LOCKE STUDIES

Vol. 15

<https://doi.org/10.5206/lis.2015.687> | ISSN: 1476-0290

Originally published: 2015

Published online: 19 FEBRUARY 2018

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Recommended citation:

Soles, David. "On Certainty and Sensitive Knowledge: A Response to Rickless." *Locke Studies* 15 (2015): 111-130. <https://doi.org/10.5206/lis.2015.687>

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ON CERTAINTY AND SENSITIVE KNOWLEDGE: A RESPONSE TO RICKLESS

DAVID SOLES

In an earlier paper ‘Certainty and Sensitive Knowledge’, published in this journal in 2014, I offered some remarks about Locke’s understanding of certainty and its implications for his account of sensitive knowledge. As a way of setting up and concluding that paper I made a few critical remarks about Professor Samuel Rickless’s thesis that, given Locke’s own identification of knowledge and certainty, what Locke calls sensitive knowledge falls short of his own criterion of knowledge. The current issue of this journal contains a paper by Professor Rickless which defends and further articulates his thesis and also offers some criticisms of my account of Locke’s views on certainty. I will make a few remarks about each.

§1. Professor Rickless’s Positive Account

If I understand Professor Rickless correctly, his position amounts to the following:

- a. Locke equates knowledge and certainty.
- b. Locke claims that there are only two degrees of certainty: intuition and deduction.
- c. What is called sensitive knowledge falls short of the certainty of intuition and deduction.
- d. Therefore, speaking precisely, on Locke’s account, sensitive ‘knowledge’ is not really knowledge.

In short, Professor Rickless claims that ‘the following triad is inconsistent’ (R: 101–2)

1. Sensitive knowledge is a kind of *bona fide* knowledge.
2. All knowledge is either intuitive or demonstrative.
3. Sensitive knowledge is not as certain as intuitive or

demonstrative knowledge.

Obviously, if sensitive knowledge is less certain than either intuitive or demonstrative knowledge, it cannot count as either intuitive or demonstrative knowledge; intuitive (or demonstrative) knowledge cannot be less certain than intuitive (or demonstrative) knowledge. Therefore, one of the three propositions must be rejected and Professor Rickless argues that 1 must be rejected. I, however, believe that it is 2 which must be rejected. Locke nowhere says or implies that all knowledge is either intuitive or demonstrative. In fact, he emphatically asserts just the opposite. I turn now to a defense of that claim.

Locke transitions from a discussion of intuitive and demonstrative knowledge to a brief discussion of the knowledge of the existence of particulars with the following remark:

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, emphasis added).¹

It is important not to miss or ignore the qualification with which this sentence ends. The position clearly and explicitly articulated here is that, *as far as general truths are concerned*, whatever falls short of intuitive or demonstrative certainty is not knowledge. But, of course, to say that all knowledge of general truths requires intuitive or demonstrative certainty is not to say that all knowledge requires intuitive or demonstrative certainty. The passage explicitly leaves open the possibility that there is knowledge of particulars which does not require intuitive or demonstrative certainty and the very next sentence continues:

There is, indeed, another *Perception* of the Mind, employed 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

¹ References to the *Essay* are to the edition of Peter H. Nidditch (1975), and in the following form: Book.chapter.section.

of certainty, passes under the name of Knowledge.

This is followed by a very short (24 line) rejection of external world skepticism as a topic not worthy of serious consideration, which concludes with the observation that

we may add to the two former sorts of *Knowledge* [intuitive and demonstrative], this also, of the existence of particular external objects by that perception and Consciousness we have of the actual entrance of *Ideas* from them, and allow these *three degrees of Knowledge*, viz. *Intuitive, Demonstrative, and Sensitive*: in each of which, there are different degrees and ways of evidence and Certainty (*E*, IV.ii.14)

So to the knowledge of universal propositions acquired via intuition and deduction we may add a third class of knowledge, knowledge of particulars, and most knowledge of particulars is acquired via sensation.² This distinction between knowledge of universal truths which requires intuitive or deductive certainty and knowledge of particulars which is based on sensation is one to which Locke frequently adverts. IV.ix.1–2, which bridges the discussion of general knowledge and the discussion of knowledge of particulars is especially relevant here and worth quoting in its entirety:

Hitherto we have only considered the Essences of Things, which being only abstract *Ideas*, and thereby removed in our Thoughts from particular Existence, (that being the proper Operation of the Mind, in Abstraction, to consider an *Idea* under no other Existence, but what it has in the Understanding,) gives us no Knowledge of real Existence at all. Where by the way we may take notice, that *universal Propositions*, of whose Truth or Falsehood we can have certain Knowledge, concern not *Existence*; and farther that all *particular Affirmations or Negations*, that would not be certain if they were made general, are only concerning *Existence*; they declaring only the accidental Union or Separation of *Ideas* in Things existing, which in their abstract Natures, have no known necessary Union or Repugnancy.

² The exceptions being knowledge of one's own existence which is said to be intuitive, and knowledge of the existence of God which, supposedly, is demonstrable.

But leaving the Nature of Propositions, and different ways of Predication to be considered more at large in another place, Let us proceed now to inquire concerning our Knowledge of the *Existence* of Things, and how we come by it. I say then, that we have the Knowledge of *our own Existence* by Intuition; of the *Existence* of God by Demonstration; and of other Things by Sensation.³

There are three points worthy of note here. The first is Locke's claim that the discussion prior to IV.ix has been focused primarily on our knowledge of general truths where intuition or demonstration enables us to perceive that abstract ideas agree or disagree. Second, Locke returns to IV.ii.14's distinction between knowledge of universal truths and knowledge of particulars, suggesting that, having discussed the knowledge of universal truths, he is now turning to a discussion of the knowledge of particulars.⁴ Third, the earlier claim that we have *knowledge* of the existence of particular sensible objects via sensation is repeated without qualification. There is no suggestion that, while the awareness of one's own existence (acquired via intuition) and the awareness of the existence of God (acquired via demonstration) constitute genuine knowledge, the awareness of the existence of sensible objects (via sensation) falls short of the criterion. Indeed, the passage explicitly states that knowledge of the existence of things can be acquired by intuition, demonstration, or sensation.

Locke, then, explicitly draws a distinction between knowledge of general truths which requires intuitive or demonstrative certainty and knowledge of particular sensible things which is acquired via sensation; while all knowledge of general truths is intuitive or deductive, not all knowledge is intuitive or deductive. I can find no textual support for supposing that Locke is not serious

³ In saying that 'Hitherto' only the essences of things have been considered, Locke is referring to the passage at IV.vi.2 which states that the following will consider the 'Truth and Certainty of universal Propositions'. From IV.vi to IV.ix the focus is on universal propositions.

⁴ This, by the way, sheds some light as to why the discussion of external world skepticism in IV.ii.14 is so abbreviated. Consideration of that issue is being saved for IV.xi, where knowledge of particulars is addressed.

when he draws the distinction between the knowledge of general truths and the knowledge of particular truths and argues that the knowledge of general or universal truths is to be had only by intuition and deduction while knowledge of the existence of particular things (excluding oneself and God) is to be had only by sensation. There are far too many passages where he claims that there are three degrees of knowledge: intuitive, demonstrative and sensitive.⁵ In none of those passages does he suggest that what he is calling sensitive knowledge is not genuine knowledge. As near as I can see, it is only by missing the above discussed qualification in IV.ii.14 that such a reading can gain any *prima facie* plausibility.

Nevertheless, agreeing with Professor Rickless that the best evidence of what Locke believes is what Locke actually says, it might be worthwhile to look at a few of those passages where Locke explicitly says that we may be certain of the existence of particular extra-mental objects. IV.xi.2 states that the fact that we are ignorant of the manner in which sensory perceptions are

⁵ IV.iii.5, for instance, notes that sensitive knowledge, ‘reaching no farther than the Existence of Things actually present to our Senses’ is narrower than either intuitive or demonstrative. There is, however, no hint that it is not genuine knowledge despite its narrow compass. IV.iii.21 claims that, while we have an intuitive knowledge of our own existence and a demonstrative knowledge of the existence of God, ‘of the *Existence* of any Thing else, we have no other but a sensitive Knowledge, which extends not beyond the Objects present to our Senses’. IV.xi.13–14 is particularly helpful here. In that passage Locke claims that

there are two sorts of *Propositions*. 1. There is one sort of Propositions concerning the *Existence* of any thing answerable to such an *Idea*: as having the *Idea* of an *Elephant*, *Phoenix*, *Motion*, or an *Angel*, in my Mind, the first and natural inquiry is, Whether such a thing does any where exist? And this Knowledge is only of *Particulars*. No existence of any thing without us, but only of God, can certainly be known farther than our Senses inform us. 2. There is another sort of *Propositions*, wherein is expressed the Agreement of our abstract *Ideas*, and their dependence one on another. Such Propositions may be *universal* and certain....In the former case, our Knowledge is the consequence of the Existence of Things producing *Ideas* in our Minds by our Senses: in the latter, Knowledge is the consequence of the *Ideas*...that are in our Minds producing there general certain propositions.

In this final section of IV.xi (a chapter entitled *Of Our Knowledge of the Existence of Other Things*), Locke repeats his distinction between knowledge of universal, general truths and knowledge of the existence of particulars and reasserts his claim that, aside from knowledge of the existence of God, the knowledge of the existence of any extra-mental particular can be known no ‘farther than our Senses inform us’—but it clearly reaches that far.

produced in us ‘takes not from the certainty of our Senses’, clearly intimating that the senses do provide certainty. The same section notes that the testimony of the senses is

so certain, that I can no more doubt, whilst I write this, that I see White and Black, and that something really exists, that causes that Sensation in me, than that I write or move my Hand; which is a Certainty as great, as humane Nature is capable of, concerning the Existence of any thing, but a Man’s self alone, and of GOD.

IV.xi.3 maintains that no one can be uncertain of the existence of those things which he sees and feels. IV.xi.8 claims that the certainty of things existing without the mind is as great as our condition needs and that the senses give us *certain* notice of those things which are convenient or inconvenient to us. IV.ii.14 asserts that sensory perception provides a certainty which is ‘as great as our happiness or Misery’. Not to belabor the point any further, Locke explicitly says (and, I think, believes) that sensory perception provides some sort of certainty.

§2. Professor Rickless’s Criticisms of my Account

In ‘Certainty and Sensitive Knowledge’ I was primarily concerned to ‘clarify Locke’s use of ‘certainty’ and his grounds for maintaining that some beliefs about the existence of extra-mental objects reach a degree of certainty that constitutes knowledge’ (2014: 161). Professor Rickless’s criticisms demonstrate that my position was not as clearly stated or as fully developed as it should have been and I appreciate the opportunity to clarify a few points that I made rather badly.

As is well known, Locke simply identifies knowledge and certainty. While this identification is implicit and operative throughout Book Four of the *Essay*, the most explicit and emphatic statement of it occurs in the published correspondence with Stillingfleet, where Locke claims ‘with me, to know and be certain, is the same thing; what I know, that I am certain of; and what I am certain of, that I know. What reaches to knowledge, I think may be called certainty; and what comes short of certainty, I think cannot

be called knowledge'.⁶ The position is complicated, however, by the fact that Locke claims that there are three 'degrees' of certainty and knowledge: intuitive, demonstrative and sensitive. Furthermore, sensitive knowledge is said to 'fall short' of the certainty of intuitive or demonstrative knowledge. These claims continue to perplex Locke scholars. How can certainty admit of degrees? And, if it cannot, how can Locke, having identified knowledge with certainty, claim that sensitive 'knowledge' falls short of the certainty of intuitive or demonstrative but, nonetheless, qualifies as knowledge?

I began by noting that talk of degrees of certainty is common throughout the seventeenth century. Given the prevalence of the idiom, it is unlikely that Locke is being confused, sloppy, or incoherent in talking of degrees of certainty. It is reasonable to suppose that he takes himself to be using the idiom in a sense widely shared by his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. In particular, I suggested that he is using it in a sense akin to Glanville, who draws a distinction between absolute certainty which is something like the absolute, hyperbolic, or metaphysical certainty for which Descartes was searching and a more modest sense of certainty as 'a firm assent to anything, of which there is no reason to doubt' which Glanville calls *indubitable certainty* (2014: 161). I suggested that Locke's use of 'certainty' seems to accord best with Glanville's indubitable or modest certainty. This helps explain his insistence that we can know of the existence of sensible objects via sensation in spite of the extravagant, albeit logically coherent, doubts of the external world skeptic.

Professor Rickless dismisses this consideration in a footnote, suggesting that 'the most important piece of evidence concerning what Locke himself accepts is what Locke himself says' (R: 101, n.2). I certainly agree that the best evidence for what Locke accepts is what Locke says. Having said that, Locke repeatedly and explicitly *says* that there are degrees of certainty and knowledge and nowhere suggests that this idiom is not to be taken seriously.

⁶ John Locke, *The Works of John Locke* (10 vols., Scientia Verlag Aalen, London, 1963), iv, 145, and see also 273, where Locke states 'I use certainty for knowledge'.

So there is ample evidence that Locke ‘accepts’ that there are degrees of certainty and knowledge. Given that, I am willing to extend him the courtesy of supposing that he means what he says and trying to make sense of it. Now, since he nowhere suggests that this troubling expression is novel with him and nowhere goes to any lengths to explicate it, it seems reasonable to suppose that he does not think that it would be problematic for his contemporaries. Consequently, looking at the ways his immediate predecessors and contemporaries talk about certainty may shed some light on his usage of the term. At the very least, if it turns out that other seventeenth century thinkers use the term in a sense which countenances talk of degrees of certainty, there is little reason to think that he is not using it advisedly.

Interestingly enough, a recent perusal of the Oxford English Dictionary reinforces my earlier suggestion that seventeenth century thinkers tend to think of certainty as being scalar, not binary. That dictionary lists an archaic use of the term as ‘definite, exact, precise’ and lists as an illustration a 1676 statement from Andrew Marvell: ‘The answer is now much shorter and certainer’. So, writing in 1676, Marvell speaks of an answer being certainer, more certain. The *OED* also lists as a standard usage, ‘sure, unerring, not liable to fail; to be depended upon, wholly trustworthy or reliable’ and illustrates this use with a 1650 passage from Robert Stapylton: ‘I have no more, nor no certainer Intelligence then [sic] others’, implying that some intelligence can be more certain than others. Also listed as a standard use is ‘Established as a truth or fact to be absolutely received, depended or relied upon; not to be doubted, disputed, or called in question; indubitable, sure’. As an example of this usage, that dictionary cites a passage from Locke at IV.xviii.4: ‘Whatsoever Truth we come to the discovery of, from the...Contemplation of our own clear Ideas, will always be certainer to us, than those which are conveyed to us by Traditional Revelation’.⁷

The evidence of the *OED*, taken in conjunction with my earlier observation that Bacon, Glanville and others of the period

⁷ All the examples in this paragraph are taken from the online *OED* (www.oed.com).

routinely talk as if certainty admits of degrees, should, at the very least, make us think that Locke just might have some point in mind in talking about degrees of certainty. We certainly cannot simply dismiss his idiom on the grounds that certainty does not admit of degrees. Whether it does or not, many seventeenth century thinkers clearly thought that it did. I think that it is only fair to Locke to think of him as a brilliant seventeenth century thinker and not as bumbling twenty-first century analytic epistemologist.

Anticipating something to which I will return below, I also noted that certainty for Locke primarily is a property of mental states—it is a way of apprehending a proposition. Given that most of us today think of certainty primarily as a property of propositions, this should have been emphasized more. For Locke, the mental state of being certain seems to be something like the apprehension of the truth of a proposition where that proposition is so well founded that there can be no reasonable grounds for doubting it. Slipping into a colloquial mode of expression, I glossed this as ‘A well founded belief for which there are no reasonable grounds for doubt may be said to be certain’ (2014: 165). While it was not explicitly mentioned, on Locke’s view, there would be reasonable grounds for doubting any proposition that was not well founded. It also should have been emphasized that Locke places extremely stringent conditions upon how well founded the truth of a proposition must be in order for one to be certain of it in this sense. Intuition, which ‘leaves no room for Hesitation, Doubt, or Examination’ provides such grounds. Demonstration also is capable of generating such apprehension. Also, what was the primary focus of that paper, veridical perceptual experience can provide certainty, in the above sense, about the existence of particular things. That is to say, sensory experience can provide an indubitable apprehension of a truth, a truth which is so well grounded that there can be no reasonable grounds for doubt. In a couple of places, I glossed this by saying that for Locke ‘one is certain of a proposition when there are no reasonable grounds for doubt and one firmly assents to it’ (2014: 175).

Professor Rickless objects strenuously to my assertion that, for

Locke, ‘one is certain of the truth of a proposition when there are no grounds for doubt and one firmly assents to it’ on the grounds that, on Locke’s view, assent is a mental state that falls short of knowledge. In support of this Professor Rickless cites IV.xv.3, where Locke draws a distinction between knowledge and ‘*Belief, Assent, or Opinion*, which is the admitting or receiving any Proposition for true, upon Arguments or Proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain Knowledge that it is so’. Obviously, if assent is a mental state that falls short of knowledge and certainty, it would be ludicrous to explicate either in terms of assent. As Professor Rickless puts it, ‘Anyone who distinguishes between knowledge and assent as Locke does cannot consistently hold *both* (a) that certainty is knowledge *and* (b) that certainty is a kind of assent (namely, firm assent in the absence of reasonable grounds for doubt)’ (R: 104).

I certainly am guilty of a verbal slip here, of a poor, non-considered use of ‘assent’. I simply did not have the sentence from IV.xv.3 in the forefront of my mind in writing that passage and do regret any confusion or misunderstanding that may have ensued. My transgression here might be somewhat mitigated by the fact that Locke, himself, tends to ignore this passage and routinely talks of our assent to propositions we know. Thus, in discussing habitual knowledge he maintains that

A Man is said to know any Proposition, which having been once laid before his Thoughts, he evidently perceived the Agreement, or Disagreement of the *Ideas* wherof it consists; and so lodg’d in his Memory, that whenever that Proposition comes again to be reflected on, he, without doubt or hesitation, embraces the right side, assents to, and is certain of the truth of it.

IV.ii.4, discussing demonstrative knowledge, states that ‘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’, clearly indicting that “while it may not be so ready”, assent does ensue. Speaking of self-evident propositions, IV.vii.2 maintains that where the

agreement or disagreement is perceived immediately by it self, without the intervention or help of any other, there our *Knowledge is self-evident*. This will appear to be so to any one, who will but consider any of those Propositions, which, without any proof, he assents to at first sight: for in all of them he will find, that the reason of his Assent, is from that agreement or disagreement, which the Mind, by an immediate comparing them, finds in those *Ideas* answering the Affirmation or Negation in the Proposition.

A few more passages randomly plucked out of the *Essay* are IV.vii.4, IV.vii.6 (which talks of self-evidence ‘forcing’ assent), IV.vii.9, IV.vii.10, and the extended discussion in Book One about assent upon first hearing being a mark of innate ideas. So Locke thinks that we do assent to or ‘embrace’ propositions which are certain; speaking colloquially, he routinely neglects the narrow, technical, use of ‘assent’ articulated in IV.xv.3 and talks of our assenting to propositions which are apprehended to be beyond doubt. I unguardedly fell into the same colloquial use of ‘assent’.

I, however, do not wish to make too much of the fact that Locke frequently speaks of assenting to propositions which are certain and I cheerfully will give up the formulation in terms of assent. It will avoid confusion and misunderstanding simply to say that, for Locke, certainty consists in apprehending the truth of a proposition where the truth is so well founded that there can be no reasonable grounds for doubting it. That was the point I was making in saying that certainty or knowledge consisted in assenting to propositions which were so well founded that doubt was impossible. The important question is: can Locke consistently maintain that the truth of propositions such as ‘There is a book on the table in front of me’ can be so well founded as to be indubitable? Resolving that question was the primary focus of my earlier paper and Professor Rickless’s objections to my ill-advised use of ‘assent’ do not undermine my affirmative response to that question.⁸

Professor Rickless raises a more substantive point in his objection that certainty is binary and not scalar. For many of us

⁸ I believe that a sympathetic reader will be able to reformulate all those offending sentences employing ‘assent’ in terms of ‘apprehending the truth of a proposition which is well founded and where there are no reasonable grounds of doubt’.

today who think of certainty as primarily a property of propositions this borders on being axiomatic. The notion of certainty, however, was much looser in the seventeenth century and I noted that thinkers in that era were ‘working in a tradition that cheerfully countenances talk of degrees of certainty’ (2014: 161). So we cannot simply stipulate that Locke thinks of certainty as purely binary and not scalar. Whether he does or not can be determined only by a careful examination of the text. And the text certainly supports the interpretation that, like Bacon, he allows for scales of certainty. As some passages already quoted clearly demonstrate, he believes that one can be certain of propositions like ‘There is a book on the table in front of me’ while maintaining that such knowledge does not reach perfectly to the ‘degrees of certainty’ achieved by intuition or demonstration (*E*, IV.ii.14).

There are three points to be emphasized here. First, if, as Locke says, sensitive knowledge is both certain and yet falls short of the degrees of certainty attained by intuition or demonstration, there must be a scale of certainty. Second, notice that Locke talks of the degrees (plural) of certainty attained by intuition and demonstration, not the degree (singular) of certainty attained by intuition and demonstration—implying that intuition and demonstration produce different degrees of certainty. That demonstration provides a different degree of certainty than intuition is explicitly stated in IV.ii.2, which initiates the discussion of demonstration by labeling it the ‘next degree of Knowledge’. This is reinforced by a couple of statements in IV.ii.14: (1) there is the claim that intuition and demonstration ‘are the degrees of our Knowledge...at least in all general Truths’, intimating that intuition and demonstration are different degrees of knowledge,⁹ and (2) there is the statement that the perception of the existence of finite beings without us ‘not reaching perfectly to *either* of the foregoing degrees of certainty, passes under the name of Knowledge’ which also clearly indicates that intuition and demonstration have different degrees of certainty (my emphasis).¹⁰

⁹ *Essay*, IV.ii.14: 536, line 37–537, line 2.

¹⁰ *Essay*, IV.ii.14: 537, line 5.

Third, IV.ii.14 concludes by asserting that there are *three* degrees (plural) of knowledge ‘in each of which, there are different degrees and ways of Evidence and Certainty’, once again, indicating degrees (plural) of evidence and certainty.¹¹ This should more than suffice to establish that it is Locke’s considered opinion that there are degrees of certainty and knowledge and that should suffice to refute Professor Rickless’s contention that certainty cannot be scalar for Locke.

Nevertheless, to continue with a few more passages: IV.xvii.13 claims that intuitive knowledge is ‘the highest of all Humane Certainty’, once again alluding to levels or degrees of certainty. IV.ii.1 claims that intuitive knowledge is the ‘most certain’, implying that there is knowledge which is less certain. IV.x.1 asserts that intuitive knowledge reaches ‘the highest level of certainty’, once again implying that there are levels of certainty. IV.xi.3 admits that while our knowledge of the existence things existing without us is ‘not altogether so certain, as our intuitive Knowledge, or the Deductions of our Reason’, no-one can ‘be uncertain of the Existence of those Things which he sees and feels’. In its allusions to degrees (plural) of certainty and some propositions being more or less certain than others, the text clearly supports the view that Locke thinks of certainty as scalar. Should we extend him the courtesy of assuming that he means what he explicitly and repeatedly asserts and try to understand it?

Actually, talk of levels of certainty might not sound quite so bizarre to us when we remember that Locke’s project is to give an account of the mental state (he calls it a mental act) of knowing or being certain. He believes that knowing or being certain is a mental act (event or state) *sui generis*, differing in important ways from other mental acts. Once again, while this is operative throughout Book Four of the *Essay*, the most explicit statement occurs in the following passage from the Stillingfleet correspondence:

There are several actions of men’s minds that they are conscious to themselves of performing, as willing, believing knowing, &c. which they

¹¹ *Essay*, IV.ii.14: lines 2–5.

have so particular a sense of, that they can distinguish them one from another; or else they could not say when they willed, when they believed, and when they knew anything. But though these actions were different enough one from another not to be confounded by those who spoke of them; yet nobody, that I had met with, had, in their writings, particularly set down wherein the act of knowing precisely consisted.

To this reflection upon the actions of my own mind, the subject of my Essay concerning Human Understanding naturally led me, wherein, if I have done anything new, it has been to describe to others more particularly than had been done before, what it is their minds do, when they perform that action which they call knowing¹²

Here Locke explicitly states that his novel contribution is to describe what the mind does when it performs the act of knowing or being certain.

Certainty, according to this view, is primarily a property of mental acts and only derivatively a property of propositions; propositions of which we are certain are said to be certain. I alluded to this in stating that ‘certainty is primarily a psychological or mental state. It is primarily a property of specific acts of affirmation, a way of embracing a propositional content. Propositional contents are certain only in a derivative sense; they are the contents to which one firmly assents’ (2014: 172). Ignoring my unguarded use of ‘assent’ here, the important point is that knowing or being certain just is apprehending a propositional content in a particular way. While this way of thinking of certainty and knowledge may be quite foreign to us, there can be little doubt that it is Locke’s position. And for someone who thinks of knowledge as a mental act *sui generis*, it may make sense to talk about there being different degrees of the apprehension of the truth of a proposition. Apprehension may be scalar in that there is a range of apprehension where any degree of apprehension within that range counts as being certain. Such a reading would allow us to reconcile Locke’s claims that (i) knowing or being certain of the truth of a proposition is a matter of apprehending the truth of a proposition in a particular way and (ii) there are degrees of

¹² Op.cit., 143–44.

certainty and knowledge.

While this is a possible interpretation that renders the text consistent and one that was operative in ‘Certainty and Sensitive Knowledge’, I do not propose to defend it here, although I do believe that it encapsulates part of Locke’s thinking about knowledge and certainty. I am happy to forego that defense because there is a second, more important, aspect of Locke’s account of the degrees of certainty and knowledge which is more than sufficient for my present purposes. I discussed this aspect in some detail in ‘Certainty and Sensitive Knowledge’ (2014: 172–75). Given the ready availability of that discussion, what follows is merely a brief recapitulation.

For Locke, different degrees of knowledge and certainty are functions or measures of different ways of perception and different ways of perception have different degrees of evidence (2014: 172). The point is that a degree of knowledge is a function (perhaps a measure or criterion) of the degree of reliability (or defeasibility) of the type of mental act which generated the apprehension of the truth of the proposition. This is the point I was attempting to make in the passage which runs from page 172–76. Intuition, being infallible, is the most reliable type of mental event (act) producing certainty; it is *perfectly* reliable and its apprehensions are immune from any possibility of doubt. Consequently, intuitive knowledge is the highest degree of knowledge.

Demonstration, on the other hand, is not infallible and I reviewed several of the ways in which Locke believes demonstration can go awry. Because the mental activity of demonstrating a truth, as a practice, is not infallible and reasonable doubts about the conclusion of a particular demonstration can arise, as a method of acquiring knowledge, demonstration is not as reliable as intuition, hence demonstrative knowledge is said to be the second degree of knowledge. As Locke puts it, demonstration ‘is more imperfect than intuitive Knowledge, and men embrace often Falsehoods for Demonstrations’ (*E*, IV.ii.7). There are even more ways for perceptual experience to go wrong and, as a way of acquiring knowledge, perceptual experience is less reliable (more imperfect) than either intuition or demonstration; consequently,

sensory knowledge is said to be a lower degree of knowledge than either. Nevertheless, and the crucial point, to say that the practice of demonstration is less reliable (certain) than intuition and that, because of that, the class of demonstrative knowledge is a 'lower' degree of knowledge than is intuitive, is not necessarily to say that some particular truth arrived at via demonstration is less certain than one acquired via intuition. As I emphasized, 'as a means of acquiring truth deduction is said to be 'less certain' than intuition, from which it does not follow that particular beliefs acquired via deduction may not be held with certainty' (2014: 174). By the same token, to say that sensory experience is less reliable than intuition and demonstration and, hence, as a class of knowledge, sensory knowledge is 'lower' than intuitive or demonstrative is not necessarily to say that a particular truth acquired via sensory experience is less certain than one acquired via intuition or deduction (2014: 175).

On a view such as this, it is broad types of knowledge, not particular knowledge claims, to which degrees of knowledge are primarily attributed. Because of the shortcomings of demonstration, demonstrative knowledge, in general, is said to possess a lesser degree of certainty than is intuitive and, because of the even more pervasive shortcomings of sensation, sensitive knowledge, in general, is said to possess a lesser degree of certainty than either, where 'degree of certainty' is an indicator of the reliability of the method and the method's susceptibility to reasonable doubt. It might be compatible with this to say that a particular truth acquired via perceptual experience is as certain as one acquired via demonstration even though it belongs to a class of truths acquired by a less certain method. While acts of being certain might not be scalar, the methods of attaining certainty are. An interpretation along these lines would allow us to make good sense of Locke's talk about degrees of knowledge and certainty without attributing to him the belief that acts of being certain can be scalar.

For the record, however, I am inclined to believe that Locke subscribes to both theses: (1) there are different types / levels / degrees of knowledge, differentiated by the reliability or

defeasibility of the type of mental act involved and (2) some acts of being certain literally are more or less certain than other acts of being certain. But, as noted above, I do not need that strong thesis for the purposes of ‘Certainty and Sensitive Knowledge’. The primary objective there was to argue that there is no tension between Locke’s identification of knowledge with certainty and his claims to have knowledge of the existence of finite things existing ‘without the mind’.

For that purpose all one needs are the following: (1) Locke dismisses external world skepticism as incoherent and impossible to maintain; (2) he believes that what he calls sensory experience is a cognitively basic epistemic ‘act’ capable of generating certainty; (3) he repeatedly and explicitly states that we can be certain of those things which we see and feel; (4) he draws a distinction between the knowledge of general truths acquired via intuition or demonstration and the knowledge of the existence of finite external objects acquired via perceptual experience. None of Professor Rickless’s objections address themselves to these claims.

§3. Degrees of Clarity

Interestingly enough, Professor Rickless concludes his paper by suggesting that ‘there is indeed a scalar property that differentiates between intuitive and demonstrative knowledge...clarity (or, as Locke sometimes calls it, brightness or lustre)’ (R: 107). According to this interpretation, ‘though intuitive knowledge and demonstrative knowledge are *equally* certain, they differ with respect to the scalar property of clarity (brightness, lustre)’ (R: 107). In speculating as to what Locke might mean by the clarity of knowledge or certainty, Professor Rickless suggests that ‘it is probably similar in some respects to what he characterizes as the clarity that belongs to ideas’ (R: 107) and quotes a passage from II.xxix.2 where Locke characterizes obscure ideas as those which have become faded or tarnished by time and concludes that ‘Locke is thinking that the perception of the agreement or disagreement between two ideas becomes faded or dim when it is the result of combining a large number of immediate perceptions of ideational

agreement or disagreement in a long proof' (R: 107–8). It is important to realize that it is the perceptions—the acts of being certain of the truth of a proposition—which are being said to vary in degrees of clarity or obscurity. Although Professor Rickless does not cite the passage, Locke himself emphasizes this fact, insisting that 'our Knowledge consisting in the perception of the Agreement, or Disagreement of any two *Ideas*, its clearness or obscurity, consists in the clearness or obscurity of that Perception, and not in the clearness or obscurity of the *Ideas* themselves' (E, IV.ii.15).

This reading, however, is problematic. First, Locke explicitly and repeatedly *says* that there are degrees of certainty and, while he may also believe that there are degrees of clarity, one cannot simply ignore what he repeatedly and explicitly says. One might be able to accommodate this by arguing, as I suggest below, that degree of clarity is part of what constitutes the degree of certainty. Second, it neglects Locke's claim that there are three degrees of knowledge or certainty, not just two. There should be ample quotes above to convince the reader that Locke repeatedly says that some perceptions of the existence of sensible objects constitute certainty or knowledge. That fact, however, could be accommodated with a simple revision in Professor Rickless's position. One could say that the intuitive act of being certain is the clearest, certainty achieved via demonstration is less clear than intuitive certainty, and certainty achieved via perceptual experience is even less clear than that achieved via demonstration. Third, if Professor Rickless's interpretation were correct, since demonstrative knowledge *per se* is a separate degree of knowledge, if the degree of knowledge were simply a function of the degree of clarity of the act of perception, all acts of being certain of the conclusion of a demonstrative argument would have to be less clear than the acts of being certain of a proposition intuitively perceived to be true. But this is not what Locke maintains. In the passage from IV.ii.6 upon which Professor Rickless relies, Locke says that the perception produced by demonstration 'is *often* with a great abatement of that evident lustre and full assurance' that always

accompanies intuition.¹³ To say that a perception achieved by demonstration is often less clear than one achieved via intuition is not to say that all are. The passage certainly does not support the thesis that the difference in degree between intuitive and demonstrative knowledge is one of clarity.

There is, however, for Professor Rickless, a much more substantive problem. On this reading, there are different degrees of clarity in perceptual acts of being certain, i.e. one act of being certain can be more or less clear than another act of being certain. It needs to be emphasized here that it is not the content of which one is certain that varies on a scale of clarity. It is acts of being certain which can vary on a scale of clarity. As IV.ii.15 insists, the clearness or obscurity of knowledge (and, hence, certainty) ‘consists in the clearness or obscurity of the Perception, and not in the clearness or obscurity of the *Ideas* themselves’. I have no idea what this talk of one act of being certain being more or less clear than another act of being certain could mean other than that one act of being certain can more clearly be an act of being certain than another or that one act of being certain is more clearly perceived to be certain than another act of being certain. Either way, there is a scale of clarity among acts of being certain. If so, then acts of being certain do admit of degrees, i.e. acts of being certain are scalar. One act of being certain can more clearly be certain than another act of being certain.

This seems to be difficult to reconcile with Professor Rickless’s claim that certainty is binary and not scalar. I, however, actually do not have any problems with it. I think that it is part of what Locke means by degrees of certainty and easily fits with my suggestion that intuition is a more reliable means of acquiring certainty than

¹³ Incidentally, it will be remembered, Professor Rickless argues that, for Locke, assurance is a mental state that falls short of knowledge and that, in routinely speaking of our assurance of the existence of things without us, Locke is indicating that such assurance does not really constitute knowledge although, for practical purposes, we can let it “pass under” the name of knowledge. As I mentioned in my earlier paper, Professor Rockwood has done a thorough job of defusing these semantic arguments in an article published in this journal, ‘Is Sensitive Knowledge Knowledge?’ (2013: 15–31). Nevertheless, in passing, note that Locke does talk about our full assurance of those things we intuitively perceive to be true.

demonstration which, in turn, is more reliable than sensation.¹⁴

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¹⁴ I am indebted to Deborah Hansen Soles for comments and suggestions. I also am grateful to the editor of *Locke Studies* for the invitation to reply to Professor Rickless's criticisms.