

**John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)<sup>1</sup>**

Book I. Of Innate Notions. Chapter I. *Introduction.*

1. *An inquiry into the understanding, pleasant and useful.* Since it is the *understanding* that sets man above the rest of sensible beings and gives him all the advantage and dominion he has over them, it is certainly a subject, even for its nobleness, worth our labor to inquire into. The understanding, like the eye, while it makes us see and perceive all other things, takes no notice of itself, and it requires art and pains to set it at a distance and make it its own object. But, whatever are the difficulties that lie in the way of this inquiry, whatever it is that keeps us so much in the dark to ourselves, I am sure that all the light we can let in upon our minds, all the acquaintance we can make with our own understandings, will not only be very pleasant, but bring us great advantage in directing our thoughts in the search of other things.

2. *Design.* This, therefore, being my *purpose*—to inquire into the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent—I shall not at present meddle with the physical consideration of the mind, or trouble myself to examine in what its essence consists, or by what motions of our spirits or alterations of our bodies we come to have any sensation by our organs, or any *ideas* in our understandings, and whether those *ideas* do in their formation, any or all of them, depend on matter or not. These are speculations which, however curious and entertaining, I shall decline, as lying out of my way in the design I am now upon. It shall suffice to my present purpose to consider the discerning faculties of a man as they are employed about the objects which they have to do with. And I shall imagine I have not wholly misemployed myself in the thoughts I shall have on this occasion, if in this historical, plain method, I can give any account of the ways by which our understandings come to attain those notions of things we have, and can set down any measures of the certainty of our knowledge, or the grounds of those persuasions which are to be found among men—so

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<sup>1</sup>[From *Works* (London, 1823), 10 vols., English, modified.]

various, different, and wholly contradictory—and yet asserted somewhere or other with such assurance and confidence that he who shall take a view of the opinions of mankind, observe their opposition, and at the same time consider the fondness and devotion with which they are embraced, the resolution and eagerness with which they are maintained, may perhaps have reason to suspect that either there is no such thing as truth at all, or that mankind has no sufficient means to attain a certain knowledge of it.

3. *Method.* It is therefore worthwhile to search out the *bounds* between opinion and knowledge and examine by what measures, in things of which we have no certain knowledge, we ought to regulate our assent and moderate our persuasions. Toward that end I shall pursue this following method:

*First*, I shall inquire into the *origin* of those *ideas*, notions, or whatever else you please to call them, which a man observes and is conscious to himself he has in his mind, and the ways by which the understanding comes to be furnished with them.

*Secondly*, I shall endeavor to show what *knowledge* the understanding has by those *ideas*, and the certainty, evidence, and extent of it.

*Thirdly*, I shall make some inquiry into the nature and grounds of *faith* or *opinion*, by which I mean that assent which we give to any proposition as true, of whose truth yet we have no certain knowledge; and here we shall have occasion to examine the reasons and degrees of *assent*.

4. *Useful to know the extent of our comprehension.* If by this inquiry into the nature of the understanding, I can discover the powers thereof, *how far* they reach, to what things they are in any degree proportionate, and where they fail us, I suppose it may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension, to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether, and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities. We should not then perhaps be so eager, out of an affectation of a universal knowledge, to raise questions and perplex ourselves and others with disputes about things to which our understandings are not

suiting, and of which we cannot frame in our minds any clear or distinct perceptions, or about which (as it has perhaps too often happened) we do not have any notions at all. If we can find out how far the understanding can extend its view, how far it has faculties to attain certainty, and in what cases it can only judge and guess, we may learn to content ourselves with what is attainable by us in this state. [. . .]

6. *Knowing the extent of our capacities will hinder us from useless curiosity, skepticism, and idleness.* When we know our own *strength*, we shall know better what to undertake with hopes of success. And when we have well surveyed the *powers* of our own minds and made some estimate what we may expect from them, we shall not be inclined either to sit still, and not set our thoughts on work at all in despair of knowing anything nor, on the other side, question everything and disclaim all knowledge, because some things are not to be understood. It is of great use to the sailor to know the length of his line, though he cannot fathom all the depths of the ocean with it. It is well he knows that it is long enough to reach the bottom at such places as are necessary to direct his voyage and caution him against running upon shoals that may ruin him. Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct. If we can find out those measures by which a rational creature, put in that state in which man is in this world, may and ought to govern his opinions and actions depending thereon, we need not be troubled that some other things escape our knowledge.

7. *Occasion of this essay.* This was that which gave the first rise to this essay concerning the understanding. For I thought that the first step towards satisfying several inquiries, the mind of man was very apt to run into, was to take a survey of our own understandings, examine our own powers, and see to what things they were adapted. Until that was done, I suspected we began at the wrong end, and in vain sought for satisfaction in a quiet and sure possession of truths that most concerned us, while we let loose our thoughts into the vast ocean of *being*, as if all that boundless extent were the natural and undoubted possession of our understandings in which there was nothing exempt from its decisions or that escaped its comprehension. Thus men extending their inquiries beyond their capacities and letting their thoughts wander into those

depths where they can find no sure footing, it is no wonder that they raise questions and multiply disputes, which, never coming to any clear resolution, are proper only to continue and increase their doubts and to confirm them at last in perfect skepticism; whereas, were the capacities of our understandings well considered, the extent of our knowledge once discovered, and the horizon found, which sets the bounds between the enlightened and dark parts of things, between what is, and what is not comprehensible by us, men would perhaps with less scruple acquiesce in the avowed ignorance of the one and employ their thoughts and discourse with more advantage and satisfaction in the other.

8. *What idea stands for.* This much I thought necessary to say concerning the occasion of this inquiry into human understanding. But, before I proceed on to what I have thought on this subject, I must here in the entrance beg pardon of my reader for the frequent use of the word *idea*, which he will find in the following treatise. It being that term, which, I think, serves best to stand for whatever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by *phantasm*, *notion*, *species*, or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking; and I could not avoid frequently using it.

I presume it will be easily granted me that there are such *ideas* in men's minds; everyone is conscious of them in himself, and men's words and actions will satisfy him that they are in others.

Our first inquiry then shall be how they come into the mind.

## Chapter II. *No Innate Principles in The Mind, and Particularly No Innate Speculative Principles.*

1. *The way shown how we come by any knowledge, sufficient to prove it not innate.* It is an established opinion among some men that there are in the understanding certain *innate principles*; some primary notions [*koinai ennoiai*], characters, as it were, stamped upon the mind of man, which the soul receives in its very first being and brings into the world with it. It would be sufficient to convince unprejudiced readers of the falseness of this supposition, if I should

only show (as I hope I shall in the following parts of this discourse) how men, barely by the use of their natural faculties, may attain to all the knowledge they have, without the help of any innate impressions, and may arrive at certainty without any such original notions or principles. For I imagine anyone will easily grant that it would be impertinent to suppose the *ideas* of colors innate in a creature to whom God has given sight and a power to receive them by the eyes from external objects; and no less unreasonable would it be to attribute several truths to the impressions of nature and innate characters, when we may observe in ourselves faculties fit to attain as easy and certain knowledge of them as if they were originally imprinted on the mind.

But because a man is not permitted without censure to follow his own thoughts in the search of truth when they lead him ever so little out of the common road, I shall set down the reasons that made me doubt of the truth of that opinion, as an excuse for my mistake, if I am in one, which I leave to be considered by those who, with me, dispose themselves to embrace truth wherever they find it.

2. *General assent the great argument.* There is nothing more commonly taken for granted than that there are certain principles, both *speculative* and *practical* (for they speak of both), universally agreed upon by all mankind, which, therefore, they argue, must necessarily be the constant impressions which the souls of men receive in their first beings, and which they bring into the world with them, as necessarily and really as they do any of their inherent faculties.

3. *Universal consent proves nothing innate.* This argument, drawn from *universal consent*, has this misfortune in it that, if it were true in matter of fact that there were certain truths in which all mankind agreed, it would not prove them innate, if there can be any other way shown how men may come to that universal agreement in the things they do consent in, which I presume may be done.

4. What is, is, *and*, it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be, *not universally assented to*. But, which is worse, this argument of universal consent, which is made use of to prove innate principles, seems to me a demonstration that there are none such, because there are none to which all mankind give a universal assent. I shall begin with the speculative, and

instance in those magnified principles of demonstration, “Whatever is, is,” and “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be,” which, of all others, I think have the most allowed title to innate. These have so settled a reputation of maxims universally received that it will no doubt be thought strange if any one should seem to question it. But yet I take liberty to say that these propositions are so far from having a universal assent that there is a great part of mankind to whom they are not so much as known.

5. *Not on the mind naturally imprinted, because not known to children, idiots, etc.* For, first, it is evident that all *children* and *idiots* do not have the least apprehension or thought of them. And the lack of that is enough to destroy that universal assent which must be the necessary concomitant of all innate truths, it seeming to me near a contradiction to say that there are truths imprinted on the soul which it does not perceive or understand—imprinting, if it signifies anything, being nothing else but the making certain truths to be perceived. For to imprint anything on the mind without the mind’s perceiving it seems to me hardly intelligible. If therefore children and *idiots* have souls, have minds, with those impressions upon them, they must unavoidably perceive them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths. Since they do not, it is evident that there are no such impressions. For if they are not notions naturally imprinted, how can they be innate? And if they are notions imprinted, how can they be unknown? To say a notion is imprinted on the mind, and yet at the same time to say that the mind is ignorant of it and never yet took notice of it, is to make this impression nothing. No proposition can be said to be in the mind which it never yet knew, which it was never yet conscious of. For if any one may, then, by the same reason, all propositions that are true, and the mind is capable ever of assenting to, may be said to be in the mind and to be imprinted; since, if any one can be said to be in the mind, which it never yet knew, it must be only because it is capable of knowing it; and so the mind is [capable] of all truths it ever shall know. No, thus truths may be imprinted on the mind which it never did, nor ever shall know; for a man may live long, and die at last in ignorance of many truths which his mind was capable of knowing, and that with certainty. So that if the capacity of knowing is the natural impression contended for, all

the truths a man ever comes to know will, by this account, be every one of them innate; and this great point will amount to no more, but only to a very improper way of speaking, which, while it pretends to assert the contrary, says nothing different from those who deny innate principles. For nobody, I think, ever denied that the mind was capable of knowing several truths. The capacity, they say, is innate, the knowledge acquired. But then to what end such contest for certain innate maxims? If truths can be imprinted on the understanding without being perceived, I can see no difference there can be between any truths the mind is capable of knowing in respect of their original. They must all be innate or all adventitious; in vain shall a man go about to distinguish them. He therefore who talks of innate notions in the understanding cannot (if he intends by this any distinct sort of truths) mean such truths to be in the understanding, as it never perceived, and is yet wholly ignorant of. For if these words (*to be in the understanding*) have any propriety, they signify to be understood, so that to be in the understanding and not to be understood, to be in the mind and never to be perceived, is all one, as to say anything is and is not in the mind or understanding. If therefore these two propositions, “Whatever is, is” and “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be,” are by nature imprinted, children cannot be ignorant of them; infants, and all that have souls, must necessarily have them in their understandings, know the truth of them, and assent to it.

6. *That men know them when they come to the use of reason answered.* To avoid this, it is usually answered that all men know and assent to them, *when they come to the use of reason*, and this is enough to prove them innate. I answer,

7. Doubtful expressions, that have scarcely any signification, go for clear reasons to those who, being prepossessed, do not take the pains to examine even what they themselves say. For to apply this answer with any tolerable sense to our present purpose, it must signify one of these two things: either that as soon as men come to the use of reason these supposed native inscriptions come to be known and observed by them; or else, that the use and exercise of men’s reason assists them in the discovery of these principles, and certainly makes them known to them.

8. *If reason discovered them, that would not prove them innate.* If they mean that by the use of reason men may discover these principles, and that this is sufficient to prove them innate, their way of arguing will stand thus, namely that, whatever truths reason can certainly discover to us and make us firmly assent to, those are all naturally imprinted on the mind; since that universal assent, which is made the mark of them, amounts to no more but this—that by the use of reason we are capable to come to a certain knowledge of and assent to them, and, by this means, there will be no difference between the maxims of the mathematicians and theorems they deduce from them—all must be equally allowed innate, they being all discoveries made by the use of reason and truths that a rational creature may certainly come to know, if he applies his thoughts rightly that way.

9. *It is false that reason discovers them.* But how can these men think the *use of reason* necessary to discover principles that are supposed innate, when reason (if we may believe them) is nothing else but the faculty of deducing unknown truths from principles or propositions that are already known? That certainly can never be thought innate which we have need of reason to discover, unless, as I have said, we will have all the certain truths that reason ever teaches us to be innate. [. . .]

12. *The coming to the use of reason not the time we come to know these maxims.* If by knowing and assenting to them, *when we come to the use of reason*, is meant that this is the time when they come to be taken notice of by the mind, and that, as soon as children come to the use of reason they come also to know and assent to these maxims, this also is false and frivolous. *First*, it is false, because it is evident these maxims are not in the mind so early as the use of reason, and therefore the coming to the use of reason is falsely assigned as the time of their discovery. How many instances of the use of reason may we observe in children a long time before they have any knowledge of this maxim, “That it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be”? And a great part of illiterate people and savages pass many years, even of their rational age, without ever thinking on this and the like general propositions. I grant, men do not come to the knowledge of these general and more abstract truths, which are thought innate, until



they come to the use of reason; and I add, nor then neither. This is so because, until after they come to the use of reason, those general abstract *ideas* are not framed in the mind, about which those general maxims are, which are mistaken for innate principles, but are indeed discoveries made and verities introduced and brought into the mind by the same way, and discovered by the same steps, as several other propositions, which nobody was ever so extravagant as to suppose innate. [. . .]

14. *If coming to the use of reason were the time of their discovery, it would not prove them innate.* But, *secondly*, were it true that the precise time of their being known and assented to were when men come to the use of reason, neither would that prove them innate. This way of arguing is as frivolous as the supposition itself is false. For, by what kind of logic will it appear that any notion is originally by nature imprinted in the mind in its first constitution, because it comes first to be observed and assented to when a faculty of the mind, which has quite a distinct province, begins to exert itself? [. . .]

15. *The steps by which the mind attains several truths.* The senses at first let in particular *ideas*, and furnish the yet empty cabinet, and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them. Afterwards the mind proceeding further abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names. In this manner the mind comes to be furnished with *ideas* and language, the materials about which to exercise its discursive faculty. And the use of reason becomes daily more visible, as these materials that give it employment increase. But though the having of general *ideas* and the use of general words and reason usually grow together, yet I do not see how this any way proves them innate. The knowledge of some truths, I confess, is very early in the mind, but in a way that shows them not to be innate. For, if we will observe, we shall find it still to be about *ideas*, not innate, but acquired—it being about those first which are imprinted by external things, with which infants have earliest to do, which make the most frequent impressions on their senses. In *ideas* thus got, the mind discovers that some agree and others differ, probably as soon as it has any use of memory, as soon as it is able to retain and perceive distinct *ideas*. But whether it is then, or not, this is certain, it

does so long before it has the use of words, or comes to that which we commonly call “the use of reason.” For a child knows as certainly before it can speak the difference between the *ideas* of sweet and bitter (i.e., that sweet is not bitter), as it knows afterwards (when it comes to speak) that wormwood and sugarplums are not the same thing. [. . .]

17. *Assenting as soon as proposed and understood does not prove them innate.* This evasion therefore of general assent when men come to the use of reason, failing as it does, and leaving no difference between those supposed innate and other truths that are afterwards acquired and learned, men have endeavored to secure a universal assent to those they call maxims, by saying they are *generally assented to as soon as proposed*, and the terms they are proposed in understood; seeing all men, even children, as soon as they hear and understand the terms, assent to these propositions, they think it is sufficient to prove them innate. For, since men never fail, after they have once understood the words, to acknowledge them for undoubted truths, they would infer that certainly these propositions were first lodged in the understanding, which, without any teaching, the mind at the very first proposal immediately closes with and assents to, and after that never doubts again.

18. *If such an assent is a mark of innate, then that one and two are equal to three, that sweetness is not bitterness, and a thousand the like, must be innate.* In answer to this I demand “whether ready assent given to a proposition, *upon first hearing* and understanding the terms, is a certain mark of an innate principle?” If it is not, such a general assent is in vain urged as a proof of them; if it is said that it is a mark of innate, they must then allow all such propositions to be innate which are generally assented to as soon as heard, by which they will find themselves plentifully stored with innate principles. For, upon the same ground, namely, of assent at first hearing and understanding the terms, that men would have those maxims pass for innate, they must also admit several propositions about numbers to be innate; and thus, *that one and two are equal to three, that two and two are equal to four*, and a multitude of other like propositions in numbers that every body assents to at first hearing and understanding the terms, must have a place among these innate axioms. Nor is this the prerogative of numbers alone and propositions

made about several of them, but even natural philosophy and all the other sciences afford propositions which are sure to meet with assent as soon as they are understood. *That two bodies cannot be in the same place* is a truth that nobody any more sticks at than at these maxims, that “it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be,” that “white is not black,” that “a square is not a circle,” “that bitterness is not sweetness.” [ . . . ] But since no proposition can be innate unless the *ideas* about which it is are innate, this will be to suppose all our *ideas* of colors, sounds, tastes, figure, etc. innate, than which there cannot be anything more opposite to reason and experience. Universal and ready assent upon hearing and understanding the terms is (I grant) a mark of self-evidence; but self-evidence, depending not on innate impressions, but on something else (as we shall show afterward), belongs to several propositions which nobody was yet so extravagant as to pretend to be innate.

19. *Such less general propositions known before these universal maxims.* Nor let it be said that those more particular self-evident propositions which are assented to at first hearing as *that one and two are equal to three, that green is not red, etc.*, are received as the consequences of those more universal propositions which are looked on as innate principles, since anyone, who will but take the pains to observe what passes in the understanding will certainly find that these, and the like less general propositions, are certainly known and firmly assented to by those who are utterly ignorant of those more general maxims; and so, being earlier in the mind than those (as they are called) first principles, cannot owe to them the assent with which they are received at first hearing. [ . . . ]

21. *These maxims not being known sometimes until proposed does not prove them innate.* But we have not yet done with *assenting to propositions at first hearing and understanding their terms*. It is fit we first take notice that this, instead of being a mark that they are innate, is a proof of the contrary, since it supposes that several who understand and know other things are ignorant of these principles until they are proposed to them, and that one may be unacquainted with these truths, until he hears them from others. For, if they were innate, what need they be proposed in

order to gaining assent, when by being in the understanding by a natural and original impression (if there were any such) they could not but be known before? [. . .]

22. *Implicitly known before proposing signifies that the mind is capable of understanding them, or else signifies nothing.* If it is said, “the understanding has an *implicit knowledge* of these principles, but not an *explicit*, before this first hearing,” (as they must who will say, “that they are in the understanding before they are known”) it will be hard to conceive what is meant by a principle imprinted on the understanding implicitly, unless it is this, that the mind is capable of understanding and assenting firmly to such propositions. And thus all mathematical demonstrations as well as first principles must be received as native impressions on the mind. [. . .]