John Locke on Perception and Knowledge (1690)

1. Knowledge: According to Locke, knowledge is acquired in one of two ways:

   a. Perception: Locke believes that perception is “representational.” That is, we do not DIRECTLY perceive reality, but only the IDEAS that are produced in us. Locke writes, “It is evident the mind does not know things immediately, but only by the intervention of the ideas it has of them.” (4.4.3)

   b. Judgment: The act of judgment may be applied to perception. When we gain ideas through perception, we are constantly making judgments about them. For instance, if I see a blue sphere, the only ideas that occur to my senses are a flat circle with various shades of blue on it (as evidenced by the fact that a painting of a sphere can appear as spherical as a real object). However, having seen that particular sort of shading repeatedly, I judge it to be not flat (2-D) but spherical (3-D). The sensations themselves do not tell us “sphere”; judgment does. Consider a blind person who suddenly gains sight. He would have no idea what shape an object was if you immediately showed it to him after he gained his sight. (2.9.8)

   All we acquire by experience are simple ideas. We do this passively. But, we build upon them via the activity of judgment. We gain knowledge, then, by taking our ideas (simple or complex) and judging certain truths about them based on the actions of recognizing things like similarity, difference, relations between them, co-existence, and their existence in reality. For instance, we can come to know that “White is not black” because we recognize a disagreement or difference between the ideas of “white” and “black”. (4.1.1-3)

2. What we can know: Based on the summary of how knowledge is acquired just given, a worry arises: It seems like we won’t be able to have very much knowledge. Locke responds (4.4.3-8) by pointing out two sorts of ideas that are certain:

   a. All simple ideas are certain: Recall that, according to Locke, the mind is passive and begins as a BLANK. Furthermore, it seems obviously true that something cannot come from nothing. That being the case, it would be impossible for the mind to create a simple idea out of nothing, for that would require the mind to be active and NOT blank. Therefore, any simple idea that we receive is certain, and not the product of our dreams or imaginations, since it necessarily derives from something external.

   b. Many complex ideas are certain: Recall that complex ideas are ones formed by the mind ultimately out of simple ones. Therefore, these ideas
(with the exception of SUBSTANCES, Locke adds) are NOT SUPPOSED to correspond to anything in reality. As such, since complex ideas don’t claim to be about real individuals in reality, we can trust that they are certain.

**Note:** To clarify, Locke describes mathematical truths. A mathematician can have an idea of a triangle and KNOW that it has 3 sides, that its angles add up to 180 degrees, etc. Yet, it is not the case that triangles NEED to EXIST in reality in order for these things to be true. However, if it turns out that there ARE any triangles in reality, it will be true that they have 3 sides, have angles adding up to 180 degrees, etc. And all complex ideas (not of substances) are like that.

**Skepticism?:** Note that Locke admits that we do not have certain knowledge of substances. A substance is a thing that exists independently of other things. Contrast this with, e.g., redness, which is only a PROPERTY of something (i.e., it cannot exist independently).

Basically, Locke says that we can have (simple or complex) CONCEPTS in our minds, and these are certain. But having a concept of something does not entail that this thing really EXISTS in reality. Or, as Locke puts it, we do not have certain knowledge about SUBSTANCES.

But note: All matter and all other minds are said to be substances. So, it seems that our ability to know that there is an external world filled with material stuff and thinking individuals has not yet been accounted for.

This worry arises because of Locke’s representationalism. If all we have access to are ideas and not the external world, how could we know whether or not our ideas ACCURATELY REPRESENT that external world? In other words, “How shall the mind, when it perceives nothing but its own ideas, know that they agree with things themselves?” (4.4.3)