

Locke's definition of knowledge

Knowledge consists in the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas.

It cannot consist in anything more than that.

Because we have no experience of anything but our own ideas.

Does this mean that we have no knowledge of the reality and truth of things, but only of what is going on in our own minds?

Does it make all knowledge merely personal, subjective, and relative rather than about objects independent of us?

There are 4 ways in which our ideas can “agree or disagree”

- with regard to identity and diversity
- with regard to coexistence in a substance
- with regard to other relations
- with regard to real existence corresponding to an idea

We don't get to make up our diverse simple ideas but must discover them in sensation and reflection.

We also do not get to decide which simple ideas are combined in a substance

The coexistence of the ideas collected together in “complex modes” like “justice” or “drunkenness” or “triangle” is up to us to determine

But that of the ideas combined in a substance is discovered by experience

Having formed ideas, we do not get to decide what other relations they exhibit. That is determined by the features of the ideas themselves

Knowledge of real existence corresponding to an idea

There is an evident difference between sensations of pain or pleasure and the memory or imagination of pain or pleasure.

This makes anything connected with the experience of pain or pleasure “real” in a special sense

(one that is also opposed to imagination and fantasy)

What knowledge of real existence corresponding to an idea might consist in, cont.'d

Since it is not up to us to determine what ideas we will find to coexist in a substance encountered in sensory experience

and some of those ideas can be harmful or beneficial

when we learn from sensory experience what ideas do coexist in a substance, we learn something about the powers in something existing outside of us,

even if we may have no clear idea of what gives that thing those powers

Doesn't the case of dreams show that I can never be sure whether I am really having sensation of substances or merely imagination?

In that case, shouldn't I be said to at best have *belief* about real existence, but not *true and certain knowledge*?

Locke's response to the dreaming argument

Nothing is more real than what causes pain or pleasure.

Consequently, whether you fancy yourself to be merely dreaming or are convinced that you are awake, you have to deal with things in the same way.

The only question is whether dreams exhibit the same sorts of relations of coexistence of ideas in substances and the same sorts of regularities as are found in waking life.

To the extent that they do it is a moot question whether we are awake or asleep.

Pragmatically we have to deal with our experiences in the same way, and that makes them as good as real for us.

Means of knowledge

- Intuition

In intuition we just “see” that certain ideas are related to one another in a certain way by comparing the ideas with one another

- Demonstration

In demonstration we cannot see that certain ideas are related to one another but we can appeal to intermediate ideas to prove that they must be

- Sensation

By means of “sensation” (perception) we discover relations that depend on how the ideas happen to be collected together in experience

Paradigm cases

“Intuition” of relations of identity and difference among ideas and of simple truths of arithmetic

(often involving just simple ideas)

“Demonstration” of moral principles and of less immediately evident truths of mathematics

(often involving analysis of complex modes)

“Sensation” of relations of coexistence in space and succession in time

(typically concerned with the characterization of substances)

Locke's conflicted views of memory and demonstration

Original view:

Unless you are actually engaged in performing a demonstration, you do not have demonstrative knowledge

If you merely recall the results of some demonstration performed in the past you have belief based on the (fallible) testimony of memory (analogous to belief in the testimony of others)

The original view might be taken to imply that demonstrations can't exist.

Because either you immediately see the relation between ideas, in which case you have intuition

Or, you can only intuit relations between other, intermediate ideas, in which case you have to rely on your memory of earlier intuitions in reaching your conclusion concerning the more remotely related ideas

And then you don't have knowledge.

Locke's conflicted views of memory and demonstration, cont.'d

Revised view:

The conclusions of remembered demonstrations are themselves known demonstratively

but by means of a different demonstration

The different demonstration appeals to the principle that relations between unchanging things will not change.

(Each idea is what it is and can never be any other, so demonstrations based on intuition of relations between simple ideas are based on intuitions of relations between unchanging things)

So all we need to do is remember that we previously demonstrated the relation and that the things are immutable.

It is not clear that this resolves the problem as it rests on the supposition that memory could not deceive us when we remember having performed a demonstration.

Locke sometimes declared that memory would not deceive about about whether we have demonstrated something in the past (IV.i.9)

But at other times declared that memory does not “exactly retain” all the steps in a demonstration (IV.ii.7)

Subjects and Extent of Knowledge

Relations of identity and difference among ideas

here our knowledge extends as broadly as our ideas

Real existence of objects corresponding to our ideas

this was discussed at the outset in connection with pleasure and pain and what knowledge is of

Relations of coexistence of ideas in a substance

Other relations between ideas

in these cases our knowledge does not extend even as far as our ideas, and its bounds are uncertain

Knowledge of “other” relations between ideas

not all relations between ideas can be intuited

resemblance, degrees in quality or quantity, and difference can be intuited; but not relations in space and time, identity, power, etc.

where relations cannot be intuited they might be demonstrated, but that depends on discovering “intermediate” ideas and it is not clear how far our ability to do that extends

wherever the secondary and tertiary qualities or powers of bodies are concerned we run into a road-block

since we do not know the microscopic constitution that gives bodies their powers we cannot demonstrate anything concerning them

so are left having to rely on experience

even of primary qualities only a few things can be demonstrated and some of the most notable features (e.g. cohesion) are unaccountable

Knowledge of coexistence in a substance

On this topic our knowledge is most limited, and cannot extend to even the most basic things

e.g., whether some substances that is characterized by cohesion of solid parts that communicate motion by impulse

might also be so organized as to be capable of initiating motion by will or of experiencing pleasure and pain as a consequence of impulse

(so even the mind/body distinction cannot be known)

Supposing there are two separate substances, one mental, one material, leaves us with insuperable problems explaining how they interact

supposing there is one is no less problematic

so far as we can understand, impulse can produce nothing but motion

if it is able to produce sensations of pleasure and pain in minds

(and we know it does produce such sensations)

it is by means completely unknown to us

and then it is just as possible, for all we know, that it could produce the like sensations in matter