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On Our Knowledge of Real Existence in Locke

Abstract

A common criticism of Locke's theory of knowledge is that Locke's account of knowledge of existence stands in "formal contradiction" with his general definition of knowledge. But some Locke scholars have attempted to defend Locke by reinterpreting either Locke's phrase "the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our ideas" or his characterization of existential knowledge, or his general definition of knowledge. In this paper, I argue that these attempts fail to resolve the apparent inconsistency in Locke's epistemology.

Key Terms

Locke, Knowledge, Existential Knowledge, Yolton, Wozzley, Mattern.

Locke'da Gerçek Varoluş Bilgimiz Üzerine

Özet

Locke'in varlığın bilgisi hakkındaki yaklaşımının onun kendi genel bilgi tanımı ile "mantıksal olarak çeliştiği" savı, Locke'in bilgi teorisine yöneltilen yaygın bir eleştiridir. Fakat bazı filozoflar, Locke'ı bu eleştiriye karşı savunmak için, onun ya varlığın bilgisine ilişkin anlayışını ya da genel bilgi tanımını yeniden yorumlayan öneriler ileri sürerler. Bu makalede, bu önerilerin her birinin Locke'in bilgi teorisindeki söz konusu çelişkiyi çözmede temelde başarısız olduğu gösterilmeye çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar Terimler

Locke, Bilgi, Varlığın Bilgisi, Yolton, Wozzley, Mattern.

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1. Introduction

At IV.I.2 of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*¹, Locke states that knowledge is “nothing but *the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas.*” Thus, Locke offers the following equivalence as an analysis of knowledge: S knows that *p* if and only if S “perceives” the relation of “agreement or disagreement” between ideas expressed by *p*. In his expanded discussion of this definition, he goes on to say that the kinds of agreement or disagreement between ideas can be reduced to four. They are classified as: (1) Identity, or Diversity, (2) Relation, (3) Co-existence, or necessary connection, (4) Real Existence (IV.I.3). As it stands, while the first three types of agreement or disagreement relations take place only between ideas, the relation of agreement or disagreement regarding “actual real existence” does not obtain between two ideas: “[t]he fourth and the last sort is, that of actual real existence agreeing to any Idea”(IV.I.7). Propositions such as “God is” or “I exist” fall under real existence, the only category of agreement or disagreement Locke did not mention as a possible sub-class of relation; this is because, propositions falling under real existence are concerned, not with certain inter-relations within a network of ideas, but rather with the relationship between the network and a real existent. Thus, as Daniel O’Connor (1967: 163) also explicitly suggests, real existence is quite different from the first three sorts of agreement and disagreement, because “a statement affirming that something exists does not assert a relation or lack of relation between two ideas.”

So, in V.I.7, Locke *seems* to define knowledge expressed in existential propositions as the perception of the agreement of some idea with an external thing that is not an idea. Because of this, a number of critics have objected that there is a formal gap between IV.I.2 and IV.I.7, between the conditions for knowledge and those conditions for being an instance of knowledge of existence. For instance, Gibson (1931: 166) argues that “the recognition of knowledge of real existence stands in formal contradiction to his general definition of knowledge.” That is, according to these critics, in recognizing “actual real existence” as a type of agreement, Locke clearly departs from his general definition of knowledge, making it an agreement not between ideas but between an idea and a real thing distinct from ideas.² But, whether this departure amounts to a logical inconsistency will be made clear in the next section below.³

Some Locke scholars have attempted to defend Locke by reinterpreting either Locke’s phrase “the perception of agreement or disagreement of our ideas” or his

¹ All references to the *Essay* are to Locke 1975.

² Others have also made a similar objection to Locke. These critics are Daniel O’ Conner (1967: 163), Thomas Hill Green (1968: 20), Richard Aaron (1971: 240) and John L. Mackie (1976: 4).

³ An anonymous referee has plausibly raised this question. Following his/her advise, I will take on this issue in section 2. But to avoid a confusion, I must at this point say that I do not originally use the terms inconsistency or contradiction to describe the apparent logical difficulty in Locke’s account of knowledge mentioned above. In raising this criticism, scholars like James Gibson and John Mackie explicitly say that there is a “logical inconsistency” or “formal contradiction” in Locke’s account of knowledge. See also Ruth Mattern (1978: 678).

characterization of existential knowledge, or his general definition of knowledge. So there are, as far as I know, three different attempts that have been made to explain away the objection. The first attempt made by John Yolton (1970) is the view that *not* all perceived agreement or disagreement relations are, for Locke, between ideas. It can also sometimes be between ideas and things other than ideas which can be perceived as well. Hence, by this interpretation, Locke's general definition of knowledge can also apply to existential knowledge, because knowing is not always confined to certain inter-relations within a network of ideas, but it also includes perceiving the relationship between ideas and the reality of things producing these ideas. The second attempt, made by Michael Ayers (1991) and Anthony Woozley (1972), focuses instead on Locke's troubling remark that "[t]he fourth and the last sort is, that of *actual real existence* agreeing to any *Idea*." They read this remark as essentially saying that knowledge expressed in any existential proposition is still a perception of a relation between ideas. In IV.1.4, they claim, Locke is not really departing from his general conception of knowledge, but he is still explaining the perception of an existential claim in terms of a subject-predicate analysis of propositions. The third attempt, maintained by Ruth Mattern (1978), proposes to reinterpret Locke's general definition of knowledge as propositional. She suggests that Locke's definition that knowledge is the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas is equivalent to characterizing knowledge as perception of the truth of affirmative and negative propositions. For Mattern, the main reason for this is that the relation of agreement or disagreement between ideas obtains when the propositions composed of these ideas are true or false. Thus, reading IV.1.4 in this way not only avoids any reference to ideas but also leaves open the question of the contents of the propositions; and by this move, the apparent logical conflict generated by Locke's reference to ideas in the original definition will be removed.

In this paper, I argue that each of these three attempts fails to resolve the apparent logical inconsistency in Locke's epistemology. My discussion will have the following order. I will begin by explaining whether there is an inconsistency between the conditions for knowledge defined in V.I.2 and those conditions for being an instance of knowledge of existence characterized in section V.I.7. I will then try to state what Locke means by "agreement and disagreement between ideas." After these preliminary elucidations, I will argue that John Yolton's proposal fails, for the reason that Locke does not hold that existential knowledge relation is between ideas and something else which can be perceived. Concerning Ayers' and Mattern's suggestions, I will try show that their arguments do not also work in explaining away the apparent difficulty in Locke's account of knowledge, because Locke does not explain the perception of an existential claim as the perception of the agreement of some idea with the idea of existence conveyed itself into the mind by sensation and reflection.

2. The Objection: An Apparent Inconsistency in Locke

In the opening sections of Book IV, Locke says that knowledge is the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas. In contemporary parlance, this amounts to saying that S knows that p if, and only if, S perceives the relation of the agreement or disagreement of ideas expressed by p . Thus, according to the analysis of knowledge developed in the *Essay*, knowledge comes with a perception of the relatedness of ideas

expressed by various propositions. To know, for example, that “white is not black” is to “perceive” that these two ideas, the idea of whiteness and the idea of blackness, do not agree; that is, knowing the truth of the compound idea that “white is not black” requires intuiting that the idea of whiteness is not the same with the idea of blackness. What underlies this conception of knowledge is the view that we are limited in the first place by experience: where we have no ideas we cannot have knowledge. This means that ideas are the only immediate objects of understanding, and that we can only know things external to us by the intervention of these mental entities. Thus, Locke thought that knowledge is “only conversant about ideas” (IV.1.1), and consists in perceiving various connections, and the agreement or disagreement between them.⁴ After defining knowledge as such, Locke puts forward, in terms of the various subject matters of propositions, a fourfold classification of the agreement or disagreement between our ideas:

For all the Enquires that we can make, concerning any of our *Ideas*, all that we know, or can affirm concerning any of them, is, That it is, or is not the same with some other; that it does, or does not always co-exist with some other *Idea* in the same Subject; or it has this or that Relation to some other *Idea*; or that it has a real existence without the Mind. (IV.1.7)

According to Locke, the fourth and last sort is real existence, i.e. “actual real existence agreeing to any idea.” For instance, the proposition expressed in “God is” implies that a certain idea agrees, in the sense of ‘is like’, with a certain reality that is not an idea. So to know, for example, that “the table exists” is, for Locke, to affirm a relation, not between some ideas, but between the table and the idea of the table. But, it is objected that if this is Locke’s treatment of knowledge of existence, then such cases of knowledge cannot possibly fall within the scope of his general definition of knowledge. For, there is an apparent inconsistency between his view of knowledge of existence transcending ideas and his general definition of knowledge restricting knowledge to a perception of an agreement or disagreement between ideas: in the fourth sort of agreement or disagreement, one of the two entities explicitly referred to as an actual real existence is clearly distinct from an idea. That is, Locke contradicted himself in thinking that knowledge of real existence counts as an instance of the perception of relations between ideas, and hence failed to realize the problem of bringing knowledge of existence into line with his general characterization of knowledge. To put in Mattern’s (1978: 678) words,

no conceivable knowledge of real existence could fall within the scope of this characterization of knowledge, because there is a *logical* conflict between the requirements for being a case of knowledge of real existence and those requisite for being an instance of this formula. In particular, how can knowledge of the existence of some real being count as perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas?

⁴ It is important to notice that since these ideas are ultimately derived from sensation or reflection, this definition of knowledge is perfectly consistent with Locke’s empiricist theory of the origins of ideas. Hence, the question of whether Locke’s general definition of knowledge coheres with his empiricism does not arise at all.

So, in including real existence as a type of agreement, Locke departs, the objection proceeds, from his general definition of knowledge, making it an agreement not between ideas but between an idea and some entity distinct from ideas. This is because, the fourth type of agreement—“actual real Existence agreeing to any Idea”—seems to suggest that knowledge expressed in existential claims consists in the perception of the agreement or disagreement not of an idea with an idea, but of an idea with an external thing that is not an idea. Knowledge of existence is, according to Locke, not knowledge of a relation between two ideas but knowledge of the existence of something in reality “agreeing to” some ideas. But this conception of knowledge of existence is inconsistent with his general definition of knowledge. Here is how.

Locke says that knowledge (K) is “the perception of the *agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas*” and that existential knowledge (EK) is a matter of perceiving “*actual real existence agreeing to any Idea.*” Is this a statement of the sort “ $p \sim p$ ”? We think that since p and $\sim p$ can never have the same truth values, their conjunction states a logical contradiction; that is, p and $\sim p$ are not contraries but contradictories, and this is why they are logically inconsistent. Now, I think that K is logically inconsistent with EK because they cannot both be true: the truth of one entails the falsity of the other. However, since K and EK can both be false, they are not contradictories but contraries; K and EK are contraries because Locke’s definition that knowledge is a matter of perceiving various connections *only* between two ideas entails that knowledge is *not* also a matter of perceiving a connection between an idea and a real existent. More clearly, since existential knowledge is also an instance of knowledge, knowledge cannot be both “the perception of the *agreement or disagreement of any of our Ideas*” and a matter of perceiving “*actual real existence agreeing to any Idea.*” That is, if knowledge consists *only* in “the perception of the *agreement or disagreement of any of our Ideas*”, then it cannot consist *also* in perceiving the relations of ideas to non-ideas. Thus, the conjunction of Locke’s definition of knowledge and his characterization existential knowledge is a case of contrariety, and this is why they are logically inconsistent.⁵

3. The Agreement or Disagreement of Ideas and True Propositions

What does Locke mean by “agreement and disagreement between ideas”? To begin with, I want to suggest that Locke’s definition of knowledge as “the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas” is a direct consequence of his approach to the relationship between knowledge and propositions. Locke thinks that knowledge requires truth, and that truth is a feature of propositions: “Certainty of knowledge is to perceive the agreement or disagreement of *Ideas*, as expressed in any Proposition. This we usually call knowing, or being certain of the Truth of any Proposition” (IV.6.3). So, to understand what Locke means by “agreement and disagreement between ideas”, we

⁵ It is important to note that this objection concerns *primarily* a logical difficulty in Locke’s official analysis of knowledge and is quite different from the problem of how to justify existential claims in Locke’s empiricist epistemology. Also, the objection is not even that Locke cannot make any sense of perceiving a relationship between an idea and a thing that is not an idea in his philosophy.

need to consider his conception of truth and propositions. Let us begin with his account of propositions.

In Book IV, Locke defines propositions as the conjunction or separation of “signs”: “a proposition consists in joining or separating signs” (IV.5.5). For Locke, there are two sorts of propositions: mental and verbal. Propositions consisting solely of ideas are mental; propositions composed of word-signs standing for ideas are verbal. However, since the ultimate function of verbal propositions is to represent mental proposition and since idea-signs are more fundamental than word-signs, it is mental propositions that are essential for knowledge. So we shall focus on mental propositions.

On Locke’s view, our mind forms mental propositions when it puts ideas into a kind of proposition which are either affirmative or negative, as expressed by the terms “joining” and “separating”. What is central to this view of propositions is the thought that one can manipulate his own ideas much like pieces in a puzzle; one can rearrange them, put them together into a new compound idea, add new ones, dismantle them and etc. On Locke’s view, the references to “joining” or “separating” signs indicate relations between idea-signs that make propositions affirmative or negative. An affirmative mental proposition consists in “joining” ideas; to put ideas together or to join them is to affirm that they can be conjoined in a compound idea that purports to be a representation of some state of affairs. On the other hand, a negative mental proposition consists in separating ideas; to separate ideas is to deny that they can be put into a kind of proposition purporting to represent some state of affairs. Thus, a negative mental proposition is the denial of an affirmative mental proposition. This is consistent with Locke’s view that there are no negative ideas; all ideas are, for Locke, positive.⁶ So since there is no idea of “not” forming the part of a negative mental proposition, e.g., the proposition that “white is *not* black”, it is plausible to take a given negative mental proposition as the denial of an affirmative mental proposition. This is why Locke suggests that a negative mental proposition consists in “separating” ideas; so to separate two ideas is to deny that these two ideas can be conjoined in a compound idea that represent some state of affairs.

With these in mind, I argue that by “agreement and disagreement between ideas” Locke means this: when two ideas are conjoined in an affirmative mental proposition that is true, those ideas are said to agree; two given ideas disagree when their conjunction results in a true negative mental proposition asserting that something is not the case. In other words, agreement between two ideas renders true an affirmative mental proposition consisting of two “joined” ideas; disagreement between two ideas renders true a negative mental proposition consisting of two “separated” ideas.⁷ Locke clearly articulates this position by saying that the mind forms mental propositions when it puts ideas “into a kind of Proposition affirmative or negative, which I have endeavored to express by the terms Putting together and Separating. But this Action of

⁶ See especially (II.8.1-6) and (III.1.4). For a similar interpretation, see David E. Soles (1985: 24-5).

⁷ So, to say that two ideas agree is not merely to claim that they are not inconsistent or incoherent; it is just to say that those ideas can be combined into a true affirmative mental proposition representing that something is the case.

the Mind, which is so familiar to every thinking and reasonable Man, is easier to be conceived by reflecting on what passes in us, when we affirm or deny” (IV.5.6).

Thus, by agreement or disagreement of ideas Locke means the affirmative or negative mental propositions, and this is why he thinks that we have knowledge when we perceive that an affirmative or negative mental proposition is true: “[t]his we usually call knowing, or being certain of the Truth of any Proposition” (IV.6.3). This brings us Locke’s conception of truth. Locke’s motivation for characterizing knowledge as propositional is his view that knowledge entails truth. But he has in mind a baroque taxonomy of truth. He first makes a general division between the truth of verbal and the truth of mental propositions:

Truth, then, seems to me, in the proper import of the word, to signify nothing but *the joining or separating Signs, as the Things signified by them do agree or disagree one with another*. The joining or separating signs here meant, is what by another name we call *proposition*. So that truth properly belongs only to propositions; whereof there are two sorts, viz. mental and verbal. (IV.5.2)

At the end of IV.5.6, Locke further subdivides these two genera into real truths and nominal truths. It is this distinction that is crucial for understanding Locke’s phrase “agreement and disagreement between ideas.” In IV.5.8, he says that the difference between nominal truths and real truths originates in their respective truth-making relations. In the case of nominal truth, the descriptive contents of ideas are the grounds for judgments that involve them; that is, the truth-maker for *nominally* true propositions is merely the coherence of the descriptive contents of ideas. But the truth-maker for *really* true propositions is their correspondence with reality. So, in real agreements more than the descriptive contents of ideas are required; they involve both the descriptive contents of ideas and their referents. But nominal agreements are much weaker than real agreements and only involve the descriptive content of ideas. For instance, “a Harpy is an animal” is, for Locke, *nominally* true because the quality-ideas contained in the Harpy cohere with those specified by the idea of animal, but the truth expresses in “a man is an animal” is *really* true because not only the ideas contained in the idea of man cohere with those specified by the idea of animal but also both of the categorical terms are real ideas which signify real combinations of powers that really join together.⁸

We are now in a position to understand Locke’s point in saying that knowledge consists in nothing but the perception of an agreement or disagreement of ideas. Since he equates the agreement or disagreements of ideas with the truth of affirmative or negative mental propositions, to say that two ideas forming an affirmative proposition agree is in effect to say that the proposition is true, and to say that two ideas disagree is just to deny that they can be combined into a compound idea purporting to be a representation of some state of affairs. In his *Elements of Natural Philosophy*, Locke

⁸ These examples are from Benjamin Hill (2006: 94). It would be an interesting question to ask whether the correspondence model of truth is, for Locke, a special case of the coherence theory of truth (or the idea-theoretic model). Ruth Mattern (1978: 684) seems to think that on Locke’s view, the coherence theory is a special case of the correspondence model of truth by saying that “all truth involves correspondence.” By contrast, I think that for Locke, there is only the idea-theoretic model, but in some cases it somehow functions like the correspondence model. But a defense of this claim lies outside the scope of the present paper.

(1892: 495) embraces this position by saying that “knowledge consists in the perception of the truth of affirmative or negative propositions.” David Soles (1985:25) provides a similar interpretation by suggesting that “knowledge comes with the perception that a mental proposition does actually represent a fact and this perception is reduced to a perception of an agreement or disagreement of ideas.”

As is well known, Locke defends a version of classical foundationalism based on “the given”; so we should not conflate Locke’s agreement or disagreement relation with coherence relation holding either between an individual belief and another individual belief (linear coherence) or between an individual belief and the set of *all* of subject’s beliefs (holistic coherence). As I have tried to explain above, the agreement or disagreement relation stands for true affirmative or negative mental proposition and has nothing to do with the concepts of coherence and incoherence. Unlike the notion of coherence, the relation of agreement or disagreement does not by itself constitute the *ratio cognoscendi*, the property by which we determine whether a belief is an instance of knowledge or has justification, nor does it count as the *ratio essendi* of knowledge. For Locke, the mere presence of the relation of agreement or disagreement of ideas is, though necessary, insufficient for knowledge; knowledge also requires perceiving the presence of such a relation: “Where this perception is, there is knowledge, and where it is not, there, though we may fancy, guess or believe, yet we always come short of knowledge” (IV.I.2). But, according to coherence theories, what determines whether a belief constitutes knowledge, or is justified, is how it “coheres” with the set of all one’s beliefs.⁹

Locke’s division between “intuitive” and “demonstrative” knowledge is based essentially on the foundationalist distinction between basic and non-basic beliefs. But, insisting that all beliefs have the same epistemic status, coherence theories deny that there are basics or epistemologically privileged subclass of beliefs. Furthermore, the foundationalist objection that coherence theories simply fail to accommodate sense perception or all input from the world stems from the empiricist view that all our knowledge is derived from experience. So, given these crucial differences, one cannot really consistently explain away the charge of inconsistency in Locke’s epistemology within the terms of coherentism.¹⁰

4. Yolton’s Proposal and Its Critique

Yolton responds to the charge of inconsistency in Locke by arguing that the appearance of a formal contradiction mainly stems from a misreading of Locke’s phrase “the agreement or disagreement of ideas”. So to explain away the objection, he advances the view that Locke does not actually hold that *all* perceived agreements or disagreements must always be between ideas. Rather, he claims that Locke maintains that it can also sometimes be between an idea and a thing external to the mind. Yolton (1970: 110) says:

⁹ See John Pollock (1986:67).

¹⁰ But a case for this interpretation would take me far beyond the confines of this paper.

the knowledge relation... does not always require two ideas, is not always between ideas but is in some cases a feature of ideas... the term 'agreement' signals an intimation of something beyond the idea itself. Sometimes the intimation is of other ideas contingently coexisting with the idea... still other times the agreement intimates some physical cause producing the idea.

According to Yolton, the correct reading of Locke's view is that knowledge isn't just limited to the relation of ideas, it may also involve an idea and something else distinct from ideas: the second term of the perceived relation can be something other than an idea. So by this reading, the charge of inconsistency in Locke's epistemology does not arise at all.

Now, there is no doubt that (a) Locke thought that ideas can be related by agreement to the reality of things, but it is indeed doubtful to attribute the position to Locke that (b) that agreement can be perceived. With regard to (a), I think that when Locke says that simple ideas are related by agreement to those patterns producing ideas, he has in mind by the term "agreement" a veridical representational relation, which is quite different from other three types of relations, e.g., identity, coexistence. So, to say that simple ideas agree to the reality of things is, for Locke, to say that they represent the way things are. According to Locke, all simple ideas are

natural and regular productions of Things without us, really operating upon us; and so carry with them all the conformity which is intended; or which our state requires: For they represent to us Things under those appearances which they are fitted to produce in us... Thus the *Idea* Whiteness, or Bitterness, as it is in the Mind, exactly answering that power which is in any Body to produce it there, has all the real conformity it can... with Things without us. (IV. IV.4)

That is, on Locke's view, saying that a simple idea agrees with an external object means that the idea is caused by a sensory confrontation with that object. Thus, in this case, the term "agreement" intimates a purely causal connection between (simple) ideas and external objects. All simple ideas are real, "all agree to the reality of things" (II.XXX.2). So, there is a plenty of textual evidence in Locke's *Essay* supporting the first part of Yolton's proposal that ideas can be related by agreement to the reality of things.¹¹

Woozley (1972) also thinks that Yolton is right in suggesting that, for Locke, ideas can be related by agreement to an external object and says that evidence from the text of Locke's *Essay* "is plentiful" for this. However, he objects that, according to Locke, such an agreement is, or can be, perceivable. Woozley raises this objection in the following manner. At IV.II.14 of the *Essay*, Locke mentions that

[t]here is, indeed, another Perception of the Mind, employ'd about the particular existence of finite Beings without us; which ... passes under the name of knowledge. There can be nothing more certain, than that the Idea we receive from an external Object is in our Minds; this is intuitive Knowledge. But whether there be anything more than barely that Idea in our Minds, whether we can thence certainly infer the existence of anything without us, which corresponds to that Idea, is that, whereof some Men think there may be a question made, because

¹¹ Especially in Book II, chapters XXX – XXXII, Locke discusses the reality, truth and adequacy of our ideas and concludes that all simple ideas agree to the real existence of things.

Men may have such Ideas in their Minds, When no such Thing exists, no such Object affects their Senses.

Woozley (1972: 10) takes this passage as suggesting that existential knowledge requires that

there be a relation of correspondence or agreement between an idea and ‘the existence of anything without us...’ The presence of this relation is a necessary condition of such knowledge, but it is not yet sufficient; we need also to be able to ‘certainly infer’ its presence.’ (Note here that he says, not that we have to be able to know or perceive this relation of agreement between idea and object, but that we have to be able to certainly infer it. And whatever inferring is for Locke, it does not seem to be a way of perceiving...)

According to Woozley, Locke proposes that knowledge of existence entails not only that there must be a relation of agreement between an idea and a thing that is not an idea but also that one must be able to “infer” the presence of this relation in question in order for one to know that that something exists. But, for Woozley, (1) since “inferring” is, for Locke, not “a way of perceiving”, it clearly follows that (2) the relation of agreement between an idea and a thing is not perceivable. Hence, Yolton’s way of escaping the logical contradiction is based on a faulty reading of Locke’s view of knowledge of existence.¹² While I agree with Woozley that (2) is indeed the correct reading of Locke, I am unaware of any textual evidence that Locke believed (1), let alone that he believed (2) because he believed (1).

Does Locke suggest, in VI.II.14, that inferring is a necessary condition of existential knowledge? I think he does not. But, in saying that Locke requires inferring for knowledge of existence, Woozley seems to confuse the problem justifying claims about existence with the question of what knowledge of existence requires. In IV.II.14, Locke is not really saying that knowledge of existence entails that one must be able to “certainly infer” the presence of a relation between an idea and an external thing; nor does he say it *anywhere* in the *Essay*. Concerning the problem of justifying claims about existence, Locke in that passage considers the following possible skeptical hypothesis: from the premise that one has an idea in one’s mind, can one validly ‘infer’ that there actually exists an external thing corresponding to that idea? Locke is well aware that such an inference would be clearly invalid, and this is why he carefully distinguishes knowledge based on demonstration involving deductive inferences, from *sensitive* knowledge which does not involve inferring conclusions from premisses. According to Locke, knowledge of the existence of particular things requires, part of the *truth condition* on knowledge, the presence of a relation between an idea and an external thing; but, our epistemic access to this relation involves *only*, perhaps part of the *justification condition* on knowledge, “another *Perception* of the Mind”, namely *sensation*.¹³ At the very end of IV.II.14, which Woozley omits, Locke makes this very

¹² It is not Yolton but Woozley who thinks that knowledge of existence requires inferring; so this is Woozley’s conclusion.

¹³ At this point, one may raise the following question. “A few lines ago, you have claimed this: Woozley’s view that the relation of agreement between an idea and a thing is not perceivable is the correct reading of Locke. But you are now claiming that knowledge of existence of particular things requires sensation. But, aren’t these two claims inconsistent? That is, how

clear: “Pleasure or Pain follows upon the application of certain Objects to us... by our Senses, this certainty is as great as our Happiness, or Misery, beyond which, we have no concernment to know, or to be. So that, I think, we may add to the two former sorts of *knowledge*, this also, of the existence of particular external Objects, by the Perception and Consciousness we have of the actual entrance of *Ideas* from them...” Thus, except for our knowledge of the existence of God based on demonstration, neither intuitive nor sensitive knowledge entails any kind of inferring.

However, even if we suppose for the sake of the argument that Locke thinks that inferring is a necessary condition for knowledge based on intuition and sensation, does this constitute a good reason for concluding that the presence of a relation between an idea and an external thing is not perceivable?¹⁴ The short answer is that it does not. For, even if we include inferring as a part of knowledge of existence, it would still be an instance of perceiving. This is because, Locke uses the term perceiving as a general epistemic predicate and takes intuiting, inferring and sensing as three different forms of it.¹⁵ So, since inferring is a form of perceiving, Woozley’s criticism of Yolton’s proposal that *not* all perceived agreements are between ideas has no ground.

I think the reason for why Yolton’s proposal fails is as follows. His proposal assumes that the relation of agreement between ideas and the reality of things is perceivable. Presumably, in this case, both the agreement relation and the thing itself must be before the mind if we are to perceive that they are related. But, neither the thing itself nor is the agreement relation can be before the mind, for the reason Locke would provide that we do not have an immediate epistemic access to things external to the mind; our access to them is made “only by the intervention of the Ideas it has of them” (VI.IV.3). Since our access to an outward thing is blocked by our ideas, the agreement relation could not be before the mind as well. When Locke turns in Book IV from discussing the extent of our knowledge to discussing the reality of knowledge, he seems to realize that knowledge of existence cannot be fully explained within the terms of the definition of knowledge set out at IV.I.2. This is simply because of the possibility that ideas may be “*fictions* of our Fancies.” If all knowledge is confined to certain inter-relations within a network of ideas, then how can we know that which ideas are real as

distinct is this notion of sensation from the notion of perception mentioned in the former claim?” This objection simply overlooks the main point of the latter claim. The claim that knowledge of existence of particular things requires sensation *only* asserts that for Locke existential knowledge requires neither a sensation (i.e. perception) of the relation of the agreement between an idea and the idea of existence nor a sensation of the relation of agreement between an idea and a thing, which is perfectly compatible with the former claim. This is because, “only when by actual operating upon him, it makes itself perceived [sensed] by him... It is therefore the actual receiving of *Ideas* from without, that gives us notice of the *Existence* of other Things...” (IV.XI.2).

¹⁴ To be sure, this question does not imply that the presence of a relation between an idea and an external thing is perceivable. Here what I am trying to say is just this: Woozley’s criticism of Yolton’s proposal is groundless because Woozley’s claim that inferring is a necessary condition for knowledge does not constitute a good reason for concluding that the presence of a relation between an idea and an external thing is not perceivable. Something else is needed to draw such a conclusion. So this coheres with my overall position.

¹⁵ See especially IV.II.14.

opposed to fantastical? “It is evident”, he says, “the Mind knows not Things immediately, but only intervention of the *Ideas* it has of them... How shall the Mind, when it perceives nothing but its own *Ideas*, know that they agree with Things themselves?” (IV.IV.3)

Here he says that any agreement between ideas and external things producing these ideas cannot be known by perceiving that agreement because the mind can perceive nothing but only its own ideas. Because of this, Locke cannot make any sense of perceiving a relationship between ideas and external things in his empiricist epistemology, and this is why he thinks that “it is therefore the actual receiving of *Ideas* from without, that gives us a notice of the *Existence* of other Things, makes us know, that something doth exist at that time without us...” (IV.XI.2) So, Yolton’s proposal clearly fails in explaining away the apparent logical inconsistency in Locke’s theory of knowledge, because it mistakenly assumes that Locke held the view that knowledge of existence comes with a perception of the agreement relation between ideas and external things.

5. Ayers’ and Woozley’s Response to the Charge of Inconsistency

Ayers and Woozley have also attempted to explain away the logical inconsistency by simply claiming that while Locke thought that existential claims may be concerned with the relationship between ideas and the world, yet at IV.I.7 Locke nevertheless provided us a subject-predicate analysis of existential propositions. That is, there Locke explained the perception of an existential claim as the perception of the agreement of some idea with the idea of existence in accordance with his general characterization of knowledge. Existential knowledge too, like the other three categories, involves the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas. On this proposal, to know, for example, that the table exists is to perceive that the idea of table agrees with the idea of existence.¹⁶ So there is no inconsistency in Locke’s labeling existence as a type of agreement. According to Woozley (1972: 15), in his second reply to Stillingfleet, Locke mentions that “now the two ideas, that in this case are perceived to agree, and do thereby produce knowledge, are the idea of actual sensation... and the idea of actual existence of something without me that causes that sensation,” and this appears to provide an important textual evidence for his proposal.

¹⁶ The difference between Yolton’s argument and this proposal can be summarized as follows. On Yolton’s view, Locke’s general definition of knowledge can also apply to existential knowledge, because knowing is not always confined to inter-relations within a network of ideas, but it also includes perceiving the relationship between ideas and the reality of things producing these ideas. But, Michael Ayers and Anthony Woozley propose that knowledge expressed in any existential proposition is still a perception of a relation between ideas. In IV.I.4, they claim, Locke is not really departing from his general conception of knowledge, but he is still explaining the perception of an existential claim in terms of a subject-predicate analysis of propositions. So, they argue that for Locke knowledge of existence is nothing but the perception of the agreement or disagreement between an idea and the idea of existence, whereas Yolton proposes that existential knowledge is the perception of the agreement or disagreement between ideas and the reality of things producing these ideas in us.

But this raises problems. First, what does the relation of agreement holding between “the idea of actual sensation” and “the idea of existence” designate? In translating the relation of agreement holding between actual existence and the idea of sensation into a relation of agreement holding between the idea of actual sensation and the idea of actual existence, Locke would seem to leave the nature of the later relation unclear. Though Locke talks about the idea of existence, it is not something over and above the idea of a thing; indeed, the idea of the existence of a thing is not something distinct from the idea of that thing. For Locke, the idea of existence is a simple idea that is “suggested to the Understanding by every Object without, and every Idea within” (II.VII.7). That is, sensation and reflection provide us the idea of existence, a non-inferential awareness of our environment’s operating upon us. But this does not mean that there is something in sense experience counting as the idea of existence over and above the idea of a thing: there is no idea of existence apart from the idea of a thing. If this is so, then what does it mean to say that the idea of existence agrees with the idea of actual sensation? What sort of agreement is it? How would a perception of such an agreement, if any, produce knowledge of real existence?

Second, in stating that “the idea of actual sensation” agrees with “the idea of actual existence of something without me,” Locke would seem to be arguing that it is the idea of actual sensation which carries the agreement with external objects and that the way we come to know this agreement is via sensation. But this would be misleading and is inconsistent with what he says in IV.XI.1-2. In IV.XI.1-2, Locke argues that it is not the idea of actual sensation but the receiving of sensory ideas which carries the agreement with things outside us: “only when by actual operating upon him, it makes itself perceived by him... It is therefore the actual receiving of *Ideas* from without, that gives us notice of the *Existence* of other Things...” Here Locke is saying that knowledge of the existence of particular things involves “noticing,” that is, an immediate awareness of the world acting upon us, and that it is the receiving of sensory ideas which carries a relation of agreement with objects, a kind of agreement a noticing of which produces our knowledge of the existence of particular things. This makes it clear that noticing does not consist in perceiving an agreement or disagreements of ideas; it only involves a non-inferential awareness of outward objects producing ideas in our minds. Thus, contrary to Ayers’ and Woozley’s opinion, we cannot attain knowledge of the existence of particular things by simply perceiving an agreement between the idea of actual sensation and the idea of existence, because the existence of such an agreement relation in one’s mind does not mean that there actually obtains a relation of agreement between these ideas and the reality of things, the presence of which is necessary for knowledge of existence.

6. Mattern on True Propositions and Knowledge of Existence in Locke

To explain away the objection, Mattern proposes to replace Locke’s official definition of knowledge with the definition Locke gives elsewhere that knowledge is perception of the truth of affirmative and negative propositions. Mattern thinks that these two definitions are equivalent. Her reason for this is that the relation of agreement or disagreement between ideas obtains if and only if the propositions composed of these

ideas are true or false. According to Mattern (1977: 692), “at least one of the things he [Locke] has in mind when he writes of the agreement or disagreement of ideas is simply the relation between ideas which obtains when propositions are true or false.” Thus, on Mattern’s view, when ideas are combined so as to produce a proposition that corresponds to some state of affairs, those ideas are deemed to agree, that is, the compound idea or the proposition is true; two ideas disagree when the proposition formed by their conjunction does not correspond to any state of affairs, that is, the proposition is false. It is for this reason that, in Locke’s epistemology, perceiving the agreement or disagreement of ideas is the same as perceiving the truth or the falsity of a proposition.

She proposes that since perceiving an agreement or disagreement of ideas is equivalent to perceiving the truth or falsity of a proposition, replacing the former with the latter will both avoid any reference to ideas in Locke’s definition of knowledge and leave open the question of the contents of the propositions; and this in effect will remove the apparent logical conflict generated by Locke’s reference to ideas in the original definition: “[t]his equivalence makes intelligible the reference to the agreement or disagreement of ideas in a characterization of knowledge that applies even to knowledge of real existence; it removes the apparent logical conflict engendered by his reference to ideas in that formula” (1977: 694).

It is true that at times Locke suggests that the two definitions are the same. For Locke, to know is to be certain of the truth of a proposition: “certainty of knowledge is to perceive the agreement or disagreement of ideas, as expressed in any proposition. This we usually call knowing, or being certain of the truth of any proposition” (IV.VI.3). As I have tried to explain above, what underlies such propositional conception of knowledge is his view that truth is a necessary condition for knowledge and that the predicates true and false attaches only to propositions composed of connected ideas: knowledge “being conversant about Truth, had constantly to do with propositions” (III.IX.2).

But we must be careful here. Is Locke also saying, especially in IV.VI.3, that being certain of the truth of an existential claim consists in perceiving an agreement relation between ideas? Locke’s account of knowing by sensation clearly suggests that noticing the truth of a proposition about the existence of a particular object does not consist in perceiving an agreement relation between ideas. For, the truth of such a proposition depends on correspondence with some state of affairs involving that particular object, but no agreement between ideas forming a proposition about the existence of particular things can designate any state of affairs rendering the proposition true.

Locke’s division that there are two sorts of propositions, the first of which concerns the “existence of anything answerable” to a given idea, seems to support this. But in saying that the relation of agreement or disagreement between ideas obtains when the propositions composed of these ideas are true or false, Mattern also suggests that knowing the truth of a claim about real existence consists of perceiving the agreement relation between ideas. According to her, one knows, for example, that “the table exists” is true if and only if one perceives that the idea of table agrees with the idea of existence. But, does this avoid any reference to ideas? Clearly, it does not. For, first,

it still explains the perception of the truth of an existential claim in terms of a perception of the agreement of an idea of a thing with the idea of existence one has by sensation and reflection. Second, Locke's treatment of propositions also evidently suggests that, in defining knowledge as the perception of the truth of a proposition, we are not yet avoiding any reference to ideas since propositions consists in connected ideas. A proposition is, for Locke, a compound idea formed by conjoining ideas: propositions consist in joining or separating ideas.

These considerations suggest that not only does Mattern's proposal fail to explain away the objection in question because it does not actually avoid reference to ideas, but also explaining the perception of the truth of an existential claim in terms of a perception of the agreement of some idea with the idea of existence misrepresents Locke's view on this issue. This is not Locke's position because it entails that it is the idea of actual sensation which carries the agreement with external objects. In both chapters IV and XI of Book IV, Locke clearly suggests that it is not the idea of actual sensation but the receiving of sensory ideas which carries the agreement with reality of things, "with them all the conformity which is intended" (IV.IV.4).

6. Conclusion

Thus far I have tried to indicate that the three attempts to explain away the charge of inconsistency in Locke's epistemology fail because their solutions are based on, as far as the text considered, a fundamentally mistaken interpretation of Locke's view on our knowledge of real existence. Locke does not explain knowledge of the existence of *particulars* in terms of the perception of the agreement of some idea with the idea of existence, because it would mean that it is not the receiving of sensory ideas but the idea of actual sensation which carries agreement with things outside us. Locke does not also define existential knowledge as the perception of the agreement or disagreement between ideas and something else. In Book IV, he provided us two different senses of knowledge. The first sense is that Locke thought that knowledge involves intuiting or demonstrating certain specified relations between ideas. But in his discussion of knowledge of the existence of other things, he introduced quite a new meaning of the word knowledge, and said that this sort of knowledge does not come with perceiving the agreement or disagreement of ideas that are in our minds: "no particular Man can know the *Existence* of any other Being, but only when by actual operating upon him, it makes itself perceived by him" (IV.XI.1).

However, this account of knowing by sensation compels us to conclude that there is indeed a logical inconsistency between Locke's characterization of existential knowledge transcending ideas and his general definition of knowledge restricting knowledge to a perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas; this is mainly because any knowledge of the existence of other things is not knowledge of a relation between our ideas but knowledge of the existence of something in reality corresponding to our ideas. Roger Woolhouse (1994:168) draws the same conclusion by saying that there is indeed a "poor fit" between Locke's account of knowing by sensation and his official definition of knowledge. In the closing section of the chapter XI, Locke also seems to arrive at the same conclusion: "In the former case [knowledge of real

existence], our Knowledge is the consequence of the Existence of Things producing *Ideas* in our Minds by our Senses: in the later, Knowledge is the consequence of *Ideas* (be they what they will) that are in our minds producing there general certain Propositions” (IV.XI.14).¹⁷

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¹⁷ I would like to thank two anonymous referees of *Kaygı* for invaluable feedback and suggestions regarding this paper.