specifically, there must be some form of affirmation or negation before we can have truth or falsehood; i.e. the mind must pass some judgement on our ideas. Ideas usually come to admit of truth or falsehood in reference to one of three things; other people’s ideas, real existence, supposed real essences. Simple ideas are the least likely to be false because they are readily observed; hence we seldom apply the name red to the idea green.

*Association of Ideas*

Locke finishes this book by noting that there is “something unreasonable in most men” (p.379). He is referring to the way ideas become connected in a person’s mind “wholly owing to chance or custom” and once they become settled in this way “it is very hard to separate them” (p.380). What makes this particularly problematic is that we often don’t remember how the ideas became incorrectly associated in the first place, so there is no way to correct for it. The example Locke gives is of a person who became sick after eating too much honey as a child and forever afterwards associates honey with ideas of dislike, sickness, and vomiting, although, having forgotten the original incident, they don’t know why.

This is also why “time cures some disorders in the mind, which reason cannot cure” (p.383), because time, by disuse, weakens and separates the false connection between the ideas.

Book III – Of Words

In this section, Locke mounts a detailed investigation of language; what words are, how we use them, and how we use them incorrectly.

Words are representations or symbols that “stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them” (p.390). Failure to understand this is one reason discourse is often hindered. First, people “suppose their words to be marks of the ideas in the minds also of other men, with whom they communicate” (p.391), when their words are only marks of their own ideas and may not correspond with the ideas of others. Second, people “often suppose the words to stand also for the reality of things” (p.392), when, in fact, they seldom do.

Regarding words we have for universals, these words are “the signs of general ideas: and ideas become general, by separating from them the circumstances of time and place” (p.396). This is abstraction. From this, it is clear that universals “are creatures of the understanding, and belong not to the real existence of things.” (p.399)

Following this, Locke defines *essence* as the abstract (general) idea we have of a group of particular things. There are two significations of the word ‘essence’. The first is *real essence* and this is “the very being of anything, whereby it is what it is.” (p.402) As we have seen, in the case of substances this is unknowable. The second is *nominal essence* and this refers to the abstract idea we have of the thing, “the artificial constitution of genus and species.” (p.403) The real and nominal essences of simple ideas and modes are the same but they are different for substances.

*Names of Simple Ideas and Simple Modes*

The names of simple ideas (and substances) always refer to some really existing thing.

The names of simple ideas (and modes) always signify the real and nominal essence of the thing.

The names of simple ideas cannot be defined. A definition works by “showing the meaning of one word by several other not synonymous terms.” (p.407) Since simple ideas are, by definition, not compositions of multiple ideas, the “several terms of a definition, signifying several ideas… can all together by no means represent an idea which has no composition at all” (p.408). Simple ideas are “only to be got by those impressions objects themselves make on our minds” (p.410) through the senses. Words can never produce these ideas, for “words, being sounds, can produce in us no other simple ideas than of those very sounds” (p.410), hence definitions for simple ideas are impossible. We can define light as “a great number of little globules, striking briskly on the bottom of the eye” (p.409) but this completely fails to explain light to someone who had no idea of what it was beforehand.

The names of simple ideas are less doubtful than those of mixed modes and substances, and they are not arbitrary but are “perfectly taken from the existence of things” (p.414); i.e. we can’t just invent a simple idea, like we can with mixed modes and to a certain extent with substances.

*Names of Mixed Modes and Relations*

Since mixed modes and relations stand for abstract ideas, they are both made arbitrarily by the understanding. As an example of this, Locke gives murder and parricide. Why do we have a special name for the murder of one’s father, but not for the murder of one’s neighbour? This is a completely arbitrary decision we have made, which isn’t to say it is a meaningless or random one, only that there is no corresponding distinction between the two in nature. The number of untranslatable words in different languages proves this point for Locke; “those of one country, by their customs and manner of life, have found occasion to make several complex ideas, and given names to them, which others never collected into specific ideas.” (p.419)

Because names of mixed modes don’t refer to any real existing thing, they always stand for their real essences; i.e. “the real and nominal essence is the same.” (p.423)

*Names of Substances*

The names of substances stand for sorts or kinds and the essence of each sort of substance is the same as our abstract idea of it. The nominal and real essences of substances are necessarily different since we cannot know the latter. All of this means that essences belong only to general ideas, not individual things; “essential and not essential relate only to our abstract ideas, and the names annexed to them” (p.428). It also means that the nominal essence of a substance completely defines it; which is to say that substance is determined by us, not the things themselves. Although Locke does remind us that the “nominal essences of substances are… not yet made so arbitrarily as those of mixed modes.” (p.443)

One example Locke uses is of ice and water, which are different substances to us. However, if someone who has never seen ice were to leave water in the basin at night and wake to find it frozen, they wouldn’t presume it to be a different “species”; they would rather think of it as something like “hardened water”. The point is if we imagine “things existing are distinguished by nature into species, by real essences, according as we distinguish them into species by names, we shall be liable to great mistakes.” (p.435)

Another example is of watches where Locke asks “what is sufficient in the inward contrivance to make a new species?” (p.451) Some watches have four wheels, some have five. Are these separate kinds? Some are regulated by spiral springs while others by hogs’ bristles. Are these different or the same? It all depends on who you are asking. A watchmaker will classify these into different kinds while the layperson ignorant of clockwork won’t.

The reason real essences were postulated was precisely to overcome this problem of every substantial essence representing nothing more than arbitrary ideas in individual people. Of course, for Locke, this is hopeless. The whole point of classifying things into substances is so that we can speak with others about them easily, not as any “consideration of real essences, or substantial forms” (p.449).

*The Imperfections and Abuses of Words*

We use words for recording our own thoughts and for communicating our thoughts to others. Communication can have either a civil or philosophical use. Words fail when one “does not excite in the hearer the same idea which it stands for in the mind of the speaker.” (p.465) This “imperfection” can happen for one of four reasons:

1. When the ideas our words stand for are complex, liable to uncertainty or obscurity, or made up of many ideas.
2. When the ideas have no certain connection in nature and so no settled standard whereby agreement or certainty can be obtained. The way we learn languages contributes to this uncertainty and lack of a fixed, universal standard; i.e. although simple ideas and substances are usually learned from real-world examples of the thing, as for mixed modes, “the sounds are usually learned first; and then, to know what complex ideas they stand for, they are either beholden to the explication of others, or (which happens for the most part) are left to their own observation and industry” (p.469).
3. Where a standard exists but isn’t easily known.
4. Where what a word signifies and the real essence of the thing aren’t the same.

Numbers 3 and 4 refer to the names of substances.

Locke asserts here that a prominent reason for the disputes and disagreements among people is due to the uncertain or mistaken significations of words and we would be well advised to improve our understanding in this area. In particular, we ought to be aware of these problems when reading authors from “different countries and remote ages” (p.478).

Locke also lists six abuses of words:

1. Words are often used without any clear ideas behind them.
2. Words are sometimes used inconsistently.
3. Affected obscurity, “by either applying old words to new and unusual significations; or introducing new and ambiguous terms, without defining either; or else putting them so together, as may confound their ordinary meaning.” (pp.482-3)
4. Mistaking words for the things they signify. The example Locke gives here is of disputes about matter, “as if there were some such thing really in nature, distinct from body” (pp.487-8). Clearly the ideas the two words signify are different (the terms aren’t interchangeable) but they can’t be *totally* distinct because “wherever there is the one there is the other” (p.488). Body “stands for a solid extended figured substance, whereof matter is but a partial and more confused conception; it seeming to me to be used for the substance and solidity of body, without taking in its extension and figure” (p.488).
5. Setting words in the place of things they do or cannot signify. The example is in using them to signify real essences of substances.
6. Assuming that the words we use signify the same ideas for other people as they do for ourselves.

Locke closes this book by making some recommendations as to how to avoid the above problems, one of which is for a “Dictionary” to be compiled that will set out clearly the ideas behind our words.

Book IV – Of Knowledge and Probability

Locke begins this book by defining knowledge as the “perception of the connexion of and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas.” (p.515) This agreement/disagreement between ideas comes about in four different ways:

1. Identity, or diversity.
2. Relations.
3. Co-existence, or necessary connection in substances.
4. Real existence.

There are two kinds of knowledge; **actual** or **habitual**. Actual knowledge is a present awareness of the agreement or disagreement of any ideas. Habitual knowledge is knowledge that “having been once laid before his thoughts, he evidently perceived the agreement or disagreement of the ideas whereof it consists; and so lodged it in his memory” (p.518) Habitual knowledge is of two further degrees; first, truths that when recalled also bring to mind the actual relations between the ideas, and second, truths that are retained without the proofs.

Knowledge comes in three different degrees of clarity:

1. Intuitive – This occurs where “the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas immediately by themselves, without the intervention of any other” (p.520). Examples include the knowledge that white is not black and a circle is not a triangle. Intuitive knowledge is the clearest and most certain we are capable of.
2. Demonstrative – This is where agreement or disagreement is only perceived through intermediate ideas and occurs “when the mind cannot so bring its ideas together as by their immediate comparison, and as it were juxta-position or application one to another” (p.522). Such a process is what we call reasoning. An example is the knowledge that the three angles of a triangle and two right angles are equal. This form of knowledge is certain but less clear. It is certain because each step in the reasoning process requires “an intuitive knowledge of that agreement or disagreement it seeks with the next intermediate idea which it uses as a proof” (p.523).

It is usually thought that demonstration is only limited to mathematics but Locke holds that all areas of study can partake of demonstrative proofs because any “ideas we have wherein the mind can perceive the immediate agreement or disagreement that is between them, there the mind is capable of intuitive knowledge” (p.525). An example Locke gives of this is the proposition, “Where there is no property there is no injustice” (p.540), which can be certainly established given full and clear understanding of the ideas involved.

1. Sensitive – This is knowledge of “the particular existence of finite beings without us” (p.527). While we cannot be absolutely certain of the existence of things around us, Locke feels our knowledge here goes beyond mere probability. In what is obviously a response to Descartes, Locke considers the objection that dreams can deceive us into believing in the existence of an external world that doesn’t, in fact, exist. Locke has two responses here. First, he points out that in a dream “reasoning and arguments are of no use, truth and knowledge nothing.” (p.528) This seems to be arguing that if the objector truly believed this was a dream, his argument would mean nothing. Secondly, Locke says that the objector “will allow a manifest difference between dreaming of being in the fire, and being actually in it” (p.528), effectively saying that there is a massive difference between dreams and reality. If the objector still argues that what we call being in a fire is nothing but a dream, then we can at least know that “pleasure or pain follows upon the application of certain objects to us, whose existence we perceive, or dream that we perceive, by our senses; this certainty is as great as our happiness or misery, beyond which we have no concernment to know or to be.” (p.528) In other words, if this is a dream, it is good enough to be accounted reality. Locke adds to this argument later when he affirms that the testimony of our senses is 1) all we can reasonably expect given our limited faculties, and 2) is sufficient for us to live meaningful, happy lives. We ought not to expect “perfect, clear, comprehensive knowledge of things free from all doubt and scruple” (pp.628-9) because this is just not within our capacity, nor is this a problem because we don’t need this to live good human lives. “[H]ow vain… it is to expect demonstration and certainty in things not capable of it; and refuse assent to very rational propositions, and act contrary to very plain and clear truths, because they cannot be made out so evident, as to surmount every the least… pretence of doubting.” (p.630)

Next, Locke enquires into the extent of human knowledge. He makes six points:

1. We can have knowledge no further than we have ideas.
2. We can have knowledge no further than we have perception of agreement or disagreement between these ideas.
3. Intuitive knowledge doesn’t extend to all the relations of all our ideas. This is just “because we cannot examine and perceive all the relations they have one to another, by juxta-position, or an immediate comparison one with another.” (p.529)
4. Following (3) above, demonstrative knowledge also doesn’t extend to all the relations of all our ideas.
5. Sensitive knowledge is narrower than both of the above because it reaches “no further than the existence of things actually present to our senses” (p.530).
6. The extent of our knowledge is therefore narrower than our ideas.

Locke now examines the extent of our knowledge under each of the four types identified earlier:

1. Identity, or diversity – This intuitive knowledge extends as far as the ideas themselves.
2. Relations – It is difficult to know how far our knowledge extends for this type because advances are continually being made regarding “the finding of proofs or examining the agreement or disagreement of remote ideas.” (p.539)
3. Co-existence, or necessary connection in substances – This type of knowledge doesn’t extend far because “the connexion between simple ideas in substances is for the most part unknown.” (p.535) What Locke means here is that we only know that certain qualities co-exist in subjects by observation, and this means that we can’t know whether any of these qualities follow necessarily from any other qualities. In other words, we don’t perceive a connection between qualities in substances and this limits our knowledge in this sphere.
4. Real existence – Here, we have “an intuitive knowledge of our own existence, and a demonstrative knowledge of the existence of a God: of the existence of anything else, we have no other but a sensitive knowledge; which extends not beyond the objects present to our senses.” (pp.543-4)

In general, Locke is quite modest regarding the possible extent of our knowledge, noting that our ignorance is “infinitely larger than our knowledge” (p.544). He details three causes for our ignorance:

1. Want of ideas. As outlined in the first book, we can only derive ideas from two sources; sensation and reflection. These sources, Locke considers to be too pitiful to grant us much in the way of a complete knowledge of all things. He is very sceptical about scientific knowledge stating that “we are not capable of scientifical knowledge; nor shall ever be able to discover general, instructive, unquestionable truths concerning them.” (p.548) One wonders if he might have changed his mind if he could have seen the progress of modern science.
2. Want of a discoverable connection between the ideas we have. Locke gives a couple of examples here. First, we have no idea how “the bulk, figure, and motion of several bodies about us produce in us several sensations, as of colours, sounds, tastes, smells, pleasure, and pain, &c. These mechanical affections of bodies having no affinity at all with those ideas they produce in us…” (p.549) This seems to be a question about how conscious experience is possible and we are still no nearer to understanding this today than we were in the 17th century. In the same vein, he also notes that “How any thought should produce a motion in body is as remote from the nature of our ideas, as how any body should produce any thought in the mind.” (p.550)
3. Want of tracing and examining our ideas. This is a failure to study adequately.

To the person who objects that since knowledge is nothing more than the perception of the agreement or disagreement between ideas, and since ideas need not have any basis in reality, what is knowledge worth? This argument turns on the idea that “the mind knows not things immediately, but only by the intervention of the ideas it has of them.” (p.554) However, we have already seen that simple ideas do have a complete agreement with reality and complex ideas (except of substances), “being archetypes of the mind’s own making… cannot want any conformity necessary to real knowledge.” (p.555) Even though mathematical and moral truths do not refer to anything outside of the mind, they “are nevertheless true and certain, even of real things existing: because real things are no further concerned, nor intended to be meant by any such propositions, than as things really agree to those archetypes in his mind.” (p.556) Our knowledge of substances is much more limited but even this, to the extent that “our complex ideas of them… are made up of such simple ones as have been discovered to co-exist in nature… [they] being thus true… are yet the subjects of real (as far as we have any) knowledge of them.” (p.560)

Truth we have already seen applies only to propositions, not to ideas. Locke defines it here as “the joining or separating of Signs [ideas or words], as the Things signified by them do agree or disagree one with another. The joining or separating of signs here meant, is what by another name we call proposition.” (p.565)

This is truth in general, but Locke also mentions two other types of truth; moral and metaphysical. Moral truth is “speaking of things according to the persuasion of our own minds, though the proposition we speak agree not to the reality of things” whereas metaphysical truth is “nothing but the real existence of things, conformable to the ideas to which we have annexed their names.” (p.570)

Locke next discusses the certainty we can have of general propositions. He holds that no “proposition can be certainly known to be true, where the real essence of each species mentioned is not known.” (pp.571-2) For simple ideas and modes this standard is easily met. However, for substances, “wherein a real essence, distinct from the nominal, is supposed to constitute, determine, and bound the species, the extent of the general word is very uncertain; because, not knowing this real essence, we cannot know what is, or what is not of that species; and, consequently, what may or may not with certainty be affirmed of it.” (p.572)

The example Locke gives here is that of the ideas we have of man. The abstract idea of man is say, “a body of the ordinary shape, with sense, voluntary motion, and reason joined to it.” (p.582) The problem is that with this essence “we can make but very few general certain propositions concerning man… Because, not knowing the real constitution of which sensation, power of motion, and reasoning, with that peculiar shape, depend, and whereby they are united together in the same subject, there are very few other qualities with which we can perceive them to have a necessary connexion: and therefore we cannot with certainty affirm: That all men sleep by intervals; That no man can be nourished by wood or stones; That all men will be poisoned by hemlock: because these ideas have no connexion nor repugnancy with this our nominal essence of man, with this abstract idea that name stands for. We must, in these and the like, appeal to trial in particular subjects, which can reach but a little way. We must content ourselves with probability in the rest: but can have no general certainty…” (p.582)

Concerning maxims, Locke notes that they are “self-evident propositions” but argues against their being innate. We have already encountered self-evident propositions in intuitive knowledge, which was nothing more than the “perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas… where that agreement or disagreement is perceived immediately by itself, without the intervention or help of any other” (p.584).

Locke argues that maxims are given a central role in knowledge that they don’t deserve. They are presumed to be first, “those truths that are first known to the mind”, and secondly, that upon which “the other parts of our knowledge depend.” (pp.587-8) Locke has already dispensed with these claims, arguing that “the ideas first in the mind… are those of particular things, from whence, by slow degrees, the understanding proceeds to some few general ones” (p.588).

So why have maxims come to be given such importance? Locke answers that it is only after schools were erected and principles established that professors developed and made use of maxims. First, they are useful for teaching sciences, but not for advancing them further. Second, they are useful in disputes, “for the silencing of obstinate wranglers, and bringing those contests to some conclusion.” (p.593)

If we merely trust to maxims to help us formulate principles however, we will be led astray. Locke gives the example of Descartes ‘proving’ there can be no vacuum (i.e. space devoid of body). Descartes defines body as extension and, relying on the maxim “what is, is”, knows that extension is what it is and not another idea. It follows from this that space cannot be without body (i.e. extension). Having a different idea of body (as “a thing that hath both extension and solidity together” (p.598)) allows one to easily prove vacuum.

Locke goes on to give three instances where propositions bring no increase to our knowledge:

1. Identical propositions – exemplified by that vaunted maxim, “what is, is”. Locke doesn’t deny that “the foundation of all our knowledge lies in the faculty we have of perceiving the same idea to be the same, and of discerning it from those that are different” (p.603), but they are more than useless “when made use of as principles of instruction, and stress laid on them as helps to knowledge” (p.604).
2. Propositions in which a part of any complex idea is predicated of the whole – an example of this is “Lead is a metal”, where anyone who knows the complex ideas lead is constituted of already knows it is a metal.
3. Using words loosely and uncertainly.

*Threefold Knowledge of Existence*

The three things we know exist are ourselves, God, and the external world.

Locke accepts Descartes ***cogito* argument**; “Our knowledge of our own existence is intuitive… it neither needs nor is capable of any proof… If I doubt of all other things, that very doubt makes me perceive my own existence.” (p.612)

The proof for the **existence of God** requires more steps, all of which are variations of Aquinas’ argument from causation. First, Locke says that non-being cannot produce being. “If, therefore, we know there is some real being, and that nonentity cannot produce any real being, it is an evident demonstration, that from eternity there has been something” (p.613).

If whatever has a beginning gets its being and beginning from another, the source “must also be the source and original of all power; and so this eternal Being must be also the most powerful.” (p.614)

Finally, Locke notes that we are capable of perception and knowledge. Either “there was a time, then, when there was no knowing being, and when knowledge began to be; or else there has been also a knowing being from eternity.” (p.614) If the former, it is impossible that knowing should ever have come about, for how could knowledge come from “things wholly void of knowledge” (p.614). Which means the latter must be true.

This gives Locke the existence of an “eternal, most powerful, and most knowing Being” (p.614) and it is this we call God.

Locke goes on to add a proof that God (eternal Mind) isn’t material. First, it can’t be true that all of matter is capable of perception and thought “since then there would be as many eternal thinking beings as there are particles of matter, and so an infinity of gods.” (p.619) Secondly, “one particle alone of matter cannot be cogitative.” (p.620) If this were true, this one particle could be different from all others only on account of its thinking, which is to say, it’s immaterial aspect. Finally, if then “neither one peculiar atom alone can be this eternal thinking being; nor all matter, as matter… it only remains, that it is some certain system of matter, duly put together, that is this thinking eternal Being.” (p.620) Now, we are back to the problem of getting thinking from non-thinking matter.

Locke also gives an odd argument against those who object to the Christian God on the grounds that *creation ex nihilo* is impossible because we cannot possibly conceive it. He responds that “it is not reasonable to deny the power of an infinite being, because we cannot comprehend its operations.” (p.623) In the same way, even though we cannot conceive how we move our bodies by will alone, this is not reason to believe it to be impossible.

Finally, we can have knowledge of the **existence of other finite beings** through sensation. This must be so because there is “no necessary connexion of real existence with any idea a man hath in his memory” (p.624). Although this knowledge through sensation isn’t as certain as demonstration, Locke still feels it rises above mere probability and is rightly described as ‘knowledge’. He doesn’t see a problem with someone who claims to be so sceptical as to express doubt over the existence of external things because this level of doubt ought to guarantee that “he can never be sure I say anything contrary to his own opinion.” (p.625)

In addition to the testimony of our senses, Locke sees four other reasons for accepting the existence of an external world:

1. Our perceptions can only be produced in us by exterior causes affecting our sense organs. This is sure because those lacking certain organs never develop the ideas associated with those sensory perceptions. Nor do our organs themselves produce the sensations or “the eyes of a man in the dark would produce colours” (p.626).
2. Ideas from sensation and from memory are clearly different.
3. Pleasure and pain only accompany actual sensations. We don’t experience pleasure or pain when we merely bring to mind the ideas of external objects.
4. Multiple senses confirm our perceptions. We are also able to predict what will happen, whether we would will it to occur that way or not.

However, Locke is clear that our knowledge of the external world, being dependent on sensation, only extends to the “present testimony of our senses” (p.629), so even though I saw someone one minute ago but am now alone, I cannot be sure of their continued existence. “And… though it be highly probably that millions of men do now exist, yet, whilst I am alone, writing this, I have not that certainty of it which we strictly call knowledge” (p.630). This is merely probability.

Past existence is known through memory and this is secure Locke thinks, “so long as we remember well.” (p.630)

Interestingly enough, Locke thinks that natural philosophy cannot be a science. The reason is that he thinks we can never have genuine knowledge concerning substances. We can use experiment to discern particular truths about particular things but this leaves us unable to form general, necessary truths about them. Although “our faculties are not fitted to penetrate into the internal fabric and real essences of bodies” (p.640) they are well-suited for morality, and this “is the proper science and business of mankind in general” (p.640).

*Probability*

Locke defines probability as “the appearance of such an agreement or disagreement by the intervention of proofs, whose connexion is not constant and immutable, or at least is not perceived to be so, but is, or appears for the most part to be so, and is enough to induce the mind to judge the proposition to be true or false, rather than the contrary.” (p.648) The accepting of this type of proposition is called belief, assent, or opinion.

Probability is grounded on two things: either the “conformity of anything with our own knowledge, observation, and experience” (p.650) or the testimony of others. The assent of propositions that don’t rise to knowledge come in four categories:

1. Particular matter of fact – this is as good as real knowledge and is derived from concurrent reports of our own and others’ observations.
2. Unquestionable testimony – this is where our own experiences convinces us that a thing is so.
3. Fair testimony – in this case, multiple reports confirm an indifferent fact.

Locke mentions one case where experience to the contrary does not lessen affirming testimony, and this is in the case of miracles. He also mentions here that divine revelation comes with the highest certainty, “an assurance beyond doubt, evidence beyond exception. This is called by a peculiar name, revelation, and our assent to it, faith” (p.663).

*Reason and Faith*

Locke says reason is useful “both for the enlargement of our knowledge, and regulating our assent.” (p.664) It is the faculty by which we find out truths (sagacity) and organise our ideas of them (illation) such that we are able to perceive the agreement or disagreement of them (i.e. obtain demonstrative knowledge).

There are four degrees of reason. First is the discovering of truths. Second, the “regular and methodical disposition of them, and laying them in a clear and firm order, to make their connexion and force be plainly and easily perceived” (p.665). Third, perceiving their connexion. Fourth, making the right conclusion.

He goes on to spend quite a while looking at syllogisms, specifically questioning whether they are “the great instrument of reason” that they tend to be promoted as. He gives two arguments against the thesis:

1. Syllogism only serves reason in one of the four degrees depicted above (the second), and it isn’t even necessary for this because people can see the connections between ideas better and more clearly without knowing a thing about syllogisms. Locke notes first that there are people who can reason well but who can’t form syllogisms. Secondly, if it is only by syllogisms that reason leads us to knowledge, then before Aristotle, no one knew anything by reason.

He doesn’t dispute that “all right reasoning may be reduced to his [Aristotle’s] forms of syllogism” (p.667), he just rejects the idea that they are the only, or even the best, way of reasoning. He gives the example of a “country gentlewoman” (p.667) who, after being told of the weather conditions and the likelihood of rain knows it is not safe for her to go out in thin clothing. She clearly makes the connections between all of these different ideas without “tying them together in those artificial and cumbersome fetters of several syllogisms, that clog and hinder the mind, which proceeds from one part to another quicker and clearer without them” (p.667).

In short, Locke argues that syllogisms don’t show anything the mind hasn’t already perceived.

1. Despite being well-versed in the use of syllogisms, “scholastic forms of discourse are not less liable to fallacies than the plainer ways of argumentation” (p.673).

One important sceptical note Locke reminds us of is that all of our reasoning can only be about particular ideas and this undercuts the main benefit thought to accrue from syllogisms; i.e. their general application. He says “no syllogistical reasoning can be right and conclusive, but what has at least one general proposition in it.” (p.677)

Locke goes on to classify arguments we make against others into four sorts:

1. Argumentum ad verecundiam (argument to shame) – In this one uses the authority of people with a solid reputation to support one’s claims.
2. Argumentum ad ignorantiam (argument from ignorance) – This demands one’s interlocutor accept the claim or assign a better one.
3. Argumentum ad hominem (argument for human) – This exposes unfavourable consequences in the other’s position.
4. Argumentum adjudicium (judgement argument) – This uses proofs to make one’s case and is the only one of the four which “brings true instruction with it, and advances us in our way to knowledge.” (p.683)

While reason is the discovery of the certainty or probability of propositions or truths reached through the use of our natural faculties (i.e. sensation or reflection), faith is the assenting to a proposition which comes directly from God; i.e. revelation. Locke claims that faith and reason are not opposites. Rather, “faith must be regulated by reason.” (p.684)

Locke divides revelation into two; traditional and original. Original revelation is the direct conveying by God to a person of some truth. Traditional revelation refers to those impressions we get from someone who has received original revelation. He notes three things regarding faith:

1. No new simple idea can be conveyed by traditional revelation.
2. Traditional revelation can reveal propositions also known by reason but lacks the same degree of certainty. Interestingly, even original revelation cannot violate the clear evidence of reason. The reason for this is that if it could, this “would be to subvert the principles and foundations of all knowledge, evidence, and assent whatsoever: and there would be left no difference between truth and falsehood, no measures of credible and incredible in the world, if doubtful propositions shall take place before self-evident” (p.688).

Revealed propositions in the Bible are never solely about faith because we require reason to ascertain whether the book is of divine authority or not.

1. “Things above reason are, when revealed, the proper matter of faith.” (p.690) There are things that reason can have no say in because they lie beyond our access, and in these, faith is the sole operator. Examples include, that angels rebelled against God, that the dead shall rise, etc.

Locke criticises the “absurdities that fill almost all the religions which possess and divide mankind” (p.692) as stemming from a faith unchecked by reason. Locke calls this *enthusiasm* and he proceeds to investigate this next.

He is suspicious of the “enthusiastic impulse” in which a truth is supposedly revealed with a clear, penetrating “light infused into their understandings, and cannot be mistaken” (p.696). Locke questions whether it is in fact a revelation from God or merely “a perception of an inclination or fancy to do something” (p.697). Indeed, “the light they speak of is but a strong, though ungrounded persuasion of their own minds, that it is a truth.” (p.699) The only light that can shine in our understanding is “the evidence of the truth of any proposition; and if it be not a self-evident proposition, all the light it has, or can have, is from the clearness and validity of those proofs upon which it is received.” (p.700) In other words, all light is the result of intuitive or demonstrative knowledge. Such people tend to think about their revelation in a circle; “It is a revelation, because they firmly believe it; and they believe it, because it is a revelation.” (p.698)

All true revelation comes with “some marks which reason cannot be mistaken in. Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything.” (p.701) These *marks* “testify to them that it was from God.” (p.702) Examples given here include Moses’ burning bush and the turning of his rod into a serpent.

*Of Wrong Assent or Error*

Locke lists four ways we mistakenly give assent to that which is not true:

1. Want of proofs
2. Want of ability to use proofs
3. Want of will to see them
4. Wrong measures of probability
   1. Propositions that are not certain and evident but have been accepted as principles. We revere our principles so much that “the testimony, not only of other men, but the evidence of our own senses are often rejected, when they offer to vouch anything contrary to these established rules.” (p.709) These are often received in childhood.
   2. Received hypotheses. These differ from the former in that they won’t reject evidence that contradicts their principles outright; rather, they will explain it away.
   3. Predominant passions or inclinations. Probabilities which run contrary to our appetites and prevailing passions will seldom be acknowledged. There are two methods for evading probabilities:
      1. Supposing there is some fallacy in the words used by an interlocutor
      2. Supposing there are unknown arguments against the interlocutor’s position

Locke makes an interesting point here. He claims that when we once see clearly the agreement or disagreement between ideas (knowledge), we cannot fail to know the truth. Likewise, when a probability clearly manifests, we cannot choose to not give our assent; “we cannot hinder our knowledge, where the agreement is once perceived; nor our assent, where the probability manifestly appears upon due consideration of all the measures of it: yet we can hinder both knowledge and assent, by stopping our inquiry, and not employing our faculties in the search of any truth.” (p.714)

* 1. Authority. This is merely the “giving up our assent to the common received opinions, either of our friends or party, neighbourhood or country.” (p.715)

*Of the Division of the Sciences*

In this final section, Locke divides science into three sorts:

1. Physica (natural philosophy) – the study of “the nature of things, as they are in themselves, their relations, and their manner of operation” (p.717)
2. Practica (practical) – the study of “that which man himself ought to do, as a rational and voluntary agent, for the attainment of any end, especially happiness” (p.717). The primary division here is *ethics* which is “the seeking out those rules and measures of human actions, which lead to happiness, and the means to practise them.” (p.717)
3. Semeiotike/Logike (signs/logic) – the study of the signs we use to represent ideas. The most common of these will be words, which Locke calls logic.

1. As an interesting aside, Locke thinks that we “cannot fix long on one invariable idea” (p.170). Ideas are constantly rolling through our minds. He does however think we can notice the ideas in our mind and “direct the sort, and call in such as he hath a desire or use of” (p.170)). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. True in Locke’s time before the discovery of the four fundamental forces of nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)