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Locke, *Essay* IV.iv.1-12; ix.2-3; x.1-7; xi
Knowledge of Real Existence

Locke's project of determining which of the four types of agreement and disagreement of ideas identified in *Essay* IV.i are known by which of the means identified in *Essay* IV.ii is only partially completed in *Essay* IV.iii. That chapter only considers the means of our knowledge of the identity and diversity, the relations, and the coexistence of ideas. The remaining topic, of the means of our knowledge of real existence corresponding to our ideas, is taken up in *Essay* IV.iv. Locke approached this topic by dividing our ideas into three groups, simple ideas, ideas of complex modes and relations, and ideas of substances. He then asked what each of these three main types of ideas might allow us to intuit, demonstrate, or experience to be the case of real things existing outside of us. His investigation of the second of these types of ideas motivated an investigation of our knowledge of general principles that was undertaken over *Essay* IV.v-viii. In investigating the third topic, he drew a distinction between knowledge of the self, knowledge of God, and knowledge of external objects. Our knowledge of the real existence of objects corresponding to our ideas of these main types of substance is discussed over *Essay* IV.ix-xi.

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. What assures us that our perceptions of simple ideas are not made up by us but correspond to powers in bodies?
2. Why can mathematical principles be regarded as "true and certain" even though t hey only describe ideas we have ourselves created in imagination?
3. What is the basis for our knowledge of general truths?
4. Are there any constraints on the power of the imagination in constructing ideas of complex modes?
5. What conditions must be satisfied in order for our ideas of substances to be considered real rather than imaginary? What conditions must be satisfied for them to be considered at least possibly real rather than fantastic creations that could never even possibly exist?
6. Is it possible to prove our own existence, i.e., give a demonstration of the fact?
7. Did Locke accept the causal principle (that every effect must have some cause)? If not, why not, and if so, how did he think we come to know it?
8. What significance does the power to produce and remove ideas have for Locke's arguments to demonstrate the existence of an external world?
9. What significance do feelings of pleasure and pain have for Locke's arguments to demonstrate the existence of an external world?
10. Can I know that objects continue to exist when I am not perceiving them?
11. Can I know that other human bodies think and perform acts of will?

NOTES ON THE READING

Though Locke supposed that all of our knowledge ultimately arises from, as he put it, a "perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas" (*Essay* IV.i.2), he also supposed that these connections and disagreements of ideas have some reference to the existence of real objects in the external world, and that we can come to know something about these objects through our ideas. This is already the case with our simple ideas.

The real existence of objects corresponding to our simple ideas. For reasons Locke gave at the outset of *Essay* II and that he canvassed in *Essay* IV.iv for a second time, we are intuitively aware that we did not create our simple ideas. Furthermore, from the circumstances in which those ideas first arose in us, we can demonstrate that a particular stimulus environment, and the possession of particular sense organs, is requisite to obtaining each simple idea of sensation. Consequently, Locke declared, these simple ideas must have some reality, in the sense that they must refer to some cause outside us, at least insofar as they are presented to us in sensation. Moreover, were it legitimate to suppose that we were created by an intelligent and benevolent being (a point that Locke attempted to demonstrate later), we could prove that there should be a regular correspondence between real things and the simple ideas we receive in sense experience. This correspondence should be extensive enough to allow us to distinguish things into sorts of things that might harm or benefit us, by referring to the different collections of ideas they bring about in us.

The real existence of objects corresponding to complex modes and relations. In mathematics, geometry, and, as far as Locke was concerned, ethics and politics, we are able to establish principles by means of calculations performed on complex modes and relations. These demonstrations have no reference to anything that really exists. That breaking promises is wrong, or that triangles have internal angles summing to two right angles are principles that are true regardless of whether any promises are ever made or any triangles happen to exist. But our knowledge of these relations between complex ideas is "real" in the sense that it would have to apply to any objects that did satisfy the definition of a promise or a triangle, were any such objects to exist.

A significant part of our knowledge takes the form of knowledge of general principles like these. The laws of natural science are really all just general principles describing complex modes. It is just that the complex modes in question are ones that a number of actually existing bodies in fact happen to share. Our knowledge of the existence of particular objects, in contrast, is largely based on everyday experience. It is what gets us home at night without making a wrong turn, but not what enables us to build the vehicles we employ for the purpose.

For this reason, Locke undertook a more extensive inquiry into the types of general principles and the nature of our knowledge of them over *Essay* IV.v-viii.

The real existence of the self. While the existence of real objects corresponding to our ideas of substances can in general only be known by sensation, that is, by experiencing a collection of ideas answering to the nominal essence of a given substance, Locke supposed that our knowledge of the existence of our own selves and of God are exceptions. The former is supposed to be known by intuition, the latter by demonstration.

Locke's discussion of our knowledge of our own existence is very brief, and after what he said on this topic in the chapters on substance and identity and in the remark on thinking matter in IV.iii.6 it is something of a disappointment. It simply consists in asserting that I cannot have any sensation or perform any act of mind without intuiting that I exist and am having that sensation or performing that operation.

As thus stated, Locke's argument appears to be no different from Descartes's in *Meditations* II. But in *Meditations* II Descartes was not just concerned to establish that the self exists, but to

establish that the self is a substance of a special kind, one capable of thought. Locke, in contrast, had nothing to say about the nature of the "self" he took us to intuit.

The real existence of God. The demonstration that Locke used to prove the existence of God is a variant on the cosmological argument. A standard cosmological argument tries to prove the existence of God by claiming that there has to be some reason why there is something rather than nothing, and in particular why the universe as a whole (a very large "something") exists. Locke did not, however, want to presuppose the existence of the universe in his proof for the existence of God. That would make our certainty of the existence of God derivative from our certainty of the existence of an external world, and Locke wanted that relation to be the other way around — our knowledge of the existence of God should be prior. But neither did Locke want to follow Descartes's route and try to prove the existence of God by appeal to the existence of an idea of an all perfect being — an attempt that he disparaged in Essay IV.x.7 and IV.x.1. Accordingly, rather than start from the universe as "something" he started from the one existence he knew with the greatest evidence and certainty — his own existence — and argued that there must have been some cause of his existence.

The path of his argument from there on is familiar. He claimed that it is evident "by intuition" that everything that exists must have some cause. Exactly why he thought this is not stated very clearly, but his argument seems to rest on the containment model — the notion that a cause must already contain its effect inside of itself somehow, so that the way it produces its effect is by a kind of excretion. If this is how causality works, then it is natural to suppose that something cannot be caused by nothing. Nothing, after all, does not contain anything out of which to produce anything else. To Locke, the containment model of causality may have looked like a direct and immediate intuition drawn from contemplation of our ideas of something and nothing. We see our idea of nothing does not contain any material that any thing could be constructed from and we infer that therefore it is impossible that something come from nothing. But if something cannot come from nothing, then it is natural to suppose that everything that is must have come from something else.

Since I obviously exist, I, too, must have come from something else. If there is not to be an infinite regress of past causes, there must somewhere be a cause that is eternal — that does not need to have a cause of its own existence because it existed for all of past time. So we can infer that the ultimate cause of my existence must be eternal.

We can also suppose, according to Locke, that this cause must be intelligent. The reason for this is that I am intelligent, and intelligence, according to Locke, cannot be an emergent quality — there is no way to get intelligence by putting stupid pieces of matter together. (It is only with the development of very recent computer technology that we have come to think that one might in fact be able to put pieces of matter together to produce intelligence.) If intelligence is not an emergent quality then whatever causes me must itself be intelligent, otherwise there would be something in me, namely my intelligence, that exists without a cause.

A similar, though somewhat more strained, argument is employed to prove that whatever it is that caused me must have all the power I can conceive of, and Locke claims, though he does not actually demonstrate, that other divine perfections could be derived by similar arguments as well. The ultimate conclusion is that, starting from the intuition of my own existence, I can proceed by a series of steps to demonstrate the existence of God.

Aside from its other problems, Locke's argument for the existence of God is extraordinary in the way it invokes the causal principle. The only way the causal principle could be "intuited" is if

the containment model of causality is accepted. Once it is accepted that causes previously contain their effects and bring them about by a kind of excretion, then it becomes intuitively obvious that something cannot come from nothing. But what convinced Locke of the truth of the containment model in the first place? It could not be known innately. Like everything else we know, it would have to be known by getting a number of ideas through external sensation or reflection, and comparing these ideas with one another. But what sort of experience and comparison could possibly warrant formulating the grand, metaphysical principle that all effects must have some cause, much less some cause "adequate" to produce them in the sense of somehow containing the effect in themselves ahead of time? If we turn to Locke's very short chapter on the causal relation (*Essay* II.xxvi — over half of which is concerned with other matters) we find little enlightenment. All that Locke said there is that having observed that alterations in one thing are regularly preceded by another thing (e.g., that the drying of grapes is regularly preceded by a period of bright sunshine), we come to refer to the one as the cause and the other as the effect. But this is hardly a containment or excretion model of causality. On this account, the cause is merely conceived as something that constantly or regularly precedes the effect in past time. Moreover, causes are something that we only come to know about through identifying something that regularly precedes alterations of a certain type. If we fail to succeed in the effort to find such a regular antecedent, and nothing seems easier than to suppose that we might, then we will have experience of events for which we can find no cause, and our experience itself will lead us to accept that not all events have causes.

Other minds and the continued existence of unperceived objects. Locke's reasons for supposing that we know the real existence of objects corresponding to those ideas of substances that we receive from sensory experience have already been canvassed in the previous chapter and so are passed over here. However, it is important to notice that there are two important limitations that Locke placed on our knowledge of particular substances. One concerns the continuity in existence of unperceived objects. Suppose Martha is looking at Henry. Then Martha turns away and looks somewhere else. Then she turns and looks back at Henry. According to Locke, Martha can only know (that is, be certain) that Henry exists while she is actually perceiving him. She cannot know that he continued to exist over the interval while she was looking away. Locke was at least being consistent here. If perception is what is necessary for knowledge that an external object exists, and there is no perception, then there is no knowledge. Locke did remark, however, that while I cannot know that others continue to exist while unperceived, I can take this as highly probable. And he noted that probability is all we require for the purposes of life, and that anyone who demands certainty in these matters is being unreasonable.

However, there is another limitation on Locke's proof that arises in the particular case where other human beings are concerned. We would all like it if others were to think of us as thinking beings rather than zombies. But while I can know that I am a thinking being because I perceive all my thoughts through reflection, I do not have a sense that informs me of anybody else's thoughts. I see other bodies move and hear sounds come out of their mouths that have meaning to me, but I have no experience that there is thinking going on in those other bodies. Locke maintained that the existence of other thinking beings is not something I accept even as a probability. It is rather based on faith.

These reflections raise the general issue of what probable belief and faith are based on, and how they compare to one another. This is the topic of the next chapter.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH TOPICS

1. Locke's claim that it is intuitively evident that every event must have a cause was attacked by Hume in Book I, Part iii, Chapter 3 of his *Treatise concerning human understanding*. Recount and assess Hume's argument.
2. It is surprisingly difficult to prove that there are other minds. Survey some of the recent literature on this topic and explain why the standard arguments for this conclusion have proven to be less than convincing.
3. Locke maintained that while we cannot *know* that objects continue to exist while not perceived, we can have grounds to *believe* that this is the case. Hume followed Locke in this respect, but unlike Locke he did not think that we have *good* or reasonable grounds to believe that objects continue to exist unperceived; instead, our belief is a fiction of the imagination, based on certain propensities that, in other circumstances, are condemned by philosophers and logicians as producing fallacious opinions. Hume's argument for this startling conclusion is offered over *Treatise* I.iv.2. Recount this argument, giving particular attention both to why Hume said that the belief in the unperceived existence of bodies is not based on any good reason, and what he identified as the illegitimate operations of the imagination that cause us to have this belief anyway.