

# Interpretation

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## Locke on the Limits of Human Understanding

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**Abstract:** Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* is not as widely studied among contemporary scholars of political philosophy as it should be given the importance of Locke to the history of political philosophy and the importance of the *Essay* to Locke. Although the *Essay* is a vast and multifaceted work, it has a central theme: the limits of human understanding. This essay provides a roadmap to Locke's treatment of that theme. After explaining Locke's framework for comprehending human understanding, I examine his most important arguments regarding the severe limits on what the human mind can know of the world. At the end of the essay, I raise some critical questions about Locke's approach and arguments in the *Essay*.

Despite the importance Locke himself accorded it and the enormous influence it had in the early years after its publication,<sup>1</sup> *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* is no longer one of Locke's most studied works, especially among scholars of political philosophy. This surely has something to do with the daunting length and complexity of the text. Next to his more familiar and inviting *Second Treatise of Government* and *A Letter concerning Toleration*, Locke's *Essay* looms as a treacherous mountain. That those other works speak more directly to political questions is another reason the *Essay* has been neglected by contemporary scholars of political philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Still,

<sup>1</sup> For an account of the influence of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, see J. Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956). Hans Aarsleff discusses its popularity throughout the eighteenth century and the ways in which it shaped that century in "Locke's Influence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. V. Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> There are some exceptions to this neglect. The most extensive recent discussion of the *Essay* by a scholar of political philosophy is S. Forde, *Locke, Science, and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). The *Essay* also plays a role, although a less prominent one, in the discussions of Locke in T. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*

given Locke's central role in the development of modern political philosophy, should we not explore the full range of his thought and especially its highest peak? There is, of course, the question of the relationship between his political works and the epistemological reflections in the *Essay*. That is a necessary question for any attempt to understand Locke's thought as a whole. But a reasonable effort to answer it presupposes a familiarity with the *Essay*. The aim of this essay, then, is to do some of the preparatory work by giving an introduction of sorts, not to Locke's *Essay* in its full intricacy and many byways, but to the most important thread that runs throughout the work. For Locke's long discussion of human understanding is above all a consideration of the *limits* of human understanding. What did Locke regard as the most important of those limits?

Before taking up that question, a word is in order about Locke's intentions in the *Essay*. Although Locke describes his decision to write the *Essay* as a happy accident—as he tells the story, the plan emerged from a series of conversations with a small group of friends about other matters (see “Epistle to the Reader”)—he also suggests that one of his chief aims was to help clear the ground for the emerging natural science of his time.<sup>3</sup> In his most direct statement about what he hoped to achieve, Locke presents himself as a servant, an “Under-Laborer,” of the great scientists, the “Master-Builders,” of his time, men such as Boyle, Huygens, and, above all, “the incomparable Mr. Newton” (“Epistle to the Reader”). Locke assigned himself the task of “removing some of the Rubbish” standing in the way of the work of such men, or at least of its proper appreciation and interpretation. As a self-appointed rubbish remover, Locke clearly has a polemical intention in the *Essay*. He wants to sweep aside the “unintelligible Terms” and the “vague and insignificant Forms of Speech” that have littered men's thoughts about human understanding, and thereby to bring some order and clarity to a realm that has been “the Sanctuary of Vanity and Ignorance.” The vanity that he wants to undermine is not merely the personal vanity of specific authors, but also the vanity of mankind as

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(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); J. Owen, *Making Religion Safe for Democracy: Transformation from Hobbes to Tocqueville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); R. Grant, *John Locke's Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); J. Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); P. Myers, *Our Only Star and Compass: Locke and the Struggle for Political Rationality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); P. Josephson, *The Great Art of Government: Locke's Use of Consent* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); M. Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism: On Lockean Political Philosophy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> All references to Locke's *Essay* are to the edition edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975). In quotations from the *Essay*, I have retained Locke's often unusual capitalization, punctuation, and use of italics. Unless otherwise noted, all emphasis is Locke's.

such, for it consists in a vast overestimation of the reach of the human mind.<sup>4</sup> The guiding proposition of Locke's project in the *Essay* is that men have greatly exaggerated the extent of their knowledge and that the human mind therefore needs to be drawn back within its proper bounds. Just as "'Tis of great use to the Sailor to know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the Ocean" (I.1.6), those who wish to study nature should take stock of the very great limits within which the human mind can reasonably operate. The opposite tendency, by which the mind's reach has long exceeded its grasp, has both perpetuated the dogmatic ignorance that has posed as knowledge and, when excessive hopes have given way to despair, led to complete skepticism (see I.1.7). The cultivation of a moderate skepticism, based on a clear awareness of "the Bounds between the enlightened and dark Parts of Things," promises a further benefit, beyond avoiding the twin rocks of dogmatism and extreme skepticism. Locke repeatedly expresses his hope that, by diminishing men's confidence in their own convictions, his moderate skepticism will cultivate tolerance and thereby promote peace (see, e.g., II.1.19, III.9.21, IV.3.22, IV.16.4).

These, then, would seem to be Locke's primary aims in the *Essay*: to clear the ground for modern science through rubbish removal, to pull the human mind back within its proper limits, and, by encouraging a moderate or sober skepticism, to benefit society as well as science. None of this is to deny, however, that as the engine of Locke's mind churns on the question of the limits of human understanding, the question also takes on a life of its own.

#### LOCKE'S FRAMEWORK

According to Locke, all human thought depends on "ideas," which is the broad term he uses to refer to any and all of the notions, mental pictures, and other images we use when we think (see I.1.8). Ideas, for Locke, are thoughts that provide the material, the building blocks, of further thoughts, but none of them are imprinted in our minds from birth. The primary task of Book I of the *Essay* is to destroy the notion that we have within our minds any innate ideas, either theoretical or practical. Having completed that task in

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<sup>4</sup> In a 1684 letter he wrote in Holland to the Earl of Pembroke, Locke described his work on the *Essay* in this way: "My time was spent alone, at home by my fireside, where I confess I wrote a good deal, I think I may say, more than ever I did in so much time in my life, but no libels, unless perhaps it may be a libel against all mankind to give some account of the weakness and shortness of human understanding, for upon that my old theme *de Intellectu humano* (on which your Lordship knows I have been a good while hammering) has my head been beating, and my pen scribbling" (*John Locke: Selected Correspondence*, ed. Mark Goldie [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], Letter 801).

Book I, Locke opens Book II with the question obviously raised by it: If none of our ideas are innate, how do we come by them? Locke's one-word answer, which he then spends many pages unpacking, is *experience*. At the beginning of Book II, Locke presents his basic framework for comprehending human understanding: all of our ideas arise from experience, which means in the first place from sense perception, but then also from our awareness of the internal operations of our own minds. Locke calls the first of these sources "sensation," the second "reflection," and he denies that there are any others: these are "the only Originals, from whence all of our *Ideas* take their beginning" (II.1.4), the first by furnishing the mind with ideas of sensible qualities, the second by supplying it with ideas of its own operations, that is, with thoughts about thoughts. Although the mind can go to work with these materials and build more complicated "compound" ideas, these are merely compilations of what is already provided by sensation and reflection (II.1.24, II.2.1–2; see also II.11.14–15, II.12.2, II.18.6).

Now, since the latter of the two sources of our ideas develops later and depends on the prior work of the former, Locke argues that the existence of ideas in our minds is coeval with sensation. Sense perception is the foundation of all of our thinking (see especially II.1.23–24, but also II.1.2–4). Given his insistence on the fundamental role of sense perception as "the first step a Man makes towards the Discovery of any thing, and the Groundwork, whereon to build all those Notions, which ever he shall have naturally in this World" (II.1.24), one might expect that Locke would dedicate a significant portion of the *Essay* to an analysis of its operation. At least in one respect, however, Locke regards that as a task beyond the bounds of his inquiry. Although the "Original," that is, the origin or source, of our understanding is certainly a question for him, one to which he will return again and again, Locke declares at the outset of the *Essay* that he intends to set aside the "Physical Consideration of the Mind" and the question of the external and internal motions by which ideas are first formed (see I.1.2). He repeats this limitation or self-restriction elsewhere (see, e.g., II.8.4, II.14.13, II.21.73, II.31.2). But if we can grasp the basic reason for the restriction by bearing in mind that the *Essay* is a work of epistemology rather than physics—that is, a study of human knowledge that does not examine the physical causes of our ideas or the motions that give rise to them—we should also notice that the restriction is not complete. It is true that Locke does not give a detailed account of the operations of perception; it is not clear that he even regards such a thing as possible (see II.14.13, II.21.73, IV.3.28, IV.2.11). Nevertheless, it is clear from the partial and sketchy accounts he does at times give that

he assumes that the processes are mechanistic and that, in them, the mind or the understanding is merely a passive recipient of various motions (see, e.g., II.1.23, II.1.25, II.8.4, II.8.11–12, II.8.22, II.9.1, II.21.73, II.30.2–3, II.31.2, IV.2.11, IV.3.28).<sup>5</sup>

Rather than try to penetrate the inner workings of sense perception, a task on which he is doubtful one could make much progress, Locke focuses on the limits of the grasp that sense perception gives us of the external world. Forced to begin from simple ideas arising from sensation, we can imagine only those qualities of bodies that are conveyed by sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and touches. There might well be other creatures somewhere in the vast universe with more and better senses than we have; in comparison to them, human beings would be as a species of worms enclosed in a drawer of a cabinet are to us (II.2.3). Or, in another of Locke's many metaphors for our plight as limited beings, our senses are but so many holes in the door of a dark closet, providing us, the inhabitants, with a few small windows that reveal only some aspects of what exists outside (II.8.17). And there is a further difficulty, for not only is our view partial, but the qualities of which we are given ideas through sense perception are not, in most cases, the qualities as they exist in the external bodies. They are the products or effects of a mechanistic process that begins in those bodies but produces in us images that need not resemble in any meaningful way the properties of the external bodies themselves. Most of the images we are given in sense perception are images or ideas of what Locke calls "secondary qualities"—qualities such as yellow, bitter, or soft—which are no more in the external things themselves, as anything more than mere powers, than is the pain caused by a knife in the knife itself (II.8.2, II.8.13–16, II.31.2).

But what is meant by Locke's suggestion that it is only *in most cases* that the ideas of qualities we are given by perception are not reliable reproductions of the qualities of the external bodies? And in comparison to what are

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<sup>5</sup> In Chapter 9 of Book II ("Of Perception"), Locke introduces a consideration that might seem to qualify or complicate his contention that the mind is simply passive in the process of perception. For he acknowledges that at least in "grown People" the ideas we receive from sensation are often "*alter'd by the Judgment*, without our taking notice of it," as when we take what appears to our eyes as a flat circle with various shadows to be a globe because our experience of the relationship between variations of light and convex bodies has built up certain habits and expectations in our minds (II.9.8; see also II.9.10). But Locke's acknowledgment here of a role for judgment in "altering the Appearances into their Causes," which could open up the broader question of whether thought does not contribute in more complex ways to the formation of even the simple ideas we receive from perception, turns out to be the exception that proves the rule in Locke's account, because he does not pursue that question or explore the broader implications of his point about the role of judgment in perception.

the “secondary qualities” *secondary* qualities? Locke distinguishes between our ideas as they live in our perceptions and their causes as they exist as modifications of the matter in the bodies that produce them (see, e.g., II.8.7–16, II.8.22, II.21.73, II.31.2, IV. 3.11, IV.6.7). The purpose of this distinction is to dispel the common illusion that the former bears a close resemblance to the latter—that, say, the ideas of white, round, and cold that we get when we look at and handle a snowball are images of the inner features of the snowball itself. Although this distinction, as Locke makes use of it, would seem to create or describe a chasm between the qualities we perceive and the aspects or powers of the external objects themselves, there is one group of qualities that, in Locke’s conception, provides a bridge over this chasm. For if our ideas of qualities such as white and cold are ideas of secondary qualities in the sense that they are mere products of the workings of colorless and heatless matter in motion, there are, according to Locke, a set of qualities—solidity, extension, figure, motion, and number—that *are* present in the external bodies, whether those bodies are taken as wholes or in their minute parts. These qualities, the “primary qualities,” provide a bridge because, on one hand, they are qualities of which we have ideas from our experience of the world through perception, and yet, on the other hand, they exist in the external bodies themselves and would remain aspects of those bodies even if there were no minds able to perceive them. More than that, the primary qualities are the *source* of the secondary qualities, for they are those aspects of the external beings that, in their variety and combinations, provide those beings with the powers that allow them to transmit to us the particles and motions that give rise to our ideas of the secondary qualities. It is by the bulk, figure, texture, and motion of the external bodies—or at least of their insensible parts—that we are able to perceive various colors, tastes, sounds, and so forth (see II.8.9–10, II.8.14–15, II.8.22–23, II.21.73, II.31.2).

At this point, however, a difficulty arises, or a set of questions concerning Locke’s framework. The most immediate question is whether the primary qualities as we experience them or know them from our perceptions can be assumed to have the same character as they do in the imperceptible parts or particles of the external bodies. Locke operates, by and large, on the assumption that they do have the same character; but he is aware that that is a problematic assumption (see II.8.11–15, III.6.6, IV.3.11–13, IV.3.28, IV.6.7). We will return to that issue in the next section. Here let us consider the difficulty raised by Locke’s account of substance. For the question must be asked: Are the particles that make up the bodies and that themselves possess the

primary qualities of solidity, extension, figure, motion, and number—are these the deepest aspects of what is, in Locke’s view? What about “substance”?

Locke borrows the term “substance” from the Scholastic tradition, according to which substance was a fundamental aspect of being. But what is Locke’s view of the matter? Some aspects of his view are clear, others more obscure. According to Locke, we have no direct idea of substance through sensation; the only idea, such as it is, that we have of it comes through a combination of habit and a line of reflection that produces a concept without clarity. “Substance” refers to the substratum, the underlying support, that we suppose to exist as the basis of any collection of simple ideas which appear to be united as aspects of a single thing. When we perceive simple ideas or “accidents”—that is, qualities, both secondary and primary—united in such a way, we suppose that they must exist in some substratum. To this supposed substratum, the philosophic tradition has given the name “substance.” The warrant for its supposition or postulation is not only the perceived unity of various collections of perceptible qualities; it is also the thought that it is inconceivable that qualities or “accidents” should subsist by themselves without inhering in anything more fundamental (II.13.19, II.23.1–4). This much is clear. But Locke insists, time and again, that the supposition of substance is an “uncertain supposition of we know not what” (see, e.g., I.4.18, II.13.19, II.23.2, II.31.13, III.6.21, IV.3.23, IV.6.7). What does Locke mean when he calls the idea of substance “an uncertain supposition of we know not what”? He certainly means to emphasize the impenetrable darkness that hides the character of substance from our minds: although we have an obscure idea of what substance *does*—somehow supports accidents as the substratum in which they inhere—we have no idea of what it *is* (I.4.18, II.23.2–4, II.23.6, II.23.37). But does Locke mean to call into question, too, whether even the supposition of such a substratum is sound? Consider his suggestion that when we regard a given idea as an idea of a substance, in the straightforward sense of a thing that we know through experience, we combine several simple ideas, one of which is the “confused” idea of substance as the support of the other ideas and the cause of their union (II.12.6, II.13.19, II.23.3, III.6.21). When Locke calls this idea “confused,” does he mean merely that it refers to something about which we have no clarity? Or given our lack of clarity—our lack of any idea whatsoever as to what substance is, beyond the circular and therefore unilluminating contention that accidents must be supported by something, which we can call substance, understanding it as that which supports accidents (see II.13.19–20)—does Locke regard it as questionable even to suppose the existence of such a thing? This would be the more radical way of taking

Locke's argument about substance, and some of his dismissive statements on the matter point in that direction, although not unambiguously so.<sup>6</sup> But

<sup>6</sup> The most important passages to consider are II.13.18–20 and II.23.2, but see also I.4.18, II.31.13, and III.10.2. In II.13.19, Locke derides “our *European* Philosophers” by asking his readers to imagine the impression their doctrine of substance would make coming from a “poor *Indian* Philosopher” who might use it to replace his claim that the Earth, which he believed to be in need of something to bear it up, is supported by an elephant which in turn is supported by a tortoise. Should the Indian philosopher, without any knowledge of what substance is, say when asked that it is that which supports the Earth, “he that enquired might have taken it for as good an Answer. . . as we take it for a sufficient Answer, and good Doctrine, from our *European* Philosophers, That *Substance*, without knowing what it is, is that which supports *Accidents*.” In II.23.2, Locke returns to his example of the Indian philosopher and then argues that when we use words such as substance without having clear and distinct ideas attached to them, “we talk like Children, who, being questioned, what such a thing is, which they know not, readily give this satisfactory answer, That it is *something*.” Such an answer, says Locke, “in truth signifies no more, when so used, either by Children or Men, but that they know not what; and that the thing they pretend to know, and talk of, is what they have no distinct *Idea* of at all, and so are perfectly ignorant of it, and in the dark.” In these passages, Locke manifestly denies that we know what substance is. Less clear even here, however, is whether he regards the darkness surrounding the character of substance as casting doubt also on its existence.

Leibniz emphasizes the debunking intention of Locke's argument about substance, interpreting it as an attempt, which Leibniz himself resists, to banish the obscure term from philosophy. See Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. and ed. P. Remnant and J. Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 105, 145, 150, 217–18. For another interpretation along these lines, see J. Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, and Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 59–63. Bennett argues that Locke's treatment of substance was “mainly skeptical in content and ironical in form.” Edwin McCann makes a similar but somewhat more equivocal argument in “Locke's Philosophy of Body,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. V. Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 76–86, and “Locke's Theory of Substance under Attack!,” *Philosophical Studies* 106 (2001): 87–105 (see esp. 90–97). Matthew Jordan argues that Locke held an “agnostic” view of the existence of substance (“Locke on ‘Substance in General,’” *Sorites* 20 [2008]: 8–26, esp. 19–26), as does Louis Loeb (*From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981], 80–81). Some of Locke's contemporary critics made similar arguments, albeit in a more prosecutorial spirit. For instance, Stillingfleet accused Locke, in an oft-cited remark, of having “almost discarded substance out of the reasonable part of the world” (see *The Bishop of Worcester's Answer to Mr. Locke's Second Letter* [London: Printed by J. H. for Henry Mortlock, 1698], 12). On the evasiveness of Locke's responses to this charge from Stillingfleet, see Jordan, “Locke on ‘Substance in General,’” 20–23; McCann, “Locke's Theory of Substance under Attack!,” 97–100; L. Newman, “Locke on the Idea of Substratum,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81 (2000): 291–324, esp. 309–12.

There are some who give Locke's conception of substance greater content and significance by more or less identifying it with “real essence” as Locke understood it. See, for example, J. Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding: A Selective Commentary on the “Essay”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 43–52, 125–26 (see also *John Locke and the Way of Ideas*, 126–48); M. Bolton, “Substances, Substrata, and Names of Substances in Locke's *Essay*,” *Philosophical Review* 85 (1976): 488–513, esp. 500–502, 511–12. For somewhat more complex and qualified interpretations that move in the same direction, see M. Mandelbaum, *Philosophy, Science, and Sense Perception: Historical and Critical Studies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 31–46; M. R. Ayers, “The Ideas of Power and Substance in Locke's Philosophy,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1975): 1–27, esp. 14–19; N. Jolley, *Leibniz and Locke: A Study of the New Essays on Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 85–86. Locke himself, however, does not equate substance and real essence, and, as McCann points out, there is no textual evidence in support of such an equation (see “Locke's Philosophy of Body,” 82–83). See also Jordan, “Locke on ‘Substance in General,’” 16–18, on the

whether Locke's argument is taken in the less or the more radical way, the essential point for understanding his intentions is that he wants to shut down the hopeless pursuit of knowledge of substance. "Substance," understood as the discoverable basis of being and thus a central object of philosophic investigation, is among the obscure notions that Locke wishes to sweep aside in his project of rubble removal. Nevertheless, one may wonder whether the problem of the unknown substratum does not cast a shadow over Locke's own suppositions regarding the most fundamental aspects of what is.

#### THE LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE

It could well seem that the unknowability of substance, understood as substratum, is the key to Locke's account of the limits of knowledge. That is not, however, where Locke directs his attention in the most important stages of his argument about those limits. Again, Locke wants to turn men's attention—not just his own, but that of his readers and, in a sense, of philosophy and science as such—away from a search after the character of substance, which he regards as an exercise in futility, toward an appraisal of what can and cannot be known about substances. Now, substances in the relevant sense are the things that constitute the world of our experience: horses, sheep, men, pieces of gold, and so forth (see II.23.3, II.23.6, III.6.1). And the fact that we call these things by common names reflects our grasp of them as belonging to classes that are marked off from one another by abstract ideas, or "essences," to which the common names are attached. But with the notion of essences, we come to another traditional term the traditional understanding of which Locke wants to sweep away.

Locke is rather obviously on the attack in his discussion of essences. He is on the attack against the view that there are in the world essences or universals in accordance with which nature produces each of the particulars such that it belongs to a specific class or species (see, e.g., III.3.17, IV.6.4). This view, with its roots in classical thought and its full flowering in Scholasticism, regards essences as forms or molds by which nature casts all natural beings into their types. But it is a view that has "very much perplexed the Knowledge of natural things" (III.3.17; see also II.31.6). Locke argues against it by pointing to nature's production of various monsters and changelings, the emergence of which cannot be explained on the basis of the traditional conception of essences (III.3.17,

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different ways in which Locke speaks of substance, on one hand, and real essence, on the other, and the different roles he ascribes to them. Locke's conception of "real essence" will be discussed in the next section.

III.6.16–17, III.6.22–23, III.6.27), and by emphasizing our lack of knowledge of the underlying structure of things on which all of their other qualities depend (II.31.6–7, III.3.18, III.6.7–9, III.6.18–20). For present purposes, however, it is less important to consider Locke's critique of the traditional conception of essences than it is to examine his alternative to it.<sup>7</sup> In its place, as "the other, and more rational Opinion" (III.3.17), Locke would put a twofold conception of essence.

According to Locke, "nominal essence" is a meaningful notion and so is "real essence," but they do not refer to the same thing. "Nominal essence" refers to the abstract idea that collects the observable qualities that we have in mind when we call something by a common name or assign it to a class; it is by reference to such collections of observable qualities, to abstract and complex ideas of that sort, that we are able to use names meaningfully and divide things into sorts or species (II.31.13, III.3.15, III.4.2–4, III.6.14–24). Such abstract and complex ideas, however, limited as they are by human perception and formed with some arbitrariness by man—or better, by various men, whose differences sometimes lead them to compose them differently (III.6.26–30, III.6.37)—are far from capturing even all of the secondary qualities of things. All the more does each of them fail to capture the underlying constitution of a given thing on which the secondary qualities depend and from which they flow (II.31.13, III.6.6–9). That underlying constitution is the "real essence" in Locke's conception; it is the internal structure of the parts of the matter within a corporeal being, which determines its perceptible character. In calling essence in this sense "real," Locke underscores its independence from any act of the human mind and its role as the deepest source of a substance's character. But what real essence gains in reality or fundamentality of being over nominal essence it loses in knowability (see III.3.15, III.6.6–9, III.9.12). To take one of Locke's examples, our use of the word "gold" refers to the nominal essence of gold, which is a complex idea of a body that is yellow, of a certain weight, malleable, fusible, fixed, and soluble in *aqua regia*. It is by reference to that complex idea—complex in the sense that it is a collection of simple ideas—that we can identify a piece of metal as gold and call it by that name. But the observable qualities that make up our complex idea of gold do not constitute the real essence of gold. That, according to Locke, is "the constitution of the insensible parts of that Body, on which those Qualities, and all the other Properties of *Gold* depend" (III.6.2;

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<sup>7</sup> For more extensive discussions of Locke's arguments against the traditional conception of essences, see Forde, *Locke, Science, and Politics*, 72–75, 81–86; R. Kennington, *On Modern Origins: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. P. Kraus and F. Hunt (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 256–58.

III.6.6). But essence in this sense, as internal constitution, is unknowable, given the character of human perception.

Now, our ignorance of the real essences of things is obviously an important limit to our knowledge in its own right. But it also has implications for how thoroughly we can understand those aspects of things to which we do have access. To come to a proper understanding of the two very different meanings of essence is, according to Locke, “perhaps, of more Moment, to discover the Extent and Certainty of our Knowledge, than we at first imagine” (III.6.43). To see why this is so, let us return for a moment to Locke’s first principles. Locke insists that all of our knowledge is dependent on our ideas. Insofar as we are able to progress beyond simple ideas, we do so by putting them together to make complex ideas of substances and then by trying understand, given our awareness of the coexistence of certain ideas, what other qualities or powers the substances of which we have a partial knowledge possess. We would like to know what other simple ideas or qualities, beyond those that are obvious, do or do not coexist with those that already make up a given complex idea of a substance (see IV.3.9, IV.6.7–8). Yet, although the attempt to understand the coexistence of qualities in this manner produces “the greatest and most material part of our Knowledge concerning Substances” and thus a “weighty and considerable” part of “Humane Science,” the knowledge achieved, according to Locke, is “yet very narrow, and scarce any at all” (IV.3.9–10; see also IV.6.7, IV.6.13). For while we can know from experience of the coexistence of certain ideas, most of which are of secondary qualities (such as the color, malleability, weight, and fusibility of gold), we cannot in most cases know, absent an understanding of the underlying causes of those qualities, the character and necessity of their coexistence. Nor, since we cannot but for a few instances grasp the necessary connections between qualities merely by observing their coexistence, can we get very far in reasoning from the experienced existence of one set of qualities to the existence or nonexistence of others (IV.3.11–16, IV.6.5–10, IV.8.9). We reasonably surmise, in Locke’s view, that all of the qualities we experience and still others we might come to grasp have their roots in the internal constitution of a given substance. Yet, without knowledge of those roots, we are extremely limited in our capacity to go beyond a merely experiential knowledge of coexistence.

The problem of our inadequate understanding of the connections between the various qualities of substances has more than one level. Most obviously, it is the problem of grasping the connections between various secondary qualities whose roots lie hidden in the primary qualities of the particles that

make up the internal constitution of a given substance. But “there is,” says Locke, “yet another and more incurable part of Ignorance, which sets us more remote from a certain Knowledge of the *Coexistence*, or *Inco-existence* (if I may so say) of different *Ideas* in the same Subject” (IV.3.12). This deeper aspect of the problem is that, while we may surmise their existence, we cannot understand the character of the connections between the secondary qualities and the primary qualities on which they depend (IV.3.12–13; see also IV.6.7, IV.6.10). Locke operates throughout the *Essay* on the assumption that the primary qualities of things, or, better, of the particles that make them up, are the source of their secondary qualities. It is in this sense that he regards what he calls “the corpuscularian Hypothesis” as the hypothesis that can “go farthest in an intelligible Explication of the Qualities of bodies” (IV.3.16; see also IV.6.14).<sup>8</sup> But he does not think that it is possible to work out the details of that explication by traveling in one’s mind down the pathways that connect the primary qualities to the secondary qualities. As he puts it, “We are so far from knowing what figure, size, or motion of parts produce a yellow Colour, a sweet Taste, or a sharp Sound, that we can by no means conceive how any *size, figure, or motion* of any Particles, can possibly produce in us the *Idea* of any *Color, Taste, or Sound* whatsoever; there is no conceivable *connexion* betwixt the one and the other” (IV.3.13; see also IV.6.7). This deeper level of the problem of understanding the connections between qualities even calls into question whether one can so confidently assume that the primary qualities *are* the source of the secondary qualities. Locke makes that assumption; there can be no doubt about that. But he shows an awareness that is an *assumption*, and at a pivotal moment, just after a repetition of his claim that the secondary qualities of things depend upon “the primary Qualities of their minute and insensible parts,” he acknowledges that it may in fact not be upon these that they depend. They may depend “upon something yet more remote from our Comprehension” (IV.3.11). Locke does not pursue the question of what this more remote aspect of the internal constitution of things might be; he would surely regard that as a road into the same darkness that enshrouds substance. But his acknowledgment that the primary qualities may not be the most fundamental source of the secondary qualities is the most profound implication of his view that we cannot grasp the connections between the primary qualities and the secondary qualities. That view also reaffirms and

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<sup>8</sup> For a fuller account of the corpuscularian hypothesis as a conception Locke drew from Gassendi and especially from Boyle, see McCann, “Locke’s Philosophy of Body,” 56–60. McCann discusses Locke’s awareness of the hypothetical character of this hypothesis and the limits of its explanatory power in the section of his essay that runs from pages 67–76. See also M. Wilson, “Superadded Properties: The Limits of Mechanism in Locke,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 143–50.

declares all the more inescapable our ignorance of the necessary coexistence or incompatibility of various possible secondary qualities, because it underscores our ignorance of their deepest causes.

If the difficulties just sketched indicate the most important limits to our knowledge arising from our ignorance of the internal structure of things, there is another limit that comes, so to speak, from the other direction—that is, from the outside in, not the inside out. In a remarkable passage in a late chapter of the *Essay*, a chapter devoted to the difficulty of developing universal propositions with truth and certainty (IV.6), Locke repeats his earlier account of the obstacles to knowing the connections between various qualities of substances, and he draws his familiar conclusion about the limits of knowledge, which he here states starkly: “we are so far from being admitted into the Secrets of Nature, that we scarce so much as ever approach the first entrance towards them” (IV.6.11). But the new account differs from the earlier one in indicating that the unknown secrets lie hidden, not just *within* each of the beings, but also *between* them, in the effects they have on one another. In the passage in question, Locke points to a common misconception: “we are wont to consider the Substances we meet with, each of them, as an entire thing by it self, having all its Qualities in it self, and independent of other Things” (IV.6.11). This tendency to think of things in isolation, to assume that each substance possesses its qualities on its own, stems from a failure to recognize that all things are embedded in relationships with other things and that these relationships shape their character. A simple example is the dependence of living beings on air and sunlight, without which they could not survive as living beings. Deprived of these external influences, they would quickly lose the life, motion, and many of the other qualities by which we recognize them as what they are (IV.6.11). But that is just one example of the broader point that all things are what they are as parts of a complex whole and nothing would be what it is, in the sense of having the qualities it possesses, were it not embedded in that whole. We make a grave mistake (“We are then quite out of the way”), Locke argues, when we think that the qualities we see in things are simply the products of what is contained in the things themselves or that they flow from their internal constitutions alone. “This is certain,” he declares, “Things, however absolute and entire they seem in themselves, are but Retainers to other parts of Nature, for that which they are most taken notice of by us. Their observable Qualities, Actions, and Powers, are owing to something without them; and there is not so complete and perfect a part, that we know, of Nature, which does not owe the Being it has, and the Excellencies of it, to its Neighbors” (IV.6.11).

The interdependence of things is a problem for our knowledge of them because even if some of the aspects of that interdependence are known to us, most are beyond our grasp. We do not know what effects “the great Parts and Wheels” of “this stupendious Structure of the Universe” have on one another; it may therefore be the case, in ways we can barely fathom much less comprehend, that “Things in this our mansion” would be quite different—they would “put on quite another face, and cease to be what they are”—if some distant star or another body in a remote realm of the universe should change its motion in some way (IV.6.11). We can surmise that the beings we know through experience, “Things in this our mansion,” depend on causes and relationships far beyond our comprehension, but we cannot determine with any precision the extent or character of that dependence. And even within the world of which we have at least some grasp through experience (“this our mansion”), our awareness of the reciprocal interactions of bodies by which they shape each other’s character, although not as utterly lacking as our knowledge of the more remote realms of the universe, is extremely limited. In fact, even the relationships that we can grasp, such as the necessity of air and sunlight to life, are such that, when we think them through, we cannot but gain a deeper sense of all that we must be missing of the vast nexus of bodies interacting with and shaping one another. Again, however, that sense cannot be converted into an adequate account of what we are missing. We do not know enough even to know with much clarity what we do not know.

What conclusions does Locke draw from this difficulty and the preceding ones? As a broad, practical matter, Locke’s counsel is, of course, greater modesty: we know too little to be zealous in our convictions (see, e.g., I.1.4, IV.3.22, IV.16.4). More specifically, however, Locke argues that the ideas we do have of substances are of limited use in helping us to develop the kind of propositions we would most like to develop: universal propositions with genuine certainty. Because we know neither the real essences of substances nor the full range of their interrelationships, our efforts to move from the ideas we have from sensation to universal propositions about the necessary connections (or incompatibility) of various qualities of substances quickly meet their limits. The certainty attainable in such propositions is “very narrow and scanty” (IV.6.13). Locke does not conclude from this that it is simply impossible to make any progress in expanding our conceptions of the connections between the qualities of substances. It is at least possible, he says, that “inquisitive and observing men,” among whom he would surely include the luminaries of his age, especially “the incomparable Mr. Newton,” can work from “Probabilities taken from wary observation, and Hints well laid

together,” supplemented by experiments, to “Guess at what Experience has not yet discovered to them” (see IV.6.13, IV.12.10, IV.3.28, and IV.8.9 with IV.7.3 and “Epistle to the Reader”). This guessing, however, is “but guessing still.” “It amounts,” Locke declares, “only to Opinion, and has not that *certainty*, which is requisite to Knowledge” (IV.6.13).<sup>9</sup> From here, we can understand why Locke expresses his doubts that natural philosophy can ever become a genuine science (see IV.3.26, IV.3.29, IV.12.10), and why he suggests that human beings are better suited by nature for practice and the pursuit of comfortable self-preservation than for theory and the pursuit of knowledge (see II.15.11, II.23.12, IV.3.23, IV.11.8, IV.12.10).

### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS AND CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Although Locke insists strenuously on the severe limits of what can be known of substances, there is a countervailing, if quieter, tendency in the *Essay* that should not go unnoticed, lest Locke’s thought seem more simply or purely skeptical than it is. For, even as he argues that we cannot know the real essences of substances, Locke shows a remarkable confidence that those essences are made up of material particles or corpuscles. Not only does he express his conviction that the “corpuscularian Hypothesis” offers the most plausible and intelligible “explication” of the qualities of bodies (see again IV.3.16), but he speaks repeatedly of the underlying particles that give rise to the world as we experience it (see, e.g., II.8.2, II.8.12–22, II.21.73, III.3.18, III.6.6, IV.2.11, IV.3.12–13, IV.3.25, IV.6.14 ). Locke’s confidence in this regard is despite his acknowledgment that we are so far from knowing how the primary qualities of the minute and insensible parts of things produce the secondary qualities that we cannot be sure they do so. Again, it may be something else—“something yet more remote from our comprehension”—that does that work (see again IV.3.11), and that is to say nothing of substance as the possible unknown foundation, so to speak, of that foundation. Locke’s skepticism about the knowability of the roots of things sits uneasily with his confidence in their corporeal character. This combination of skepticism and confidence is one of the most striking and perplexing aspects of his thought, leaving one with questions about his consistency. Could it be that Locke was not radical enough in applying his own arguments about the unknowability of the roots of things to his own convictions about their character? Should he

<sup>9</sup> What Locke says in IV.7.3 about Newton may seem to go further, since he speaks there of Newton’s use of intermediate ideas to demonstrate propositions and of the advances in knowledge he thereby achieved. But these more robust formulations speak more directly about the advances in mathematics than about Newton’s related advances in physics.

have pursued the thought that the primary qualities of minute particles may not be the deepest source of the world as we perceive it further than he seems to have pursued it? Together with this question, we can observe and ponder Locke's tendency to ascribe to the primary qualities of the particles, as well as to those particles themselves, an independence and integrity that he denies to all other things (see, e.g., II.21.73, II.23.8–11, II.31.2, III.6.6, IV.3.25, IV.6.14). Should he have extended his critique of the common belief that things are absolute and entire in themselves all the way down, that is to say, to the most minute particles and their qualities? Why should they be exempt from the interdependence of all things?

If these questions lead one to wonder whether Locke, for all of his skepticism, remained too confident in his convictions about the character of the roots of things, another question—cutting apparently in the other direction, but perhaps more connected than it initially seems—is whether Locke does not despair too much of what can be known of substances from our ideas of them. Of course, Locke insists that we must begin from our ideas; we have no other option, as he reminds us again and again in the *Essay*. But could it not be by an implicit comparison with what he imagines it would mean to know the real essences of things, as their internal structure constituted by particles with an integrity in themselves, that Locke is so disparaging of the progress we can make if we begin from their nominal essences and our experience of their interrelations? To be sure, one cannot reasonably dismiss Locke's argument that there are severe limits to what we can know of the world if we must begin from the ideas that our experience provides. Severe as these limits may be, however, do they not still leave room for a genuine, if partial, grasp of the character of things, including an incomplete but not for that reason insignificant grasp of some aspects of their interdependence? To refer back to Locke's own example, to grasp the necessity of air and sunlight to life as we know it is to grasp an important relationship and necessity. And that is just one example that points to broader, less obvious possibilities. Of course, Locke does not deny that we can work through our ideas and experience to advance our understanding of the world. But when he declares that natural philosophy cannot be made into a science, or when he goes still further and proclaims that we are so far from being capable of "a perfect *Science* of natural Bodies" that it is "lost labour to seek after it" (IV.3.29), does he not display his inclination to throw the baby out with the bathwater? Locke had his reasons for trying to dampen men's expectations of what can be accomplished by natural philosophy: the excessive expectations of an earlier form of it, which he regarded as a metaphysical pseudoscience, had produced a naive image of what philosophy could achieve,

and that dream had done more to inspire zealotry than to improve the conditions of human life by increasing “our stock of Conveniences” (IV.12.10). But Locke was so concerned to dampen men’s expectations from philosophy that the *Essay* comes close at times to being an exhortation to abandon theory for practice. And that makes sense only if it is true that human beings find a fuller satisfaction in the pursuit of comfortable self-preservation than we do in the pursuit of the partial clarity that is available to us.

