

# LOCKE'S 'SENSITIVE KNOWLEDGE': KNOWLEDGE OR ASSURANCE?

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[To appear in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*]

## 1. *Introduction*

Scholars disagree about whether Locke thinks that we can really *know* through sensation that material substances and their sensible qualities exist outside our minds. A great deal of what Locke writes on this subject strongly suggests that he takes sensitive knowledge of the existence of external things to be *bona fide* knowledge.<sup>1</sup> But it has also been suggested that a closer look at the *Essay* reveals that Locke treats the word 'knowledge' in 'sensitive knowledge' as an honorific; on this view, sensitive knowledge, properly understood, is really no more than a kind of assurance, that is, a kind of judgment (not knowledge) that is based on the highest degree of probability.<sup>2</sup> Let us call the former interpretation, the "Knowledge View", and the latter interpretation, the "Assurance View". My aim here is to defend the Assurance View and criticize the Knowledge View. I will argue, first, that none of the criticisms of the Assurance View is persuasive and, second, that the Knowledge View, as it has been defended by its most recent proponents, is inconsistent with some of the basic tenets of Locke's theory of knowledge. I conclude that the available textual evidence, properly interpreted, establishes that Locke holds that sensation assures us, but does provide us with knowledge, of the existence of material things.

## 2. Locke's Theory of Knowledge

In order to understand and adjudicate this debate, it helps to begin with a conspectus of the features of Locke's theory of knowledge on which the relevant scholars agree. Locke initially defines knowledge as "*the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas*" (E IV.i.2: 525).<sup>3</sup> This definition leaves open the possibility that Locke takes perception of agreement or disagreement between an idea and an extra-mental entity to be sufficient for knowledge.<sup>4</sup> But later Locke makes plain that this is not so: knowledge, he says, consists in "the perception of the Agreement, or Disagreement of any two *Ideas*" (E IV.ii.15: 538). Locke's account of knowledge therefore depends on his account of three things: ideas, perception, and agreement (and disagreement).

In keeping with his epistemic modesty (see E I.i.4-6: 44-46), Locke identifies ideas by description, rather than by giving an account of their nature. He writes that the term 'idea' stands for "whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks" or "whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ'd about in thinking" (E I.i.8: 47), where the relevant object of understanding or thought is perceived without intermediary: "Whatsoever the Mind perceives in it self, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call *Idea*" (E II.viii.8: 134). Concerning what ideas are in themselves, Locke does not presume to speak, claiming that it is "Speculation" to consider whether "*Ideas* do in their Formation...depend on Matter, or no" (E I.i.2: 43). All that matters to Locke is that ideas are the immediate objects of perception, in the sense that they can be perceived without perceiving something else that represents (or otherwise stands for) them.

Locke's account of the nature of perception (at least, in the case of perception of relations, such as agreement and disagreement) is likewise minimal. As Locke uses the term (at least in this context), 'to perceive' is a factive verb, so that the perception of agreement (or disagreement) between ideas  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  amounts to the perception that  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  agree (or disagree), and it is impossible for one to perceive that  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  agree (or disagree) without its actually being the case that  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  agree (or disagree). Beyond this, Locke does not elaborate, except to distinguish between the mental operation of perceiving and the mental operation of presuming. Whereas knowledge is the *perception* of agreement (or disagreement) between two ideas, judgment is the *presumption* of such agreement (or disagreement). To presume that  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  agree (or disagree) is to "take"  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  to agree (or disagree) without being certain of the agreement (or disagreement) (E IV.xiv.4: 653). And presumption, as Locke conceives it, is the kind of mental operation that results from non-demonstrative reasoning based on a probabilistic relation of support between evidence and hypothesis (E IV.xv.1-3: 654-655).

Locke is more expansive about the nature of agreement. He tells us that there are four main kinds of agreement: identity, relation, co-existence (or necessary connexion), and real existence (E IV.i.3: 525).  $I_1$  agrees with  $I_2$  in the way of identity if and only if  $I_1$  is the same as  $I_2$ ;  $I_1$  agrees with  $I_2$  in the way of relation if and only if  $I_1$  is somehow related to  $I_2$ ;  $I_1$  agrees with  $I_2$  in the way of co-existence if and only if  $I_1$  co-exists with  $I_2$  in the same subject; and  $I_1$  agrees with  $I_2$  in the way of real existence if and only if what  $I_1$  represents has a real existence without (i.e., outside) the Mind (E IV.i.7: 527).<sup>5</sup> However, as Locke acknowledges, agreement in the way of identity and agreement in the way of co-existence are two distinct species of the genus: agreement in the way of

relation (E IV.i.7: 527). This is not surprising, given that identity and co-existence (or necessary connexion) are clearly relations.<sup>6</sup>

For Locke, then, knowledge is the perception of agreement (or disagreement) between two ideas. As Locke points out, there are two possible ways of perceiving an ideational agreement: intuitively or demonstratively. To possess intuitive knowledge is to perceive “the Agreement or Disagreement of two *Ideas* immediately by themselves, without the intervention of any other” (E IV.ii.1: 530-531). By contrast, to possess demonstrative knowledge is to perceive “the Agreement or Disagreement of any *Ideas*, but not immediately” (E IV.ii.2: 531). The reason why not all knowledge is intuitive is that some ideas are such that the mind “cannot so bring [them] together, as by their immediate Comparison, and as it were Juxta-position, or application one to another, to perceive their Agreement or Disagreement,” and thus the mind “is fain, by the Intervention of other *Ideas* (one or more, at it happens) to discover the Agreement or Disagreement, which it searches” (E IV.ii.2: 532).<sup>7</sup> In the case of demonstrative knowledge, when perception of agreement between two ideas obtains via perception of intervening ideas, Locke tells us that “[t]hose intervening *Ideas*...are called *Proofs*” (E IV.ii.3: 532), and the process by which one discovers a chain of intervening ideas leading from one idea to another is called “*Reasoning*” (E IV.ii.2: 532). In addition, Locke makes plain that in the case of demonstrative knowledge, consecutive intervening ideas that are part of any proof must be perceived to agree immediately. Demonstrative knowledge therefore depends on intuitive knowledge of each step in the relevant proof (E IV.ii.7: 533).

### 3. *The Debate*

Locke claims that intuitive and demonstrative knowledge are two *degrees* of knowledge. But he doesn't stop there, for he identifies *three* degrees of knowledge in all: "*Intuitive, Demonstrative, and Sensitive*" (E IV.ii.14: 538). Sensitive knowledge is the kind of knowledge that is "employ'd about *the particular existence of finite Beings* without us" (E IV.ii.14: 537), and consists in "[*t*]he notice we have by our Senses, of the existing of Things without us" at the very time that we are, or at least appear to be, sensing them (E IV.xi.3: 631). The reason Locke thinks that sensitive knowledge constitutes a *third* degree of knowledge is that it is "not altogether so certain, as our intuitive Knowledge, or the Deductions of our Reason, employ'd about the clear abstract *Ideas* of our own Minds" (E IV.xi.3: 631). And the reason why sensitive knowledge is less certain than either intuitive or demonstrative knowledge is that the level of certainty sensation delivers is sufficient for all practical, though not sufficient for all theoretical, purposes. As Locke puts the point:

[*T*]he certainty of Things in *rerum Naturâ*, when we have the testimony of our Senses for it, is not only *as great* as our frame can attain to, but *as our Condition needs*. For our Faculties being suited not to the full extent of Being, nor to a perfect, clear, comprehensive Knowledge of things free from all doubt and scruple; but to the preservation of us, in whom they are; and accommodated to the use of Life: they serve to our purpose well enough, if they will but give us certain notice of those Things, which are convenient or inconvenient to us. (E IV.xi.8: 634).

The problem with which commentators have wrestled is whether Locke's conception of sensitive knowledge is consistent with the rest of his theory of knowledge. Commentators have focused on two main worries: (i) that Locke's conception of sensitive knowledge does not fit with his official definition of knowledge as the perception of agreement or disagreement between two ideas, and (ii) that Locke's conception of sensitive knowledge cannot make sense of the apparent diffidence with which he confronts the challenge of radical external world skepticism. Among those who think that Locke does not fall into inconsistency, proponents of the Knowledge View argue, in response to worry (i), that it is possible, and indeed not all that difficult, to identify the two ideas perception of the agreement or disagreement between which constitutes sensitive knowledge, and argue, in response to worry (ii), that the appearance of diffidence in Locke's response to radical skepticism is misleading; by contrast, proponents of the Assurance View argue, in response to worry (i), that sensitive knowledge is not a kind of knowledge *strictly understood*, and hence that the appearance of inconsistency between Locke's conception of sensitive knowledge and his official definition of knowledge is only superficial, and argue, in response to worry (ii), that Locke's diffidence in responding to the skeptic is real, but easily explained by the fact that sensitive knowledge consists in a kind of assurance that is indeed vulnerable to radical skeptical attack.

In section 4, I canvass the main reasons for adopting the Assurance View, as articulated by Rickless, 'Locke's Theory'. In section 5, I examine and assess criticisms of these reasons provided by Owen, 'Locke', Nagel, 'Sensitive Knowledge', and Allen,

‘Locke’. I conclude that these criticisms are unpersuasive. In section 6, I consider the versions of the Knowledge View defended by Owen, Nagel, and Allen, and in section 7 I argue that each is inconsistent with two fundamental tenets of Locke’s theory of knowledge, namely the claim that sensitive knowledge is less certain than either intuitive knowledge or demonstrative knowledge, and the claim that the distinction between intuitive knowledge and demonstrative knowledge is exhaustive. I conclude that the Assurance View, as an interpretation of the nature and place of sensitive knowledge in Locke’s epistemology, is superior to the Knowledge View.

#### *4. The Case for the Assurance View*

The main case for the Assurance View is straightforward. First, Locke explicitly characterizes sensitive knowledge as a kind of assurance; second, Locke explicitly defines assurance as a kind of judgment (or assent) based on the highest degree of probability.

In the most important proof text for the Assurance View, Locke writes that “*the notice we have by our Senses, of the existing of Things without us...is an assurance that deserves the name of Knowledge*” (E IV.xi.3: 631—underlining added). In the same section, Locke also writes that “GOD has given me assurance enough of the Existence of Things without me”, that “the confidence that our [sensitive] Faculties do not herein deceive us, is the greatest assurance we are capable of, concerning the Existence of material Beings”, and that from our senses we have “the assurance...that they do not err in the Information they give us, of the Existence of Things without us, when they are

affected by them” (E IV.xi.3: 631-632). This strongly suggests that Locke thinks of sensitive knowledge as a kind of assurance.

It is true that Locke tells us that sensitive knowledge is the kind of assurance that “*deserves the name of Knowledge*”. And this might suggest that Locke treats sensitive knowledge as *bona fide* knowledge. But there is a dual passage that casts further light on the idea of deserving the name of something. In the section in which he introduces a ‘third’ degree of knowledge besides intuitive and demonstrative knowledge, Locke writes that “[t]here is, indeed, another *Perception* of the Mind, employ’d about *the particular existence of finite Beings* without us; which going beyond bare probability, and yet not reaching perfectly to either of the foregoing degrees of certainty, passes under the name of Knowledge” (E IV.ii.14: 537). It is therefore reasonable to suppose that Locke does not see a semantic distinction between the locutions “deserves the name of” and “passes under the name of”. But, as Rickless (‘Locke’s Theory’, 95) points out, there is evidence (from, among others, Shakespeare and Addison) that in Locke’s day “to pass for” (which appears to be a stylistic variant of “to pass under the name of”) was synonymous with “to be taken for..., often with the implication of being something else”. So, when Locke says that sensitive knowledge is a kind of assurance that “deserves the name of knowledge”, he could well be saying or implying that sensitive knowledge is a kind of assurance that is taken for knowledge without being knowledge.

As to the nature of assurance, Locke tells us that it is the highest degree of assent. Locke defines assent (or belief—see E IV.xv.3: 655) as the faculty of judgment “when it is exercised...about Truths delivered in Words”, rather than “immediately about Things” (E IV.xiv.3: 653), and defines judgment as the faculty “whereby the Mind takes [or



presumes] its *Ideas* to agree, or disagree” without *perceiving* such agreement or disagreement (E IV.xiv.3-4: 653). He then tells us that “the foundation of...Assent is the Probability of the thing” (E IV.xv.1: 654), and later defines assurance thus (E IV.xvi.6: 662):

These *Probabilities* rise so near to *Certainty*, that they govern our Thoughts as absolutely, and influence all our Actions as fully, as the most evident demonstration: and in what concerns us, we make little or no difference between them and certain Knowledge: our Belief thus grounded, rises to *Assurance*.

Locke therefore treats assurance as a kind of presumption of ideational agreement or disagreement that is based on the highest degree of probability short of certain knowledge.

But if sensitive knowledge is a kind of assurance, and assurance is a kind of presumption (rather than perception) of ideational agreement or disagreement, then sensitive knowledge is not really a kind of knowledge, though it may “pass under” or “deserve” the name of ‘knowledge’ by virtue of the fact that “in what concerns us, we make little or no difference between [assurance] and certain Knowledge”. Locke emphasizes the fact that the practical consequences (as opposed to the merely theoretical consequences) of possessing *assurance* of the existence of material objects differ in no way from the practical consequences of possessing *knowledge* of the existence of these objects. In particular, assurance is incompatible with the possibility of ordinary doubt (E IV.xi.2: 631), even if it may be (where knowledge definitely isn’t) compatible with the

possibility of radical skeptical doubt (E IV.xi.8: 634-635—see also E IV.ii.14: 537). So the fact that sensitive knowledge passes for knowledge even though it isn't knowledge is fully explained by the fact that assurance and knowledge are indistinguishable for all practical purposes.

### *5. The Case Against the Assurance View, and Why It Fails*

Despite what appears to be a strong case for the Assurance View, the view has recently come under sustained criticism from three different sources. It is to these criticisms that I now turn.

#### *5.1 Owen's Criticisms*

Owen ('Locke', 7) claims that the Assurance View is "close to what Locke should have said, but didn't". His objections to the Assurance View can be divided into four distinct lines of criticism.

Owen's first criticism begins with the following "very general point":

Since belief approximates to knowledge, understanding what it is to presume an agreement between two ideas presupposes we have some idea what it would be like to perceive their agreement. Presuming agreement doesn't give us some sort of independent access into the nature of that agreement and our awareness of it.

('Locke', 8)

This point should be granted, but I fail to see how it cuts any ice against the Assurance View. Owen's point is that presumption itself does not give us independent access to any agreement between ideas that would be the object of such presumption in the case of sensitive knowledge on the Assurance View. If sensitive knowledge were a kind of assurance, then a proper grasp of it would require an independent grasp of the nature of the presumed ideational agreement that constitutes it. But it seems plain that this is consistent with the Assurance View. For example, a proponent of the Assurance View could say (plausibly) that the agreement that is presumed in the case of sensitive knowledge is a relation of co-existence or necessary connexion between two ideas: the idea of a particular sensible object (such as a table) and the idea of existence (or, alternatively, the idea of the mental action of sensing a particular sensible object and the idea of existence—about which, more below). On such an account, grasp of the nature of the relevant ideational agreement in any case of sensitive knowledge does not depend on a grasp of the idea of presumption. So there is no conflict between Owen's general point and the Assurance View.

Potentially more problematic is Owen's second criticism, which focuses on the textual evidence for the claim that "'assurance' is a technical term, indicating the *presumption* of agreement that is probable judgment rather than the *perception* of agreement that is knowledge". The textual problem here, Owen writes, is that "there are just too many other uses of the term 'assurance', as a generic term for *either* knowledge *or* belief, for it to be plausible to claim that 'assurance' is a technical term reserved for belief or probability" ('Locke', 8).

Owen cites two passages in particular in defense of the view that Locke does not always use the term ‘assurance’ with the technical sense of E IV.xiv.6. Here is the first:

...this way of entertaining a Truth seem’d formerly to me like something between Opinion and Knowledge, a sort of Assurance which exceeds bare Belief, for that relies on the Testimony of another; Yet upon a due examination I find it comes not short of perfect certainty, and is in effect true Knowledge. (E IV.i.9: 528-529)

As Owen sees it, “[t]he point of the passage is that the assurance once seemed to be belief but now seems to be knowledge” (‘Locke’, 8). And if Locke is claiming that assurance of any sort now counts as knowledge, then he can’t be using the term “assurance” in E IV.i.9 to refer to a kind of presumption of ideational agreement, which is something less than knowledge.

However, the passage is ambiguous, and the reading of it that Owen latches onto does not strike me as the preferred reading. The problem concerns the interpretation of the proper antecedent of the anaphor “it”. Owen reads the “it” as referring back to “a sort of Assurance”, so that the final sentence of the passage should be read as follows: “Yet upon a due examination I find *that sort of assurance*...is in effect true Knowledge”. Although the linguistic rules governing anaphora allow for this interpretation, the sweep of the passage strongly suggests that the proper antecedent of “it” is not “a sort of Assurance”, but rather “this way of entertaining a Truth”. On the latter reading, what Locke is saying is that a particular way of entertaining a truth originally *seemed* “formerly” to him to be a kind of assurance, but *now* “upon a due examination” strikes

him as a kind of knowledge. If the passage is read this way, then it neither states nor implies that assurance is a kind of knowledge: what it states is that something that initially appeared to be a kind of assurance is not in fact a kind of assurance, but rather a kind of knowledge. Indeed, the passage, properly read, *reinforces* the distinction between assurance and knowledge, and therefore counts as one more reason to think that Locke often uses the term “assurance” in its technical sense.

The second passage Owen cites as evidence that Locke sometimes uses the term “assurance” in a non-technical sense is this:

’Tis true, the Perception, produced by *Demonstration*, is also very clear; yet it is often with a great abatement of that evident lustre and full assurance, that always accompany that which I call *intuitive*. (E IV.ii.6: 533)

Owen claims that Locke here “uses the term...where only uncontroversial cases of knowledge are at issue” (‘Locke’, 8). This is true, but it doesn’t follow that Locke here allows for the possibility that assurance is a kind of knowledge. What Locke says is that evident luster and full assurance always *accompany* intuitive knowledge, while the luster and assurance that always accompany demonstrative knowledge are abated. So the kind of assurance to which Locke is referring in E IV.ii.6 is surely not to be *identified* with a kind of intuitive or demonstrative knowledge.

Still, it must be acknowledged that the sense of “assurance” in E IV.ii.6 is not the technical sense of E IV.xiv.6. For in saying that full assurance always accompanies intuitive knowledge, Locke surely doesn’t mean that intuitive knowledge is always

accompanied by some sort of presumption of ideational agreement or disagreement based on a very high degree of probability. Rather, what Locke appears to be saying is that intuitive knowledge is always accompanied by a sense of complete certainty, a psychological state that excludes any (psychological) possibility of doubt. This sense of complete certainty is to be identified with *full assurance*. In this sense, assurance that is not full might be constituted by a sense of less than complete certainty, a psychological state that leaves room for the possibility of some sort of doubt.

Owen is therefore right that Locke uses the term “assurance” in at least two different ways in the *Essay*. There is the technical sense of E IV.xiv.6, according to which assurance is a kind of presumption of ideational agreement or disagreement based on the highest possible degree of probability; and there is the non-technical sense of E IV.ii.6, according to which assurance is a sense of certainty that excludes the possibility of certain sorts of doubts. The two senses are linked, in the sense that assurance in the technical sense is always accompanied by assurance in the non-technical sense. For although technical assurance allows for the possibility of radical skeptical doubt, it does not make room for the possibility of ordinary, non-radical doubt.

The critical question, then, is whether the word “assurance” in Locke’s claim at E IV.xi.3 that sensitive knowledge is a kind of assurance should be read in the technical sense or in some other way, perhaps in the non-technical sense. Owen is right that the fact that Locke sometimes uses “assurance” in a non-technical sense means that one cannot automatically infer from E IV.xi.3 that Locke identifies sensitive knowledge with a kind of judgment or assent. But this does not settle the question of the meaning of E IV.xi.3. What *is* the proper disambiguation of the relevant passage?

Disambiguation requires that we examine section E IV.xi.3 more carefully. For there are important clues in the passage that indicate that the word “assurance”, which appears more times in this section of the *Essay* than it does in any other section, is best read in its technical sense. Here is the entire section, divided into parts, and with relevant words underlined for emphasis:

[A] *The notice we have by our Senses, of the existing of Things without us*, though it be not altogether so certain, as our intuitive Knowledge, or the Deductions of our Reason, employ'd about the clear abstract *Ideas* of our own Minds; yet it is an assurance that *deserves the name of Knowledge*. [B] If we persuade our selves, 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 no body can, in earnest, be so skeptical, as to be uncertain of the Existence of those Things which he sees and feels. At least, he that can doubt so far, (whatever he may have with his own Thoughts) will never have any Controversie with me; since he can never be sure I say any thing contrary to his Opinion. [C] As to my self, I think GOD has given me assurance enough of the Existence of Things without me: since by their different application, I can produce in my self both Pleasure and Pain, which is one great Concernment of my present state. [D] This is certain, the confidence that our Faculties do not herein deceive us, is the greatest assurance we are capable of, concerning the Existence of material Beings. For we cannot act any thing, but by our Faculties; nor talk of Knowledge it self,

but by the help of those Faculties, which are fitted to apprehend even what Knowledge is. (E IV.xi.3: 631-632)

This passage is rich in both content and allusions. In part [A], Locke claims that sensitive knowledge is a kind of assurance, one that deserves the name “knowledge”. Thus far, Locke’s claim is consistent both with the hypothesis that he is using the word “assurance” technically and with the hypothesis that he is using the word “assurance” non-technically. However, clues to disambiguation begin appearing in part [B]. There Locke says that the assurance he has identified with sensitive knowledge in part [A] “cannot pass for an ill-grounded confidence”, because it is incompatible with ordinary skepticism (in the sense of ordinary doubt and uncertainty) about the existence of sensed objects. Interestingly, and, I think, not coincidentally, in the chapter on degrees of assent Locke defines *confidence* as “[t]he next degree of Probability” immediately below *assurance* (in the technical sense) (E IV.xvi.7: 662). Confidence, when well grounded, like (technical) assurance, is incompatible with ordinary doubt (E IV.xvi.8: 662-663). But ill-grounded confidence, such as confidence that is based on faulty or mistaken testimony, is the kind of epistemic state that is vulnerable to ordinary doubt. So when Locke tells us that the assurance identified with sensitive knowledge cannot pass for an ill-grounded confidence, he is explicitly contrasting assurance (which is incompatible with ordinary doubt) with a certain kind of confidence. Given that the words “assurance” and “confidence” are both given technical readings in consecutive sections of the *Essay* chapter on degrees of assent, it seems too much to believe that *both* words are being used *non-technically* in E IV.xi.3.



Part [C] provides further disambiguating clues that confirm the hypothesis that Locke is using “assurance” in its technical sense in E IV.xi.3. There Locke says that the fact that one experiences pleasure or pain when the things one senses are applied to one’s body (as when tasting wine or being hit with a club) provides us with “assurance enough” of the existence of those things, where the idea of having *enough* assurance is clearly tied to the fact that the assurance is sufficient to address a great *concernment*. There are two things to note about this. First, it makes little sense to suppose that Locke takes the relevant assurance here to be a kind of *bona fide* knowledge, for he well knows that the fact that one feels pleasure or pain immediately upon experiencing wine is not sufficient to produce a perception of ideational agreement between the idea of the sensation of wine and the idea of wine’s actual existence. Locke’s point, rather, is that the epistemic relation we have to the existence of wine when we taste it and to the existence of the club when we feel it is sufficient to guide us towards the good and away from the bad, *even if* the relation is *not* one of knowing. Second, Locke’s use of the word “concernment” is another clue that he means us to think of the relevant kind of assurance as something less than knowledge. For the use of the word harkens back to a section of the very first chapter of the *Essay* in which it is presupposed that what addresses the relevant *concern* is something less than knowledge. The relevant section epitomizes Locke’s epistemic modesty:

The Candle, that is set up in us, shines bright enough for all our Purposes. The Discoveries we can make with this, ought to satisfy us: And we shall then use our Understandings right, when we entertain all Objects in that Way and Proportion,

that they are suited to our Faculties; and upon those Grounds, they are capable of being propos'd to us; and not peremptorily, or intemperately require Demonstration, and demand Certainty, where Probability only is to be had, and which is sufficient to govern all our Concernments. (E I.i.5: 46)

Locke's point here is that judgment based on (a sufficiently high degree of) probability addresses what most concerns us, namely the attainment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and that it is for this reason that we should be content with judgment (such as assurance or well grounded confidence) when the exercise of our faculties does not allow for the possibility of knowledge. This point dovetails nicely with what Locke appears to be conveying in part [C], namely that the assurance that is sensitive knowledge addresses one of our main objects of concern: pleasure and pain.

Finally, in part [D], Locke notes that it is sufficient for sensitive knowledge ("assurance...concerning the Existence of material Beings") that we possess "the confidence that our Faculties do not herein deceive us". Here again, it is too much to believe that the juxtaposition of "assurance" and "confidence" is no more than mere coincidence: surely both of these words are being used here in their technical senses, as opposed to whatever non-technical senses they might bear. Locke's point is not that we have assurance through sense of the existence of material things because we are confident *that they exist* (this would be to conflate assurance that *p* with confidence that *p*); his point, rather, is that we have assurance through sense *that material things exist* because we are confident *that our senses are reliable*. But this confidence surely does not rise to the level of certain knowledge; and although confidence in the reliability of the senses

may raise the level of assent to the existence of material things to the heights of assurance (in the technical sense), it surely does not suffice for *bona fide* knowledge of their existence.

Owen's third criticism of the Assurance View is that Locke draws two contrasts both of which require that sensitive knowledge count as knowledge rather than probable belief. The first contrast is between *general knowledge* and *sensitive knowledge of particulars* (see E IV.ii.14: 536-537 and E IV.vi.16: 590-591). However, the existence of this contrast is compatible with the Assurance View. For, on this view, although sensitive knowledge is not *bona fide* knowledge, it *is* a kind of mental state that is indistinguishable in its practical effects from *bona fide* knowledge, and hence a state that deserves to be *called* "knowledge". It is the fact that sensitive knowledge deserves to be called "knowledge" (even if it isn't knowledge) that explains why Locke calls it 'sensitive *knowledge*'. This then makes it possible for Locke to distinguish between general knowledge and sensitive knowledge without committing himself to the consequence that the latter is *bona fide* knowledge.

The second contrast is between sensitive knowledge of particulars and the extension of such knowledge into general beliefs. Owen finds this contrast in two passages, of which this is the first:

Thus though we see the yellow Colour, and upon trial find the Weight, Malleableness, Fusibility, and Fixedness, that are united in a piece of Gold; yet because no one of these *Ideas* has any evident *dependence*, or necessary connexion with the other, we cannot certainly know, that where any four of these

are, the fifth will be there also, how highly probable soever it may be: Because the highest Probability, amounts not to Certainty; without which, there can be no true Knowledge. For this *co-existence* can be no farther known, than it is perceived; and it cannot be perceived but either in particular Subjects, by the observation of our Senses, or in general, by the necessary *connexion* of the *Ideas* themselves. (E IV.iii.14: 546)

Owen claims that Locke is here contrasting sensitive knowledge with general beliefs that are no more than highly probable and that do not count as true knowledge. But this is, I think, a mistake. Sensitive knowledge, as Locke understands it, concerns the *existence* of material things. This is clear from Locke's initial description of the fourth kind of agreement as "that of *actual real Existence* agreeing to any *Idea*" (E IV.i.7: 527), his description of sensitive knowledge as "employ'd about *the particular existence of finite Beings*" (E IV.ii.14: 537), as concerning "the Existence of particular Things" (E IV.iii.2: 539), and as "[t]he notice we have by our Senses, of the existing of Things without us" (E IV.xi.3: 631), and his division of knowledge of the existence of particulars into (i) knowledge of one's own existence, (ii) knowledge of God's existence, and (iii) knowledge "of other Things by Sensation" (E IV.ix.2: 618). But here, in E IV.iii.14, Locke is discussing the perception through sensation of the *co-existence*, rather than the *existence*, of *qualities* (such as yellow and malleableness), contrasting it with (intuitive or demonstrative) perception of the necessary connexion of the *ideas* that represent these qualities. And even if perception of the relevant co-existence were to be identified with a kind of sensitive knowledge, Locke's point in the relevant passage could reduce to no

more than that whereas sensitive knowledge of co-existence would require perception by sense of the co-existence of qualities, general knowledge of co-existence would require perception of a necessary connexion between ideas. Given that it is obvious from the passage that Locke thinks that perception of the relevant sort of necessary connexion is impossible for us, he cannot be read as presupposing that perception of the relevant sort of co-existence is possible instead.

The second passage in which Owen finds a contrast between sensitive knowledge of particulars and the extension of such knowledge into general beliefs is one in which Locke distinguishes between (i) the testimony of the senses that “Collections of simple *Ideas*, as we have observed by our Senses to be united together, do really exist together” and (ii) the highly probable belief “that Millions of Men do now exist” when one is not sensing them (E IV.xi.9: 635-636). Owen’s claim about this contrast is that it “would be much less important than Locke takes it to be if sensitive knowledge was really only probability of a very high degree” (‘Locke’, 10). But it is, I think, significant that Locke describes the relevant highly probable belief as a kind of “*confidence* that there are Men...now in the World” (E IV.xi.9: 636—emphasis added). For in contrasting such confidence with sensitive knowledge, Locke could just as easily be contrasting confidence with assurance (as he does, for example, at E IV.xvi.6-7: 661-662) as he could be contrasting confidence with *bona fide* knowledge. So the fact that Locke contrasts sensitive knowledge with the confidence that millions of men exist does not show that he is thinking of sensitive knowledge as something more than assurance (in the technical sense).

Owen's fourth criticism of the Assurance View, one he takes to be "decisive", starts from the (correct) observation that, for Locke, all probable beliefs have *grounds*. One of these grounds, writes Owen, is the "conformity of any thing with our own Knowledge, Observation, and Experience" (E IV.xv.4: 656). From this, Owen ('Locke', 11) draws the following conclusion:

[S]ensitive knowledge grounds probable judgment; it is not a species of probable judgment. Sensitive knowledge could not itself be grounded, or probable reasoning would be circular.

But this "decisive" criticism of the Assurance View is anything but. For from the fact that sensitive knowledge grounds *some* probable judgments it does not follow that sensitive knowledge grounds *all* probable judgments. And, indeed, Locke *cannot* consistently hold that sensitive knowledge grounds all probable judgments, for if he did, he would also (as Owen notices) be committed (on pain of circularity) to the view that sensitive knowledge could not be grounded; and yet Locke explicitly argues that sensitive knowledge *is* grounded. This is the very point of the "concurrent Reasons" for sensitive knowledge provided at E IV.xi.4-7. To instance the first of these reasons, Locke argues that "we cannot but be assured, that [our sensible ideas] come in by [our sense organs]", for "*those that want the Organs of Sense, never can have the Ideas belonging to that Sense produced in their Minds*" and "the Organs themselves...do not produce [the ideas]" (for otherwise "the Eyes of a Man in the dark, would produce Colours, and his Nose smell Roses in the Winter") (E IV.xi.4: 632). But here it should be plain that it is neither

intuitively nor demonstratively knowable that if our eyes themselves produced our ideas of colors we would experience such ideas in the dark. For it could be that the presence of light is needed for the production of color-ideas by the eyes without its being the cause of such ideas itself, just as it could be that the presence of oxygen is needed for the striking of a match to cause a flame without its being the cause of the flame itself. It follows that the first of Locke's "concurrent reasons" is designed to provide probable grounds for, rather than a demonstrative proof of, the existence of material things outside our minds. And if this is so, then Locke cannot consistently hold that all probable judgment is grounded in sensitive knowledge. And this leaves open the possibility that sensitive knowledge is, as the Assurance View takes it to be, a kind of probable judgment.

### *5.2 Nagel's Criticisms<sup>8</sup>*

Nagel claims, first, that on the Assurance View Locke must be read as "deliberately blurring the line between knowledge and mere judgment" ('Sensitive Knowledge', 10-11). But this, she argues, does not sit well with one of the explicitly stated aims of the *Essay*, which is "to search out the *Bounds* between Opinion and Knowledge" (E I.i.3: 44), as well as passages (such as E IV.i.2: 525) in which Locke reminds us of the significance of the distinction. But it is a mistake, I think, to suggest that the Assurance View represents Locke as blurring the opinion/knowledge distinction. According to the Assurance View, the distinction remains significant and consequential. Knowledge, whether intuitive or demonstrative, is certain and immune both to ordinary doubts and to radical skeptical doubts. Most degrees of assent (belief, judgment) are neither certain nor immune to any kind of doubt, whether radical or non-radical (see, e.g., E IV.xv.4: 655:

“*Probability*...is always conversant about Propositions, whereof we have no certainty”). This much is clear and consistent with the Assurance View. The only issue is what to say about the status of sensitive knowledge in Locke’s epistemology. On the Assurance View, sensitive knowledge is a kind of assurance (in the technical sense), i.e., judgment based on the highest possible degree of probability, and assurance in this sense rises “so near to *Certainty*, that [it governs] our Thoughts as absolutely, and influence[s] our Actions, as fully, as the most evident demonstration: and in what concerns us, we make little or no difference between [it] and certain Knowledge” (E IV.xvi.6: 662). More specifically, on the Assurance View, sensitive knowledge is nearly or practically certain, in the sense that it is immune to ordinary doubt, even if it is not immune to radical skeptical doubt. In the end, the Assurance View no more blurs the boundaries between knowledge and judgment than the very existence of a category of assurance under the genus of judgment does. Alternatively, the very fact that Locke carves a category of near-certain judgment that is practically indistinguishable from knowledge shows that he is ready to “blur the lines” between knowledge and judgment in a way that does not compromise the distinction.

Nagel’s second criticism is that, on the Assurance View, Locke does not have a good way to placate critics who view him as unable to defeat the skeptic:

As another possible reservation about [the Assurance View], those critics of Locke who were concerned about the mediation of ideas in our grasp of outer existence will still be unsatisfied if Locke is read as maintaining that experience gives us highly probable judgment of the existence of outer things. Like



knowledge, judgment for Locke also invariably involves a cognitive relation to ideas rather than bare outer objects or real existence; the distinctive feature of judgment is just that the agreement of ideas is presumed, rather than perceived. ('Sensitive Knowledge, 12)

This is an odd reason for having a reservation about the Assurance View. The problem is that, on the Knowledge View, which is the main competitor to the Assurance View, Locke holds that sensitive knowledge is *bona fide* knowledge, where *bona fide* knowledge is no more than the perception of a relation between two ideas. So if there is reason to worry that the Assurance View doesn't give Locke a way to answer critics who worry about "the mediation of ideas in our grasp of outer existence", then, by parity of reasoning, there is also reason to worry that the Knowledge View doesn't give Locke a way to answer these very same critics. So this reservation provides us with sufficient reason to abandon *both* the Assurance View and the Knowledge View or *neither*. The only way out of this conundrum is to suppose that Locke allows for the possibility that sensitive knowledge involves perception of agreement between ideas and external objects. But, as Nagel herself emphasizes (and as I observed above), "one cannot reconcile Locke's remarks on knowledge of existence with his definition of knowledge by broadening the notion of agreement in this manner" ('Sensitive Knowledge', 8). So if the Assurance View and the Knowledge View are the only live alternative interpretations of Locke's theory of sensitive knowledge, then this "reservation" of Nagel's gives us reason to abandon neither. It must simply be accepted that Locke does not have the

theoretical resources to placate a critic who refuses to accept any theory that requires our grasp of outer existence to be mediated by ideas.

Nagel's third and final criticism is that, on the Assurance View, Locke is in no better position to parry Pyrrhonian skepticism than he would be on the Knowledge View:

[T]he confrontation with the skeptic about the external world is not going to be settled simply by softening the claim that we *know* external objects exist into the claim that we are highly justified in believing that external objects exist. Many skeptics will be equally happy to challenge our claims to justification. Sextus Empiricus, for example, took pains to develop many arguments against the Academic skeptics who gave up claims to knowledge but sought to substitute softer claims about what is probable or persuasive; according to Sextus's Pyrrhonian skepticism we lack not only knowledge but also rational grounds to find any impression more probable or credible than any other. ('Sensitive Knowledge', 12)

Again, this seems an odd criticism to make of the Assurance View if its only viable competitor is the Knowledge View. For if lack of immunity to Pyrrhonian attack is sufficient reason to abandon the Assurance View, then, by parity of reasoning, similar lack of immunity is also sufficient reason to abandon the Knowledge View. The reason for this is that there are, if anything, more Pyrrhonian reasons to think that we do not have *bona fide* knowledge of the external world than there are to think that we do not have *assurance* of the existence of material objects. But, over and above the fact that

purported lack of immunity to Pyrrhonian attack should not lead us to abandon the Assurance View for the Knowledge View, it is a mistake to think that Locke is no more than a sitting duck for Sextus Empiricus. For, first, the fact that Sextus attacks Academic skepticism does not entail that his arguments are probative. And, second, even if Sextus provides reasons to dismiss the softer claims of Academic skepticism, it does not follow that those reasons successfully parry Locke's probabilistic reasoning for assurance of the existence of external objects. As we have seen, Locke provides four "concurrent reasons" to believe that our sensible ideas are caused by material things outside our minds. Without discussing those arguments in detail, it is plain that the jury is still out on whether Sextus's criticisms of Academic skepticism are equally effective when directed at them. This means that, if the Assurance View is correct, then Locke may well be much *less* vulnerable to Pyrrhonian attack than he would be on the Knowledge View. Far from giving us reason to abandon the Assurance View, Nagel's third criticism therefore provides us with more reason to accept it.

### 5.3 Allen's Criticisms

According to the Assurance View, Locke's claim that sensitive knowledge "passes under the name of Knowledge" (E IV.ii.14: 537) and "*deserves the name of Knowledge*" (E IV.xi.3: 631) should be read as the claim that sensitive knowledge is sufficiently similar to knowledge (in its practical effects) that it can be taken for knowledge without actually being knowledge. Allen's first criticism is that although this reading makes sense of Locke's use of the "passes under the name of" locution, it really cannot make much sense of his use of the "deserves the name of" locution:

No matter how convincingly someone *appears* to be a man, it is far from clear that they *deserve* the name ‘man’ unless they really are a man. ‘Deserving’ connotes merit or entitlement, and early modern usage does not appear to differ significantly from modern usage in this respect. It is therefore difficult to see how sensitive knowledge could merit the name knowledge, if it is not actually knowledge. (‘Locke’, 4-5)

Allen’s objection rests on two assumptions: (i) that, in both modern and early modern usage, the fact that X deserves the name of F entails that X merits or is entitled to the name of F, and (ii) that, in both modern and early modern usage, the fact that X merits or is entitled to the name of F entails that X is really and truly F. The problem with the objection is that, even if (i) is true, (ii) seems clearly false. Consider the following counterexample to (ii).<sup>9</sup> Imagine that two teams, A and B, are playing for the championship. The members of scrappy Team A overcame a great deal of adversity and low salaries to get to the title game: they are the underdogs. The members of coddled Team B have never experienced hardship and have benefited from multi-million dollar salaries: they are the prima donnas. In the championship game, Team A has so far played professionally and fairly, but Team B has so far played unprofessionally and unfairly. In the late stages, Team A has a slight lead over Team B. But in the final seconds, one of the members of Team B commits a foul that is not detected by the referees, a foul that results in a last minute winning score. Team B are the champions; Team A are not. But we can say, truly and literally, that Team A deserve to be champions, that they merit or

are entitled to be called “champions”, even though they are not champions. What this shows is that deserving, meriting, or being entitled to a name does not entail that one actually bears the name.

Allen tries to reinforce this criticism by referring to another one of Locke’s uses of the locution “deserves the name of”, this time in the *Second Treatise*:

For *Law*, in its true Notion, is not so much the Limitation as *the direction of a free and intelligent Agent* to his proper Interest...that ill deserves the Name of Confinement which hedges us in only from Bogs and Precipices. (*Works VI*, section 57, 305)

Concerning this passage, Allen argues as follows:

Locke’s point is not that the law really does limit our freedom, but that it is nevertheless inappropriate to describe it as doing so. Rather, the law “ill deserves the name confinement” because “*where there is no law, there is no freedom*: for *liberty* is, to be free from restraint and violence from others; which cannot be, where there is no law.” (‘Locke’, 5)

On the Assurance View, the fact that X deserves the name of F does not entail that X is F. We may suppose that the Assurance View also endorses the converse principle: the fact that X is F does not entail that X deserves the name of F. (For example, the fact that Team B are champions does not entail that they deserve to be called “champions”.) The

question is whether the *Second Treatise* passage fits with this view or contradicts it. To me it seems plain that there is no contradiction. Locke's point is that although the law really does confine us, it does not deserve to be called "confinement" because what it prevents is the commission of violent or coercive acts that infringe the very liberty rights that it is designed to protect. Similarly, a fence that really does prevent us from going where we please does not deserve to be called a form of confinement if it prevents us from walking on dangerous territory. This is presumably because the word "confinement" connotes something bad, and yet it is not bad for us that our liberties are secure and that we do not fall into bogs and precipices. So this attempt of Allen's to reinforce his first criticism does no more than provide further support for the Assurance View.

Allen's second criticism hinges on the placement of Locke's discussion of the technical idea of assurance relative to his discussion of sensitive knowledge:

[T]he passage from IV.xvi.6 [in which Locke provides his account of assurance] is drawn from the later discussion of belief, probability, and opinion. The break from the earlier discussion of knowledge occurs two chapters after the discussion of sensitive knowledge; calling the second of these chapters "Some Farther Considerations concerning our Knowledge" would seem particularly inappropriate if the preceding sections include a discussion of something that is not itself knowledge. ('Locke', 5)

Allen's point is that, broadly speaking, Locke's focus in E IV.i-xiii is *knowledge*, while his focus in E IV.xiv-xvi is *judgment* or *assent*, each of which is distinct from *bona fide* knowledge. Locke's discussion of sensitive knowledge occurs in E IV.xi, two chapters before Locke switches his focus from knowledge to judgment. Moreover, the title of E IV.xiii strongly suggests that Locke takes his previous discussion of sensitive knowledge to be a discussion of something that counts as knowledge *rather than* judgment or assent.

This criticism is suggestive, but far from probative. As we have seen, it is a critical aspect of the Assurance View that sensitive knowledge deserves to be called "knowledge" even if it isn't *bona fide* knowledge. The reason for this is that sensitive knowledge provides us with everything that we want knowledge to give us: a kind of immunity to ordinary doubts on the basis of which we can make plans that enable us to attain pleasure and avoid pain. On this view, it is therefore no surprise that Locke places his discussion of sensitive knowledge within the part of Book IV that concerns knowledge. If sensitive knowledge concerns the existence of particular things, deserves to be called 'knowledge', and does everything we want *bona fide* knowledge to do for us, then it seems perfectly appropriate to discuss it (as Locke does) along with intuitive knowledge of one's own existence and demonstrative knowledge of God's existence.<sup>10</sup> Locke might also worry that if he were to place his discussion of sensitive knowledge squarely in the part of Book IV that is devoted to discussion of judgment, then his reader might be led to think, erroneously, that he has no good answer to (radical or non-radical) skepticism. Indeed, in light of Stillingfleet's blistering criticism of Locke's discussion of sensitive knowledge *for just this reason*, such a worry would have been well founded.<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, the relevant placement also risks a different misreading, to the effect that

Locke takes sensitive knowledge to be a kind of *bona fide* knowledge. But, as Locke sees it, this kind of misreading is less misleading, and also far less damaging to his reputation, than the kind of misreading that relocation of his discussion would likely invite.

Allen's third criticism focuses on E IV.xvi.6, the passage in which Locke discusses the nature of assurance. Here, as Allen rightly notes, Locke claims that we are assured of certain sorts of particular facts about the past and future on the basis of testimonial evidence regarding "the regular proceedings of Causes and Effects in the ordinary course of Nature", evidence that agrees with our own "never-failing Experience in like cases" (E IV.xvi.6: 661). But Allen goes further:

Particular matters of fact that are *currently perceived* are excluded from the scope of the discussion. The implication is that whilst beliefs about past and future particular matters of fact are treated no differently to certain knowledge *for practical purposes*, propositions assented to on the basis of what is currently perceived are known *properly speaking*. ('Locke', 6)

Allen therefore infers from the fact that Locke's main examples of proper objects of assurance concern the past and the future that Locke does not take currently perceived matters of fact to be facts of which we are assured; rather, says Allen, Locke takes these matters of fact to be objects of *bona fide* knowledge.



I do not find this criticism persuasive. It is true that Locke applies the category of assurance to particular matters of fact about the past and to particular matters of fact about the future. But it does not follow from the fact that Locke's main examples of assurance concern the past and the future that he takes it to be impossible for us to be assured of a *present* matter of fact. Locke does not *explicitly* exclude the possibility that present matters of fact could be objects of assurance, and it is a leap to infer from the fact that Locke does not explicitly allow for such a possibility that he excludes it, whether implicitly or by "implication". Indeed, it would be surprising if Locke were thinking in these terms. For any probabilistic evidence in support of a proposition regarding "the stated Constitutions and Properties of Bodies, and the regular proceedings of Causes and Effects in the ordinary course of Nature" (E IV.xvi.6: 661) supports not only retrodictions (e.g., "Fire made Lead fluid") and predictions (e.g., "Fire will make Lead fluid"), but also propositions about present phenomena that are beyond the reach of our senses (e.g., "Fire makes Lead fluid now in the Earth's core") and counterfactual propositions about present phenomena (e.g., "If this Lead were now heated by Fire, it would become liquid"). From the evidential point of view, the support that probabilistic reasoning provides does not discriminate between the present on the one hand, and the past and the future on the other. Surely this is something of which Locke is aware, and this makes it very unlikely that he means his uses of retrodictive and predictive examples of objects of assurance to exhaust the field. But, then, if Locke allows propositions about particular *unperceived* material objects in the present to count as possible objects of assurance, it stands to reason that he would allow propositions about particular *perceived* material objects in the present to count as possible objects of assurance as well. For, again, the nature of

probabilistic evidence is not such as to discriminate between matters that are currently perceived and matters that are not currently perceived, as Locke's use of probabilistic reasoning at E IV.xi.4-7 to support assurance of the existence of material things strongly suggests.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these three criticisms, Allen offers “two more general problems with views according to which sensitive knowledge is not really ‘Knowledge’” (‘Locke’, 9). The first of these objections concerns the structure of Locke's argument in E IV.xi:

Locke describes [the probabilistic reasons for believing in the existence of things without the mind at E IV.xi.4-7] as merely “concurrent Reasons” that “farther confirm” the assurance that we have “from our Senses themselves” (IV.xi.3, editions 2-5). The implication is that the certainty of sensitive knowledge has been established to Locke's satisfaction by the end of IV.xi.3. (‘Locke’, 10)

The issue here concerns the relationship between E IV.xi.3 and E IV.xi.4-7. Allen thinks that Locke's description of the reasoning in E IV.xi.4-7 as “concurrent” with, and as “farther confirming”, the sense-based reasons for assurance of the existence of external things provided in E IV.xi.3 implies that Locke takes the latter assurance to be a kind of *bona fide* knowledge. However, I see no such implication; and the Assurance View has ample resources to account for Locke's description of the relation between the two sections of E IV.xi.

Importantly in this context, *concurrent* reasons are not *subordinate* reasons: they are not (or, at least, not *ipso facto*) reasons of *lesser* probative value, but rather reasons that, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, “act in conjunction”, “co-operate”, or “contribute to the same effect” (meaning A2). Indeed, Locke’s very use of the word “concurrent” strongly suggests, all by itself, that the conclusion of E IV.xi.4-7 (namely, that we have assurance, in the technical sense, of the existence of external things) is the *same* (the “same effect”) as the conclusion of E IV.xi.3, which is that we have sensitive knowledge. (A similar point applies to Locke’s use of the phrase “farther confirm”.) Especially given (as argued in section 5.1 above) that Locke’s use of the word “assurance” in E IV.xi.3 is almost surely *technical*, the Assurance View makes *more* sense of Locke’s use of the phrases “concurrent Reasons” and “farther confirm” than does Allen’s version of the Knowledge View, which reads the reasons of E IV.xi.4-7 as of significantly lesser probative value.

The second of Allen’s more general objections concerns the relation between sensitive knowledge and existential knowledge more generally:

Existential knowledge of any kind depends essentially on the way that the world is, and not merely how it is represented as being; in particular, it requires that the things represented really exist. Locke thinks that we can have existential knowledge of God, ourselves, and finite material particulars. But if we are worried that sensitive knowledge cannot consist solely in perceiving agreements between ideas, and must instead consist in [perceiving] the agreement of our ideas

with the objects that they are ideas *of*, then the same ought to be true of knowledge of the existence of God and ourselves. If this is right, then Locke can only *consciously* allow that sensitive knowledge is not really “Knowledge”—and thereby avoid the charge of inconsistency—if he is also prepared to allow that we do not really “Know” of the existence of God or ourselves either. However, there is no evidence that Locke would find either possibility even remotely acceptable. (‘Locke’, 10)

Allen claims that there is a serious worry for any view, such as Locke’s, according to which existential knowledge consists in perception of a relation between two ideas. This is because existential knowledge requires perception of a relation between an idea and the external object represented by the idea. If Locke’s reaction to this worry is to retreat to the claim that sensitive knowledge is not really a kind of existential *knowledge* at all, then, by parity of reasoning, he should—to avoid inconsistency—also retreat to the claim that the existence of God and himself is not something he can know either. But this is something Locke does not do. And this suggests that Locke really does think of sensitive knowledge as a kind of *bona fide* knowledge.

This criticism rests on a mistaken assumption. It is no part of the Assurance View to suppose that Locke’s taking sensitive knowledge to be something less than *bona fide* knowledge is the result of some sort of retreat in the face of the kind of worry that Allen articulates. Proponents of the Assurance View hold (or, at least, are not prevented from holding) that Locke has *independent* and *positive* reasons for taking sensitive knowledge

to be a kind of assurance (in the technical sense), reasons relating to the fact that the best arguments that can be found for the existence of an external world are all probabilistic (see discussion of E IV.xi.3-7 above). By contrast, so say the proponents of the Assurance View, Locke claims that we immediately perceive an ideational agreement when we consider whether we exist (and thus possess intuitive knowledge of our own existence), and that we mediately perceive an ideational agreement when we consider whether God exists (and thus possess demonstrative knowledge of God's existence). The Assurance View therefore has a ready explanation for why Locke has no trouble distinguishing between our epistemic relation to finite material things on the one hand, and our epistemic relation to our own existence and to God on the other. In the end, the worry that sensitive knowledge "must consist in the agreement of our ideas with the objects that they are ideas *of*" is not *Locke's* worry: it is, as Allen himself notes ('Locke', 10, note 19), a worry articulated by modern-day *commentators*. There is therefore no reason to suppose that Locke must, on pain of inconsistency, treat sensitive knowledge no differently from existential knowledge more generally.

The result of our investigation into extant criticisms of the Assurance View is that each and every one of them fails. It does not follow from this that the Assurance View is the best interpretation of Locke's account of sensitive knowledge. But what *does* follow is that the Assurance View remains a live interpretive option. To see whether it is the *best* option, we need to examine the best arguments for the best available interpretive alternative, namely the Knowledge View.

## 6. *The Case For the Knowledge View*

The best case for the Knowledge View rests on textual evidence of two kinds. The first is that Locke repeatedly refers to sensitive knowledge using the term 'knowledge'. The second is an important passage in Locke's *Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter*, which is worth quoting at length:

In the last place, your lordship argues, that because I say, that the idea in the mind proves not the existence of that thing whereof it is an idea, therefore we cannot know the actual existence of any thing by our senses: because we know nothing, but by the perceived agreement of ideas. But if you had been pleased to have considered my answer there to the sceptics, whose cause you here seem, with no small vigour, to manage; you would, I humbly conceive, have found that you mistake one thing for another, viz. the idea that has by a former sensation been lodged in the mind, for actually receiving any idea, *i.e.* actual sensation; which, I think, I need not go about to prove are two distinct things, after what you have here quoted out of my book. Now the two ideas, that in this case are perceived to agree, and do thereby produce knowledge, are the idea of actual sensation (which is an action whereof I have a clear and distinct idea) and the idea of actual existence of something without me that causes that sensation. And what other certainty your lordship has by your senses of the existing of any thing without you, but the perceived connexion of those two ideas, I would gladly know.

(*Works* IV, 360)

Here, in response to Stillingfleet's charge that Locke flirts with, or may even commit himself to, skepticism about the external world, Locke insists that sensitive knowledge is a kind of *bona fide* knowledge consisting in the perception of an agreement between two ideas, "the idea of actual sensation" and "the idea of actual existence of something without me that causes that sensation".

While proponents of the Assurance View have a ready explanation for Locke's repeated use of the word "knowledge" to refer to what he really takes to be a kind of assurance (in the technical sense)—namely, that assurance is as good as knowledge for all practical purposes, and hence, as Locke puts it, "deserves the name of Knowledge", it is more difficult for them to explain away the passage from the *Second Reply*. Proponents of the Knowledge View have also developed Locke's remarks in this passage into what appears to be a compelling interpretation of Locke's picture of the place of sensitive knowledge in his epistemology. They have done so in two ways, the second of which seems superior to the first.

One main question concerns the nature of the two ideas perception of agreement between which Locke claims to constitute sensitive knowledge. According to Owen, "experiencing a sensory idea...is to perceive that idea as agreeing with the idea of the existence of its external cause" ('Locke', 13—see also Ayers, *Locke*, vol. 1, 159). Thus, more particularly, "when I know that the apple in front of me exists, there is agreement between my sensory idea of the apple and the idea of its being caused by something extra-mental" ('Locke', 6). As Owen sees it, then, in any case of sensitive knowledge, the first member of the relevant pair of ideas that are perceived to agree with each other is a *sensory idea*. In the case of sensitive knowledge of the existence of a sensed apple, the

relevant sensory idea is, we may presume, a complex idea composed of the simple ideas of the apple's shape, size, color, texture, weight, and so on, along with the abstract idea of substratum (see E II.xxiii.3: 296-297).

However, as Nagel ('Sensitive Knowledge', 23) and Allen ('Locke', 12-13) rightly point out, Owen's hypothesis does not make the best sense of the relevant passage. Locke writes that, in the case of sensitive knowledge, the idea that is perceived to agree with the idea of actual existence of an external cause is not a *sensory idea*, but rather an idea that represents the "action" of "actual sensation". The latter idea is an idea of reflection (rather than sensation), an idea produced by reflecting on the mental operation of sensing (see E II.i.4: 105). So when there is an apple in front of me, Locke's view appears to be that I perceive my idea of the mental operation of actually sensing the apple to agree with the idea of the actual existence of the external cause of that very mental operation.

The Nagel-Allen version of the Knowledge View makes it easier to understand why Locke would have thought that there could be perception of an agreement between two ideas sufficient to provide knowledge of the existence of an external world of material objects on the basis of sensation. If, as Locke accepts (see IV.x.3: 620), one can intuitively know that every event has a cause, then surely one can perceive (and perhaps even intuitively know) that one's mental act of sensation has a cause; and if one can definitively rule out (perhaps by relying on the involuntariness of sensation, as Locke does at E IV.xi.5) the possibility that the cause of one's mental act of sensation is internal to the mind, then one can know that one's mental act of sensation has an *external* cause; and if one can definitively rule out that the cause of one's mental act of sensation is



*immaterial*, then one can know that one's mental act of sensation has an external *material* cause.

### 7. *The Case Against the Knowledge View, and Why It Succeeds*

The Knowledge View, in the version developed by Nagel and Allen, is therefore both textually moored and, so far at least, philosophically attractive. Unfortunately, as I will now argue, it cannot make sense of the texts in which Locke affirms that sensitive knowledge is less certain than either intuitive or demonstrative knowledge, and it also renders Locke's overall epistemology philosophically incoherent.

Locke does not mince words about the relative uncertainty of sensitive knowledge:

These two, (*viz.*) Intuition and Demonstration, are the degrees of our Knowledge; whatever comes short of one of these, with what assurance soever embraced, is but Faith, or Opinion, but not Knowledge, at least in all general Truths. There is, indeed, another *Perception* of the Mind, employ'd about *the particular existence of finite Beings* without us; which going beyond bare probability, and yet not reaching perfectly to either of the foregoing degrees of certainty, passes under the name of Knowledge. (E IV.ii.14: 536-537—emphasis added)

*The notice we have by our Senses, of the existing of Things without us, though it be not altogether so certain, as our intuitive Knowledge, or the Deductions of our Reason*, employ'd about the clear abstract *Ideas* of our own Minds; yet it is an

assurance that *deserves the name of Knowledge*. (E IV.xi.3: 631—emphasis added)

The first problem with the Knowledge View is that, if sensitive knowledge is indeed *perception*, and not merely *presumption*, of an agreement between the reflective idea of actual sensation and the idea of an external material cause of that sensation, then how can this perception be *less certain* than the perception of agreement involved in intuitive or demonstrative knowledge?

It might be thought that one could appeal to Locke's explanation of the uncertainty of demonstrative knowledge relative to intuitive knowledge to explain the relative uncertainty of sensitive knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Clever as this suggestion is, there are two reasons why it won't work. The first is that, when Locke is being careful, he does not, in fact, aver that demonstrative knowledge is less *certain* than intuitive knowledge; what he says is that the former is less *clear* and also less *perfect* than the latter:

The different clearness of our Knowledge seems to me to lie in the different way of Perception, the Mind has of the Agreement, or Disagreement of any of its *Ideas*. (E IV.ii.1: 530—emphasis added)

*This Knowledge by intervening Proofs*, though it be certain, yet the evidence of it is *not* altogether so clear and bright, nor the assent so ready, as in *intuitive Knowledge*. (E IV.ii.4: 532—emphasis added)

'Tis true, the Perception, produced by *Demonstration*, is also very clear; yet it is often with a great abatement of that evident luster and full assurance, that always accompany that which I call *intuitive*; like a Face reflected by several Mirrors one to another, where as long as it retains the similitude and agreement with the Object, it produces a Knowledge; but 'tis still in every successive reflection with a lessening of that perfect Clearness and Distinctness, which is in the first, till at last, after many removes, it has a great mixture of Dimness, and is not at first Sight so knowable, especially to weak Eyes. Thus it is with Knowledge, made out by a long train of Proofs. (E IV.ii.6: 533—emphasis added)

[B]ecause in long Deductions, and the use of many Proofs, the Memory does not always so readily and exactly retain: therefore it comes to pass, that this is more imperfect than intuitive Knowledge, and Men embrace often Falshoods for Demonstrations. (E IV.ii.7: 534—emphasis added)

What this means is that, for Locke, the *degrees* of knowledge are degrees of *clarity* or *perfection*, but not degrees of *certainty*: intuitive and demonstrative knowledge are equally certain, but not equally clear or perfect. If this is so, then one cannot appeal to whatever distinguishes the certainty of demonstrative knowledge from the certainty of intuitive knowledge to explain the lesser degree of certainty of sensitive knowledge.

The second reason why an appeal to the difference between demonstrative and intuitive knowledge won't help us understand the difference between sensitive knowledge and the other two forms of knowledge is that whatever it is that might be

thought to make demonstrative knowledge *less certain* than intuitive knowledge could only make sensitive knowledge *more certain* than demonstrative knowledge. The basic difference between intuitive knowledge and demonstrative knowledge is that while the former is self-evident, the latter is based on proofs, which amount to chains of ideas consecutive members of which are immediately perceived to agree. If there is a problem with demonstrative knowledge, it isn't at the level of the individual links in the chain (each of which is intuitively known), but rather at the level of retention of the individual links in memory, which is imperfect. But if sensitive knowledge rests on demonstration (or something akin to it), the steps from the reflective idea of the mental operation of sensation to the idea of the existence of an external material cause of this operation number no more than three: (i) the step from the idea of the reflective act of sensation to the idea of its cause, (ii) the step from the idea of its cause to the idea of its cause being external, and (iii) the step from the idea of its cause being external to the idea of its external cause being material.<sup>14</sup> Surely it is far easier to remember these three steps than it is to remember any demonstrative proof with more than three steps. And in that case, on the assumption that it is memory that explains why demonstrative knowledge is less certain than intuitive knowledge, sensitive knowledge would turn out to be more, rather than less, certain than almost all forms of demonstrative knowledge.

Nagel and Allen provide different explanations of what they take to be the lesser degree of certainty possessed by sensitive knowledge. Nagel's suggestion is that the difference in certainty is explained by referring to a lack of intuitive agreement between two ideas that are related to the two ideas that are perceived to agree in the case of sensitive knowledge. Imagining a case in which one perceives a rose, she writes:

[B]ecause the connection between the central content presented to one's mind (in this case, the idea of the rose) and one's idea of one's mode of thought (in this case, the idea of actual sensation) is not intuitive agreement but mere temporal coincidence, sensitive knowledge yields a lower degree of certainty than intuition or demonstration. ('Sensitive Knowledge', 26)

To clarify, on Nagel's view, Locke holds that sensing the rose produces an idea of the rose ( $I_R$ ), that reflection on the mental operation of sensing the rose produces an idea of that operation ( $I_S$ ), and that every such episode brings to mind the idea of the actual existence of the external cause of the relevant mental operation ( $I_E$ ). Nagel suggests that the lesser degree of certainty of sensitive knowledge is explained, not by lack of intuitive agreement between  $I_S$  and  $I_E$ , but rather by lack of intuitive agreement between  $I_S$  and  $I_R$ . However, on Nagel's view, sensitive knowledge involves the perception of an agreement between  $I_S$  and  $I_E$ , not between  $I_S$  and  $I_R$ . What is difficult to understand is how lack of intuitive agreement between X and Y could explain a lesser degree of certainty possessed by an epistemic state that involves perception of an agreement between X and Z. Without further elaboration, this proposal of Nagel's is excessively opaque.

Allen provides a different, two-part explanation for the lesser degree of certainty belonging to sensitive knowledge. Here is the first part:

First, the senses differ from reason in only providing knowledge of the existence of objects that are present to them (IV.iii.21, IV.xi.9); this is because sensitive

knowledge consists in the awareness of receiving ideas from without, and we are only aware of receiving ideas from without in the presence of objects which produce ideas in us. It is therefore possible to doubt the current existence of things without the mind when they are not present to the senses. (Note: Although we can know of their past existence by memory (IV.xi.11).) In this respect, the reason why sensitive knowledge is less certain than either intuitive or demonstrative knowledge is similar to part of the reason why demonstrative knowledge is itself less certain than intuitive knowledge: whereas it is possible to doubt the truth of a proposition that can be known demonstratively prior to actually producing the demonstration (IV.ii.5), intuitively knowable agreements are perceived “at the first sight of the *Ideas* together” (IV.ii.1). (‘Locke’, 20-21)

Allen’s suggestion is that just as the possibility of doubting a proposition that is later demonstratively proved provides reason for thinking that demonstrative knowledge is less certain than intuitive knowledge, so the possibility of doubting the current existence of unsensed external things that are later perceived by sense provides reason for thinking that sensitive knowledge is less certain than both intuitive and demonstrative knowledge. But there are two problems with this suggestion, even apart from the fact that, as argued above, demonstrative knowledge is not less certain than intuitive knowledge. The first is that whereas this explanation might work to explain why sensitive knowledge is less certain than *intuitive* knowledge, it cannot show that sensitive knowledge is less certain than *demonstrative* knowledge, for the objects of both sensitive knowledge and demonstrative knowledge are subject to the same sort of antecedent doubt. The second is

that Locke never says that the fact that the objects of demonstrative knowledge are subject to antecedent doubt indicates that demonstrative knowledge is less certain than intuitive knowledge: the closest thing to the claim that Allen attributes to him is that there is a “*difference between intuitive and demonstrative Knowledge*” (E IV.ii.5: 532). But this claim is far from the statement that the relevant “difference” concerns a lesser or greater degree of certainty.

The second part of Allen’s explanation appeals to the effects of the possibility of ideational obscurity and indistinctness on the relative certainty of sensitive knowledge:

But even when we are actually receiving ideas from without, a particular kind of doubt remains possible in the case of sensitive knowledge. Whereas reason is employed about “the clear abstract *Ideas* of our own Minds” (IV.xi.3), the reflective awareness of receiving ideas from without can be rendered indistinct and obscure by a failure to attend carefully to our own mental lives. [Note on the nature of obscurity and indistinctness left out.] Although we are constantly aware of the mind’s operations to at least some degree, clear and distinct awareness of the mind’s operations requires attention: [quote from E II.i.8 left out]. Again, this echoes part of the reason why demonstrative knowledge is itself less certain than intuitive knowledge: demonstrative knowledge requires “pains and attention” (IV.ii.4), and the agreements between ideas linked by a chain of reasoning are less clearly perceived than agreements between ideas that can be perceived immediately (IV.ii.6). (‘Locke’, 21)

Allen's point here is that sensitive knowledge is less certain than either intuitive or demonstrative knowledge because, in the absence of sufficient attention, the idea of the mental operation of sensation that is one of the two ideas perception of the agreement between which constitutes sensitive knowledge is obscure and indistinct, thereby rendering sensitive knowledge itself obscure and indistinct. However, there are two problems with this suggestion. First, as we have already seen, from the fact that a particular kind of knowledge is more obscure and indistinct than another, it does not follow that the former kind of knowledge is less certain than the latter. A lesser degree of clarity and distinctness is one thing, a lesser degree of certainty is another. Second, and more importantly, even if a lesser degree of clarity or distinctness were sufficient for a lesser degree of certainty, the fact that the obscurity of an idea is sufficient for the obscurity of any perception of agreement between that idea and another entails that sensitive knowledge can be no less obscure, and so no less certain, in general, than either demonstrative or intuitive knowledge. For the ideas between which we sometimes immediately or mediately perceive an agreement can be just as obscure as the idea of a mental operation that is not carefully attended to. For those ideas can be ideas of mental operations themselves! Suppose, for example, that one fails to attend carefully to a particular mental operation (say, the operation of judgment), and therefore finds oneself with an obscure and indistinct idea of it. Still, as long as one possesses the idea of judgment, one can immediately (and so, intuitively) perceive the agreement (in the way of identity) between the idea and itself. In such a case, as Locke points out (E IV.ii.15: 538), the obscurity and indistinctness of the idea that is perceived to agree with itself is automatically inherited by the intuitive perception of the relevant ideational agreement.



So there is no reason to suppose that sensitive knowledge, conceived of as the perception of an agreement between the idea of actual sensation and the idea of the actual existence of its external cause, is generally any more obscure or indistinct than intuitive (or demonstrative) knowledge.

It follows from all of this that no proponent of any reasonable version of the Knowledge View has yet been able to explain why Locke takes sensitive knowledge to be less *certain* than either intuitive or demonstrative knowledge. By contrast, the Assurance View provides a ready explanation. According to the Assurance View, sensitive knowledge is fundamentally different in kind (even if not in its practical effects) from both intuitive and demonstrative knowledge. It is different in kind because it is a form of assurance (in the technical sense), namely belief based on a very high degree of probability. But assurance, unlike demonstrative or intuitive knowledge, is vulnerable to more radical forms of skeptical doubt, even if it is not vulnerable to ordinary skeptical doubts. So assurance is less certain than (demonstrative or intuitive) knowledge, and this is why, on the Assurance View, Locke takes sensitive knowledge to be less certain than *bona fide* knowledge of any sort.

Let us now move on to the most serious problem facing the Knowledge View, namely the problem of overall philosophical incoherence. Recall that, for Locke, knowledge is the perception of an agreement or disagreement between two ideas. Logically speaking, this perception must be either immediate or mediate: if it is not immediate then it is mediate, and if it is not mediate then it is immediate. The reason for this lies in the definition of immediate perception and in the definition of mediate perception. Perception of an agreement between ideas is immediate when it occurs

“without the intervention of any other [idea]” (E IV.ii.1: 531), and perception of an agreement between ideas is mediate when it occurs “by the intervention of other *Ideas* (one or more, as it happens)” (E IV.ii.2: 532). Locke calls immediate perception of an agreement (or disagreement) between two ideas “intuitive knowledge”, and calls mediate perception of agreement (or disagreement) between two ideas “demonstrative knowledge”. These definitions leave no logical room for a third kind of knowledge: if one’s knowledge is not intuitive then it must be demonstrative, and if one’s knowledge is not demonstrative, then it must be intuitive. Logically speaking, then, if Locke really conceived of sensitive knowledge as a kind of *bona fide* knowledge, he would be committed to identifying it as demonstrative or intuitive. But he doesn’t; indeed he goes out of his way *not* to. This is at least *part* of the purport of his insistence that sensitive knowledge is less certain than either intuitive or demonstrative knowledge. It follows that, whether he likes it or not, Locke is committed to the position that sensitive knowledge is not a kind of *bona fide* knowledge at all.

It might be thought that Locke tries to avoid this result by distinguishing between general and particular truths when he introduces sensitive knowledge as a third degree of knowledge. He writes:

These two, (*viz.*) Intuition and Demonstration, are the degrees of our Knowledge; whatever comes short of one of these, with what assurance soever embraced, is but Faith, or Opinion, but not Knowledge, at least in all general Truths. (E IV.ii.14: 536-537—emphasis added)

Here Locke seems to be suggesting or implying that, whereas *in the case of our epistemic relation to general truths* whatever comes short of intuitive and demonstrative knowledge cannot be *bona fide* knowledge, *in the case of our epistemic relation to particular truths* it is possible for something that comes short of intuitive and demonstrative knowledge (namely, sensitive knowledge) to count as *bona fide* knowledge. But this move is clearly something of a cop-out, and this is something of which Locke should have been aware, even if it wasn't at the forefront of his mind when he was writing this section of the *Essay*. For the distinction between intuitive and demonstrative knowledge is no less exhaustive in the realm of particular truths than it is in the realm of general truths: just as a perceived *general* truth must be perceived either immediately or mediately, so a perceived *particular* truth must be perceived either immediately or mediately. If the particular truth is perceived immediately (as in the case of one's own existence), then it is intuitively known; and if the particular truth is perceived mediately (as in the case of God's existence), then it is demonstratively known. *Tertium non datur*. It follows that it is philosophically incoherent for Locke to suppose that sensitive knowledge is a kind of *bona fide* knowledge that is distinct from both intuitive and demonstrative knowledge. Perhaps Locke's epistemology *is* philosophically incoherent. But charity pulls in the opposite direction, namely away from the Knowledge View and towards the Assurance View. For the Assurance View avoids incoherence by attributing to Locke the textually moored position that sensitive knowledge is a kind of assurance (in the technical sense), rather than a kind of *bona fide* knowledge.

What, then, should be said about Locke's insistence in his *Second Reply* that sensitive knowledge really *is* a kind of *perception* of ideational agreement, and hence a

kind of *bona fide* knowledge? Admittedly, this passage poses something of a puzzle for the Assurance View. The answer, I believe, is that Locke simply falls into a trap of his own making. The fact that he refuses to acknowledge the theoretical inconsistency generated by this part of his reply probably derives from the fact that he very much desires to be able to provide an answer to the radical external world skeptic, and thereby answer Stillingfleet's charge that he is committed to a kind of skepticism. This wish blinds him both to the theoretical inconsistency to which his response to Stillingfleet commits him, and to the theoretical inconsistency with which he flirts when distinguishing between general and particular truths in the course of describing the category of sensitive knowledge at E IV.ii.14. The problem is that Locke wants to have his cake and eat it too. In the end, it seems to do far less violence to his epistemology as a whole to suppose that he takes sensitive knowledge to be a kind of assurance (in the technical sense) than to suppose that he takes sensitive knowledge to be a kind of *bona fide* knowledge. And thus the Assurance View seems, on balance, far preferable as an interpretation of Locke's epistemology than any version of the Knowledge View.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Those who read Locke this way include John W. Yolton, *Locke on the Compass of Human Understanding: A Selective Commentary on the Essay [Compass]* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 109; Richard I. Aaron, *John Locke*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 240; Louis E. Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 58; Michael R. Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology*, 2 vols. [Locke] (London: Routledge, 1991), 159; Roger Woolhouse, 'Locke's Theory of Knowledge', in Vere Chappell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 146-71, at 154 and 168; E. J. Lowe, *Locke on Human Understanding* (London: Routledge, 1995), 174-5; Nicholas Jolley, *Locke: His Philosophical Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 187; David Owen, 'Locke on Sensitive Knowledge' ['Locke'], unpublished, accessed at [www.ic.arizona.edu/ic/dwo/David's%20Papers/SensKn1.rtf](http://www.ic.arizona.edu/ic/dwo/David's%20Papers/SensKn1.rtf); Jennifer Nagel, 'Sensitive Knowledge: Locke on Skepticism and Sensation' ['Sensitive Knowledge'], in Matthew Stuart (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Locke* (New York: Blackwell, forthcoming), accessed at <http://philpapers.org/archive/NAGSKL.2.pdf>; and Keith Allen, 'Locke and Sensitive Knowledge' ['Locke'], *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, forthcoming, accessed at [http://www-users.york.ac.uk/~ka519/Publications\\_files/Allen%20Locke%20and%20Sensitive%20Knowledge.pdf](http://www-users.york.ac.uk/~ka519/Publications_files/Allen%20Locke%20and%20Sensitive%20Knowledge.pdf). Yolton, Aaron, Loeb, Ayers, Woolhouse, Lowe, and Jolley all worry that Locke's claim that sensitive knowledge is a kind of knowledge is (or may be) inconsistent with Locke's official account of the nature of knowledge. Owen, Nagel, and Allen claim that there is no need to worry, for there is no inconsistency.

<sup>2</sup> This view is endorsed by Samuel C. Rickless, 'Is Locke's Theory of Knowledge Inconsistent?' ['Locke's Theory'] *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 77 (2008), 83-104. Lex Newman, 'Locke on Knowledge', in Lex Newman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 313-51, takes Locke to hold a hybrid account of sensitive knowledge according to which it is a dual cognition involving both *bona fide* knowledge of the truth of one proposition (that the ideas derived from sensation have an external cause) and *bona fide* assurance of the truth of another (that the external causes of our sensations are material substances).

<sup>3</sup> All references to Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* are to the edition by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), by "E" followed by book, chapter, section, colon, and the relevant page number(s).

<sup>4</sup> This suggestion is endorsed by Yolton, *Compass*, 110, and A. D. Woozley, 'Some Remarks on Locke's Account of Knowledge', in I. C. Tipton (ed.), *Locke on Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 141-8, at 142.

<sup>5</sup> Locke's initial account of agreement by way of real existence does not bring out clearly that this fourth kind of agreement obtains between *ideas*. This requires further

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discussion. In short, Locke holds that what  $I_1$  represents has real existence outside the mind if and only if  $I_1$  itself agrees (most likely by way of co-existence or necessary connexion) with the idea of real existence. More on this below.

<sup>6</sup> What *is* surprising is that Locke does not *explicitly* identify agreement in the way of real existence as a species of agreement in the way of relation. This is likely an oversight resulting from the fact that Locke's initial explication of agreement in the way of real existence does not bring out its relational characteristics. Still, this sort of agreement can be redescribed as a species of agreement in the way of co-existence or necessary connexion. See previous footnote, and below.

<sup>7</sup> The fact that the agreement between two ideas is not always immediately perceivable is likely a function of the complexity of one or both of them. When ideas are simple (in the sense of having no proper parts that are also ideas), it is easy to recognize whether they agree or disagree. An example of this is the knowledge that white is not black, which is the immediate perception of the numerical distinctness of the idea of white and the idea of black. However, when ideas are complex (that is, when ideas have other ideas as proper parts), the number and connection of those parts can (though it need not always) make it difficult to recognize whether they agree (in the relevant ways) with other ideas. Although perception of the identity between the idea of two added to two and the idea of four can be immediate, the same cannot be said (at least for most people) of perception of the identity of the idea of 1,679 added to 5,783 and the idea of 7,462.

<sup>8</sup> One of Nagel's criticisms echoes Owen's second criticism, so I will not address it here.

<sup>9</sup> I am greatly indebted to Dana Nelkin for the main idea behind this example.

<sup>10</sup> Rickless, 'Locke's Theory', 93, note 11, makes much the same point.

<sup>11</sup> Stillingfleet writes: "Before I conclude my self, I must take notice of your *Conclusion*, viz. *That you must content your self with this condemned way of Ideas, and despair of ever attaining any knowledge by any other than that, or farther than that will lead me to it.* Which is in effect to say, that you see no way to avoid *Scepticism* but this: but my great Prejudice against it is, that it leads to *Scepticism*, or at least, that I could find no way to attain to Certainty in it upon your own grounds." (*The Bishop of Worcester's Answer to Mr. Locke's Letter*, London: printed by J.H. for Henry Mortlock, 1697, 125).

<sup>12</sup> Immediately following his third criticism, Allen offers a fourth that focuses on a passage from the Stillingfleet correspondence in which Locke explicitly claims that sensitive knowledge is *bona fide* knowledge because it is the *perception* of a particular ideational agreement. Because this passage is the basis for all of the positive arguments for the Knowledge View, I defer discussion of it until sections 6 and 7 below.

<sup>13</sup> This proposal is suggested by aspects of Allen's interpretation and is being developed by Nate Rockwood (UC San Diego) in his Ph.D. dissertation.

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<sup>14</sup> In his Ph.D. dissertation, Nate Rockwood (see previous note) is developing the proposal that sensitive knowledge is or includes a kind of demonstrative knowledge.

<sup>15</sup> I would like to thank Dana Nelkin, Keith Allen, Jennifer Nagel, David Owen, and Nate Rockwood for helping me to hone the ideas and arguments presented in this paper. Many thanks also to an anonymous reviewer for *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, and to the editors, Don Rutherford and Dan Garber, for their constructive comments and assistance.