John Locke on External World Skepticism (1690)

1. What can we know?: Like Descartes, Locke agrees that “I exist” is intuited to be true, and that “God exists” can be demonstrated by reason. But, what of the existence of everything else? It seems that we only believe that the external world exists because of the ideas that we acquire via Sensation. But, “having the idea of anything in our mind no more proves the existence of that thing than the picture of a man evidences his being in the world.” (4.11.1)

So, how do we know whether or not the external world exists?

2. Answer: Locke states that, though we can’t be CERTAIN that there is an external world, nevertheless the best we can do is trust our senses, which tell us that there IS a world out there. He offers several reasons for this. (4.11.2-7)

   a. The mind is passive and blank: First, Locke points out that the mind receives ideas passively, and begins empty and blank at birth. Therefore, it would be impossible for the mind to CREATE ideas. It must be the case that the mind only receives ideas from experience. But, if we have experiences that are not created in the mind, they MUST derive from something external.

   b. Ideas derive from the senses: Locke notes that, without certain senses, it becomes impossible to acquire certain ideas. For instance, a blind person can never acquire the idea of redness. So, it seems obvious that certain ideas derive from certain senses. But, the sense organs do not themselves give rise to those ideas. If that were the case, we would expect people to see colors even in the dark, or smell roses even when there were no flowers. But, this does not happen. Therefore, it must be something EXTERNAL to the sense organs that gives rise to these ideas (by stimulating those organs).

   c. The sensation of ideas is unavoidable: The ideas of sensation are unavoidable. If I stand outside at noon, I cannot help but see all sorts of illuminated things. Unlike memory or imagination, sensations come to us without us willing anything at all. Our experience of them is irresistible.

   d. Not all sensations accompany memories: When I SENSE heat, by putting my hand in a fire, it is accompanied by pain. However, when I REMEMBER the heat, it is not painful at all; likewise, if I remember a headache. This is an indication that, when the external objects are PRESENT, they cause certain sensations; but the MERE IDEAS of them (e.g., in memory or imagination) do not themselves cause those sensations. If everything was merely an idea, and nothing corresponded to an outside world, we would expect the act of remembering pain to HURT. But, it does not.
e. The senses corroborate one another: If I see a fire, and doubt that it is there, I can verify its presence with my other senses. For instance, if I try to touch it, it hurts. Likewise, if I were to write out a paragraph of words and later had someone read it aloud, it would still read the same, even if I had forgotten what it said exactly in the mean time. Thus, the senses seem to verify one another in a way that supports the conclusion that there is an external world.

3. Conclusion: Locke concludes that we must trust the senses, and believe there is an external world. Though we cannot be absolutely certain that there is an external world, this seems to be the best we can do. Furthermore, it is foolish to think that we should require more than this. (4.11.3, 8) He writes,

> If we persuade ourselves that our faculties act and inform us right concerning the existence of those objects that affect them, it cannot pass for an ill-grounded confidence. For I think nobody can, in earnest, be so skeptical as to be uncertain of the existence of those things which he sees and feels. (4.11.3)

Basically, though there is not certainty regarding such things, it would be foolish to be skeptical of them. If we were to require 100% certainty of something before we believed it, we would not believe much at all, and such skepticism would not be useful for much of anything except “perishing quickly.” (4.11.10)

If anyone still insists on questioning the existence of an external world, there is no reason to reply to him. First because, according to him, we don’t exist. But, secondly, because we would need only attempt to stick the hands of such a person into a furnace, and let their screaming and resistance testify to their belief that the external world is not just a dream or an illusion, but is, rather, real.