

## “Locke on Knowledge, Propositions, and Particles”

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### Abstract

Locke defines knowledge as “the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our *Ideas*” (IV.i.2). Those agreements come in four categories: identity, necessary co-existence in the same substance, relation in general, and real existence (IV.i.3). When he speaks of knowing the identity of our ideas, Locke is not referring to knowing the identity of two tokens of an idea type: those are trivial, or “trifling” propositions. Rather, to know the identity of an idea is to know something substantive and foundational; it is to know an individual idea. But therein an apparent problem arises, for significant textual evidence suggests Locke is committed to three claims: 1. We have knowledge of individual ideas; 2. All knowledge is propositional; and 3. Signification proceeds by semantic assent – anything in the mind is first signified by an idea and then by a word. But how can the three claims be consistent? It seems that either knowing an individual idea is not propositional, that is, we have only that single idea in the mind, or Locke is wrong to say that we can know an *individual* idea, or the theory of “semantic assent” must allow for components of some propositions (i.e., at least those we know when we know an individual idea) not to be signified by ideas. Making sense of Locke’s view seems to require one of these exceptions. One possible solution is that Locke allows something like a distinction between knowledge by acquaintance (to account for knowing an individual idea) and propositional knowledge. Unfortunately, the text seems to render that option unavailable. But all is not lost, for I will make a case that Locke, following the Port Royal logic, has a restricted understanding of semantic assent: some mental content, when signified in language, skips the idea rung of the semantic ladder, which means that some mental propositions have non-ideational constituents. Therefore, we can have propositional knowledge of individual ideas within Locke’s theory of semantic assent.