An Essay Concerning Human Understanding
Book I: Innate Notions

John Locke

[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported on, between [brackets], in normal-sized type.

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Chapter i: Introduction

1. Since it is *the understanding* that sets man above all other animals and enables him to use and dominate them, it is certainly worth our while to enquire into it. The understanding is like the eye in this respect: it makes us see and perceive all other things but doesn't look in on itself. To stand back from it and treat it as an object of study requires skill and hard work. Still, whatever difficulties there may be in doing this, whatever it is that keeps *us* so much in the dark to *ourselves*, it will be worthwhile to let as much light as possible in upon our minds, and to learn as much as we can about our own understandings. As well as being enjoyable, this will help us to think well about other topics.

2. My purpose, therefore, is to enquire into •the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, and also into •the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent. I shan't involve myself with the biological aspects of the mind. For example, I shan't wrestle with the question of what alterations of our bodies lead to our having sensation through our sense-organs or to our having any ideas in our understandings. Challenging and entertaining as these questions may be, I shall by-pass them because they aren't relevant to my project. All we need for my purposes is to consider the human ability to *think*. My time will be well spent if by this plain, factual method I can explain how our understandings come to have those notions of things that we have, and can establish ways of measuring how certainly we can know things, and of evaluating the grounds we have for our opinions. Although our opinions are various, different, and often wholly contradictory, we express them with great assurance and confidence. Someone observing human opinions from the outside—seeing how they conflict with one another, and yet how fondly they are embraced and how stubbornly they are maintained—might have reason to suspect that either there isn't any such thing as truth or that mankind isn't equipped to come to know it.

3. So it will be worth our while to find where the line falls between *opinion* and *knowledge,* and to learn more about the 'opinion' side of the line. What I want to know is this: When we are concerned with something about which we have no certain knowledge, what rules or standards should guide *how* confident we allow ourselves to be that our opinions are right? Here is the method I shall follow in trying to answer that question. First, I shall enquire into the origin of those *ideas* or *notions*—call them what you will—that a man observes and is conscious of having in his mind. How does the understanding come to be equipped with them? Secondly, I shall try to show what *knowledge* the understanding has by means of those ideas—how much of it there is, how secure it is, and how self-evident it is. I shall also enquire a little into the nature and grounds of *faith or opinion*—that is, acceptance of something as true when we don't know for certain that it is true.

4. I hope that this enquiry into the nature of the understanding will enable me to discover what its powers are—how far they reach, what things they are adequate to deal with, and where they fail us. If I succeed, that may have the effect of persuading the busy mind of man •to be more cautious in meddling with things that are beyond its powers to understand; •to stop when it is at the extreme end of its tether; and •to be peacefully reconciled to ignorance of things that turn out to be beyond the reach of our capacities.

Perhaps then we shall stop pretending that we know everything, and shall be less bold in raising questions and getting into confusing disputes with others about things to which our understandings are not suited—things of which we can't form any clear or distinct perceptions in our minds, or, as happens all too often, things of which we have no notions at all. If we can find out what the scope of the understanding is, how far it is able to achieve *certainty*, and in what cases it can only *judge* and *guess*, that may teach us to accept our limitations and to rest content with knowing only what our human condition enables us to know.

5. For, though the reach of our understandings falls far short of the vast extent of things, we shall still have reason to praise God for the kind and amount of knowledge that he *has* bestowed on us, so far above all the rest of creation. Men have reason to be well satisfied with what God has seen fit to give them, since he has given them everything they need for the •conveniences of life and the •forming of virtuous characters—that is, everything they need to discover how to •thrive in this life and how to •find their way to a better one. . . . Men can find plenty of material for thought, and for a great variety of pleasurable physical activities, if they don't presumptuously complain about their own constitution and throw away the blessings their hands are filled with because their hands are not big enough to grasp everything. We shan't have much reason to complain of the narrowness of our minds if we will only employ them on topics that may be of use to us; for on *those* they are very capable. . . .

6. When we know what our ·muscular· strength is, we shall have a better idea of what ·physical tasks· we can attempt with hopes of success. And when we have thoroughly surveyed the powers of our own minds, and made some estimate of what we can expect from them, we shan't be inclined either •to sit still, and not set our thoughts to work at all, in despair of knowing anything or •to question everything, and make no claim to *any* knowledge because *some* things can't be understood. It is very useful for the sailor to know how long his line is, even though it is too short to fathom all the depths of the ocean. It is good for him to know that it is long enough to reach the bottom at places where he needs to know where it is, and to caution him against running aground. . . .

7. This was what first started me on this *Essay Concerning the Understanding*. I thought that the first step towards answering various questions that people are apt to raise ·about other things· was to take a look at our own understandings, examine our own powers, and see to what they are fitted for. Till that was done (I suspected) we were starting at the wrong end—letting our thoughts range over the vast ocean of being, as though there were no limits to what we could understand, thereby spoiling our chances of getting a quiet and sure possession of truths that most concern us. . . . If men consider the capacities of our understandings, discover how far our knowledge extends, and find the horizon that marks off •the illuminated parts of things from •the dark ones, •the things we can understand from •the things we can't, then perhaps they would be more willing to accept their admitted ignorance of •the former, and devote their thought and talk more profitably and satisfyingly to •the latter.

8. Before moving on, I must here at the outset ask you to excuse how frequently you will find me using the word 'idea' in this book. It seems to be the best word 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 that the mind

can be employed about in thinking; and I couldn't avoid frequently using it. Nobody, I presume, will deny 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. First, then: How do they come into the mind?

Chapter ii: No innate ·speculative· principles in the mind

1. Some people regard it as settled that there are in the understanding certain innate principles. These are conceived as primary notions [= 'first thoughts']—letters printed on the mind of man, so to speak—which the soul [= 'mind'; no religious implications] receives when it first comes into existence, and that it brings into the world with it. I could show any fair-minded reader that this is wrong if I could show (as I hope to do in the present work) how men can get all the knowledge they have, and can arrive at certainty about some things, purely by using their natural faculties [= 'capacities', 'abilities'], without help from any innate notions or principles. Everyone will agree, presumably, that it would be absurd to suppose that the *ideas* of colours are innate in a creature to whom God has given eyesight, which is a power to get those ideas through the eyes from external objects. It would be equally unreasonable to explain our knowledge of various *truths* in terms of innate 'imprinting' if it could just as easily be explained through our ordinary abilities to come to know things. Anyone who follows his own thoughts in the search of truth, and is led even slightly off the path of common beliefs, is likely to be criticized for this; ·and I expect to be criticized for saying that none of our intellectual possessions are innate·. So I shall present the reasons that made me doubt the truth of the innateness doctrine. That will be my excuse for my mistake, if that's what it is. Whether it is a mistake can be decided by those who are willing, as I am, to welcome truth wherever they find it.

2. Nothing is more commonly taken for granted than that certain principles, both speculative [= 'having to do with what *is* the case'] and practical [= 'having to do with morality, or what *ought to be* the case'] are accepted by all mankind. Some people have argued that because these principles are (they think) universally accepted, they must have been stamped onto the souls of men from the outset.

3. This argument from universal consent has a defect in it. Even if it were in fact true that all mankind agreed in accepting certain truths, that wouldn't prove them to be innate if universal agreement could be explained in some other way; and I think it can.

4. Worse still, this *argument from universal consent* which is used to prove that there are innate principles can be turned into a proof that there are none; because there aren't any principles to which all mankind give universal assent. I shall begin with speculative principles, taking as my example those much vaunted logical principles •'Whatever is, is' and •'It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be', which are the most widely thought to be innate. They are so

firmly and generally believed to be accepted by everyone in the world that it may be thought strange that anyone should question this. Yet I am willing to say that these propositions, far from being accepted by everyone, have never even been heard of by a great part of mankind.

5. Children and idiots have no thought—not an inkling—of these principles, and that fact alone is enough to destroy the universal assent that any truth that was genuinely innate would have to have. For it seems to me nearly a contradiction to say that there are truths imprinted on the soul that it doesn't perceive or understand—because if 'imprinting' means anything it means making something be perceived: to imprint anything on the mind without the mind's perceiving it seems to me hardly intelligible. So if children and idiots have souls, minds, with those principles imprinted on them, they can't help perceiving them and assenting to them. Since they don't do that, it is evident that the principles are not innately impressed upon their minds. If they were naturally imprinted, and thus innate, how could they be unknown? To say that a notion is imprinted on the mind, *and* that the mind is ignorant of it and has never paid attention to it, is to make this impression nothing. No proposition can be said to be in the mind which it has never known or been conscious of. It may be said that a proposition that the mind has never consciously known may be 'in the mind' in the sense that the mind is *capable* of knowing it; but in that sense *every true proposition that the mind is capable of ever assenting to may be said to be 'in the mind' and to be imprinted*! Indeed, there could be 'imprinted on' someone's mind, in *this* sense, truths that the person never did and never will know. For a man may be capable of knowing, and indeed of knowing with certainty, many things that he doesn't in fact come to know at any time in his life. So if the mere *ability* to know is the natural impression philosophers are arguing for, all the truths a man ever comes to know will have to count as innate; and this great doctrine about 'innateness' will come down to nothing more than a very improper way of speaking, and not something that disagrees with the views of those who deny innate principles. For nobody, I think, ever denied that the mind was capable of knowing many truths. Those who think that •all knowledge is acquired ·rather than innate· also think that •the *capacity* for knowledge is innate. If these words 'to be in the understanding' are used properly, they mean 'to be understood'. Thus, to be in the understanding and not be understood—to be in the mind and never be perceived—amounts to saying that something *is* and *is not* in the mind or understanding. If therefore these two propositions, •'Whatsoever is, is' and •'It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be' are imprinted by nature, children cannot be ignorant of them; infants and all who have souls must necessarily have them in their understandings, know the truth of them, and assent to that truth.

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

7. People who are in the grip of a prejudice don't bother to look carefully at what they say; and so they will say things that are suspect—indeed almost meaningless—and pass them off as clear reasons. The foregoing claim ·that innateness is proved by assent-when-reason-is-reached·, if it is to be turned into something clear and applied to our present question, must mean either **1** that as soon as men come to the use of reason these supposedly innate truths come to be known and observed by them, or **2** that the use and exercise of men's reason assists them in the discovery

of these truths, making them known with certainty.

8. If they mean **2** that by the use of reason men may discover these principles, and that this is sufficient to prove them innate, they must be arguing for this conclusion:

> Whatever truths reason can enable us to know for certain, and make us firmly assent to, are all ·innate, i.e.· naturally imprinted on the mind;

on the grounds that universal assent proves innateness, and that all we mean by something's being 'universally assented to' in this context is merely that we can come to know it for sure, and be brought to assent to it, by the use of reason. This line of thought wipes out the distinction between the *maxims* [= 'basic axioms'] of the mathematicians and the *theorems* they deduce from them; all must equally count as innate because they can all be known for certain through the use of reason.

9. How can people who take this view think that we need to use *reason* to discover principles that are supposedly innate?. . . . We may as well think that the use of reason is necessary to make our *eyes discover visible objects* as that we need to have (or to use) reason to make the *understanding see what is originally engraved on it* and cannot be in the understanding before being noticed by it. 'Reason shows us those truths that have been imprinted'—this amounts to saying that the use of reason enables a man to learn what he already knew.

10. ·In reply to my final remark in section 8·, it may be said that maxims and other innate truths *are*, whereas mathematical demonstrations and other non-innate truths *are not*, assented to as soon as the question is put. . . . I freely acknowledge that maxims differ from mathematical demonstrations in this way: we grasp and assent to the latter only with the help of reason, using proofs, whereas the former—the basic maxims—are embraced and assented to as soon as they are understood, without the least reasoning. But so much the worse for the view that reason is needed for the discovery of these general truths [= maxims], since it must be admitted that reasoning plays no part in *their* discovery. And I think those who take this view ·that innate truths are known by reason· will hesitate to assert that the knowledge of the maxim that *it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be* is a deduction of our reason. For by making our knowledge of such a principle depend on the labour of our thoughts they would be destroying that bounty of nature they seem so fond of. In all reasoning we search and flail around, having to take pains and stick to the problem. What sense does it make to suppose that all *this* is needed to discover something that was imprinted ·on us· by nature?

11. . . . .It is therefore utterly false that reason assists us in the knowledge of these maxims; and ·as I have also been arguing·, if it were true it would prove that they are *not* innate!

12. ·Of the two interpretations mentioned in section 7, I now come to the one labelled **1**·. If by 'knowing and assenting to them when we come to the use of reason' the innatists mean that this is *when* the mind comes to notice them, and that *as soon as* children acquire the use of reason they come also to know and assent to these maxims, this also is •false and •frivolous. •It is false because these maxims are obviously not in the mind as early as the use of reason. We observe ever so many instances of the use of reason in children long before they have any knowledge of the maxim that *it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be*. Similarly with illiterate people and savages. . . .

13. ·All that is left for these innatists to claim is this·: Maxims or innate truths are never known or noticed before

the use of reason, and *may* be assented to at some time after that, but there is no saying *when*. But that is true of all other knowable truths; so it doesn't help to mark off innately known truths from others.

14. Anyway, even if it were true that certain truths came to be known and assented to at *precisely* the time when men acquire the use of reason, that wouldn't prove them to be innate. To argue that it would do so is as •frivolous as the premise of the argument is •false. [Locke develops that point at some length. How, he demands, can x's innateness be derived from the premise that a person first knows x when he comes to be able to reason? Why not derive something's innateness from its being first known only when a person comes to be able to *speak*? (Or, he might have added even more mockingly, when a person first becomes able to *walk*? or to *sing*?) He allows *some* truth to the thesis that basic general maxims are not known to someone who doesn't yet have the use of reason, but he explains this in terms not of innateness but rather of a theory of his own that he will develop later in the work. It rests on the assumption—which Locke doesn't declare here—that to *think* a general maxim one must have general *ideas*, and that to *express* a general maxim one must be able to use general *words*. Then:] The growth of reason in a person goes along with his becoming able to form *general abstract ideas*, and to understand *general names* [= 'words']; so children usually don't have such general ideas or learn the ·general· names that stand for them until after they have for a good while employed their reason on familiar and less general ideas; and it is during that period that their talk and behaviour shows them to be capable of rational conversation.

[Sections **15** and **16** continue with this theme. A typical passage is this, from section 16:] The later it is before anyone comes to have those general ideas that are involved in ·supposedly innate· maxims, or to know the meanings of the general words that stand for them, or to put together in his mind the ideas they stand for; the later also it will be before he comes to assent to the maxims. . . . Those words and ideas are no more innate than is the idea of *cat* or of *weasel*. So the child must wait until time and observation have acquainted him with them; and *then* he will be in a fit state to know the truth of these maxims.

17. . . . .Some people have tried to secure universal assent to the propositions they call *maxims* by saying they are generally assented to as soon as *they are proposed, and the terms they are proposed in are understood*. . . .

18. In answer to this, I ask whether prompt assent given to a proposition upon first hearing it and understanding the terms really is a certain mark of an innate principle? If so, then we must classify as innate *all* such propositions, in which case the innatists will find themselves plentifully supplied with innate principles—including various propositions about numbers that everybody assents to at first hearing and understanding the terms. And not just numbers; for even the natural sciences contain propositions that are sure to meet with assent as soon as they are understood: •*Two bodies cannot be in the same place ·at the same time·* is a truth that a person would no more hesitate to accept than he would to accept •*It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be*, •*White is not black*, or •*A square is not a circle*. If assent at first hearing and understanding the terms were a mark of innateness, we would have to accept as innate every •proposition in which different ideas are denied one of another. We would have legions of innate propositions of this one sort, not to mention all the others. . . . Now, I agree that a proposition is shown to be *self-evident* by its being promptly

assented to by everyone who hears it and understands its terms; but self-evidence comes not from innateness but from a different source which I shall present in due course. There are plenty of self-evident propositions that nobody would be so fanciful as to claim to be innate.

19. Don't say that the less general self-evident propositions—*One and two are equal to three*, *Green is not red*, and so on—are accepted as the consequences of more general ones that are taken to be innate. Anyone who attends with care to what happens in the understanding will certainly find that the less general propositions are known for sure, and firmly assented to, by people who are utterly ignorant of those more general maxims; so the former can't be accepted on the strength of the latter.

[In section **20** Locke considers the claim that the less general self evident truths are not 'of any great use', unlike the more general maxims that are called innate. He replies that no reason has been given for connecting usefulness to innateness, and that in any case he is going to question whether the more general maxims *are* of any great use.]

21. ·Here is another objection to inferring a proposition's innateness from its being assented by anyone who hears it and understands its terms·. Rather than this being a sign that the proposition *is* innate, it is really a proof that it *isn't*. It is being assumed that people who understand and know other things are ignorant of these ·self-evident and supposedly innate· principles till they are proposed to them. But if they were innate, why would they need to be *proposed* in order to be assented to? Wouldn't their being in the understanding through a natural and original impression lead to their being known even *before* being proposed? Or does proposing them print them *more clearly* in the mind than nature did? If so, then a man knows such a proposition better after he has been thus taught it—·that is, had it clarifyingly 'proposed' to him·—than he did before. This implies that these principles may be made more evident to us by others' teaching than nature has made them by impression; which deprives supposedly innate principles of their authority, and makes them unfit to be the foundations of all our other knowledge, as they are claimed to be. . . .

[Section **22** briefly and unsympathetically discusses the suggestion that even before a man first has an innate maxim 'proposed' to him, he has an *implicit* knowledge of it.]

[In section **23** Locke argues that the position he is now opposing—that a proposition counts as innate if it is assented to when first proposed and understood—looks plausible only because it is assumed that when the proposition is proposed and made to be understood *nothing new* is learned; that assumption might lead Locke's opponents to say that he was wrong in section 21 to say that such propositions are *taught*. Against this he says:] In truth they *are* taught, and ·in such teaching the pupils· do learn something they were ignorant of before. They have learned the terms and their meanings, neither of which were born with them; and they have acquired the relevant ideas, which were not born with them any more than their names were. [Locke then presents at some length his own view about what really happens when someone assents to a self-evident proposition; all this will be developed further in Book II.]

24. To conclude this argument about universal consent, I agree with these defenders of innate principles that *if they are innate they must have universal assent*. (I can no more make sense of a truth's being innate and yet not assented to than I can of a man's knowing a truth while being ignorant of it.) But it follows that they can't be innate, because they are not universally assented to, as I have shown. . . .

25. It may be objected that I have been arguing from the thoughts of infants, drawing conclusions from what happens in their understandings, whereas we really don't know what their thoughts are. [Locke at some length just denies this, claiming that we do know a good deal about the thoughts of children. The section ends thus:] The child certainly knows that the wormseed or mustard it refuses is not the apple or sugar it cries for: this it is certainly and undoubtedly assured of. But will anyone say that the child has this knowledge by virtue of the principle *It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be*? Someone who says that children join in these general abstract speculations with their sucking bottles and their rattles can fairly be thought to have less sincerity and truth than an infant, even if he outdoes the child in his passion and zeal for his opinion!

[Section **26** winds up that whole line of argument.]

[Section **27** advances a new argument. The innatist must allow that the truths innately implanted in our minds don't always present themselves to our consciousness, and he is forced to explain that this happens because our innately given intellectual possessions may be smudged over, 'corrupted by custom or borrowed opinions, by learning and education'. But if that were right, those innate truths 'should appear fairest and clearest' in the minds of 'children, idiots, savages, and illiterate people'; yet in such people 'we find no footsteps of them'.] One would think, according to the innatists' principles, that all these native beams of light (if they existed) would shine out most brilliantly in people who are not skilled in concealing things, leaving us in no more doubt of *their* having them than we are of their loving pleasure and hating pain. But alas, amongst children, idiots, savages, and the grossly illiterate, what general maxims are to be found? What universal principles of knowledge? Their notions are few and narrow, borrowed only from the objects they have had most to do with, and which have most frequently and strongly impressed themselves upon their senses. . . .

28. I don't know how absurd my position on this may seem to logicians; and probably most people will find it, on a first hearing, hard to swallow. So I ask for a little truce with prejudice, and a holding off from of criticism, until I have been heard out in the later parts of this Book. I am very willing to submit to better judgments. Since I impartially search after truth, I shan't mind becoming convinced that I have been too fond of my own notions; which I admit we are all apt to be when application and study have excited our heads with them. . . .

Chapter iii: No innate practical principles

1. It is even more obvious that no practical [= 'moral'] principles are universally assented to than that no speculative [= 'non-moral'] principles are. It will be hard to find any moral rule that has as much claim to immediate universal assent as 'What is, is' or that is as obviously true as 'It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be.' So the case against the innateness of *practical* principles is even stronger. In saying this I don't question their truth: the two kinds of principle are equally *true*, but they are not equally *self-evident*. The speculative maxims of which I have written are self-evident; ·you have only to bring them clearly before your mind to see that they are true·; but moral principles need to be supported by reasons; you have to *use* your mind on them to become certain that they are true. This, however, doesn't detract from their truth or certainty. (Similarly, 'The three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles' is not as evidently true as 'The whole is bigger than a part', nor so apt to be assented to at first hearing; but it is true and certain all the same.) Since these moral rules can be demonstrated, it is our own fault if we don't achieve certain knowledge of them. But the sheer fact that •many men are ignorant of them, and the fact that •others come to them only gradually, are clear proofs that moral rules are *not* something we can know without searching for them, and are therefore not innate.

2. If you have the slightest knowledge of the history of mankind, or have looked beyond the four walls of your own home, you must know that there are no moral principles that everyone assents to. Most people seem to agree about justice and the keeping of contracts. Indeed, this principle is thought to be respected even amongst thieves and other villains: those who have gone furthest towards losing their own humanity, it is said, still keep faith with another. So indeed they do; but they observe principles of justice merely as rules of convenience within their own communities, not as innate moral laws. It isn't believable that someone who is ready to plunder or kill the next honest man he meets with acts fairly with his fellow highwayman *because he embraces justice as a moral principle*! Justice and truth are the common ties of society; and therefore even outlaws and robbers must keep faith and rules of fairness amongst themselves, for otherwise their gangs will fall apart. But will anyone say that those who live by crime allow themselves to be guided by innate principles of truth and justice?

3. You may want to say that criminals *accept* those principles even though they don't *act on* them. Well, I have always thought that men's actions are the best guides to their thoughts. Furthermore, it is very strange and unreasonable to suppose that there are innate practical principles that show up in what men think but don't affect their behaviour. What makes a principle *practical* (rather than speculative) is its bearing upon *action*. Something of a practical kind that *is* innate in all mankind, and influences all our conduct, is a desire for happiness and an aversion to misery; but this has to do with our •wants, not with our moral beliefs. I don't deny that there are •natural tendencies imprinted on the minds of men, so that from the moment we begin to perceive we like some things and dislike others; but that doesn't mean that we have innately in our minds anything amounting to principles of moral knowledge. . . .

4. Another reason for doubting that there are any innate practical principles is that I think one can fairly ask for a

reason for any moral rule whatsoever. If such rules were innate, they would be self-evident: their truth could be seen without any kind of proofs or reasons; and so the demand for a reason would be perfectly ridiculous and absurd. Someone who asked *why* it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be would be regarded as lacking in common sense, as would someone who tried to answer him. That speculative principle needs no proof except its own self-evidence: anyone who understands the words accepts the principle for its own sake, and if he doesn't, nothing will change his mind. In contrast with that, suppose someone hears for the first time 'One should do as he would be done unto', and understands its meaning, might he not without any absurdity ask for a reason why? and ought not the person who proposes it be willing to supply a reason? But if it were innate, it wouldn't need a reason and couldn't be given one. Clearly, the truth of all these moral rules depends on some underlying rules from which they must be deduced; and this could not be so if they were innate, or even if they were merely self-evident.

5. *That men should keep their promises* is certainly a great and undeniable rule in morality. But if •a Christian is asked why a man must keep his word, he will answer: because God, who has the power of eternal life and death, requires him to. But if •a follower of Hobbes is asked why, he will answer: because the public requires it, and the state will punish you if you don't. And if •one of the old philosophers had been asked, he would have answered: because breaking promises is dishonest, below the dignity of a man, and opposite to virtue, which is the highest perfection of human nature.

6. So men's opinions concerning moral rules vary greatly, according to the different sorts of happiness they aim at. This couldn't be so if practical principles were innate, and imprinted in our minds immediately by the hand of God. I grant that the existence of God is made clear to us in so many ways, and the obedience we owe him agrees so much with the light of reason, that a great part of mankind proclaim *the law of nature*; but it can't be denied that moral rules can be generally approved of by people who don't know what their true ground is—namely, the will and law of a God who sees men in the dark, has in his hand rewards and punishments, and has power enough to call to account the proudest offender. God has firmly joined virtue and public happiness together, and made virtuous conduct necessary to the preservation of society, and visibly beneficial to everyone the virtuous man has any dealings with; so it isn't surprising that each person should not merely *accept* those rules but also *recommend* and *praise* them to other people whose observance of the rules is bound to bring advantage to him. He may, out of self-interest rather than conviction, declare the sacredness of something that he needs to have observed for his own security. This doesn't detract from the moral and eternal obligation that these rules evidently have; but it shows that the outward acknowledgment men pay to them in their words doesn't prove that they are innate principles. Indeed, it doesn't even prove that men assent to them inwardly in their own minds as unbreakable rules for their own conduct. . . .

7. For if we don't politely believe everything that men *say*, but take their *actions* to show what they think, we shall find that they have no such inner respect for these rules, and are not so sure they are bound by them. . . . It may be urged that men's *consciences* help to prevent them from breaking the rules, showing that there is after all an internal sense of being obliged by them.

8. To which I answer that many men can come to assent to various moral rules in the same way that they come to the

knowledge of other things—without the rules being written on their hearts. And others may be led the same way by their education, the company they keep, and the customs of their country. Such an assent to the rules, however it is come by, will activate the conscience—which is nothing but our own opinion or judgment of the moral rightness or wrongness of our own actions. And if conscience is a proof of innateness, contraries can be innate principles; because sometimes men will conscientiously promote what others conscientiously avoid.

9. But if those moral rules were innate, and stamped on men's minds, I can't see how anyone should ever confidently and serenely break them. ·Yet this happens constantly·. See an army sacking a town, and look for signs of the soldiers' •obeying or •having some sense of moral principles, •feeling some touch of conscience over the outrages they are performing! Robberies, murders, rapes, are the sports of men who are not threatened with punishment and censure. Have there not been whole nations, and those of the most civilized people, amongst whom the exposing of their children—leaving them in the fields to die of hunger or from wild beasts—has been the practice? [The section continues with a page and a half of even more disgusting examples.]

10. Look carefully at the history of mankind, and scan the various tribes of men, looking without prejudice at their actions, and you will be able to satisfy yourself that

> There is hardly a principle of morality to be named, or rule of virtue to be thought of, that is not somewhere in the world slighted and condemned by the general fashion of whole societies of men who live by moral views and rules that are quite opposite to those of others.

An exception is provided by rules that are absolutely necessary to hold society together; but these too are commonly flouted in relations between distinct societies.

11. It may be objected that a rule's being *broken* doesn't prove that it is not *known*. I agree with this, in cases where men break a moral law but don't disown it, showing by their fear of shame, blame, or punishment that they still hold it in some awe. But it is impossible to conceive that a whole nation of men should all publicly reject and renounce what every one of them, certainly and infallibly, knew to be a law (as they must if it is naturally imprinted on their minds). . . . Whatever practical principle is innate must be known to everyone to be just and good. It is therefore little less than a contradiction to suppose that whole nations of men should, in both speech and action, unanimously and universally give the lie to what every one of them knew for certain to be true, right, and good. So no practical rule can be supposed to be innate if in any part of the world it is transgressed universally and with public approval or without disapproval.

12. [Locke discusses, as a possible candidate for an innate moral rule, 'Parents, preserve and cherish your children', and reverts to the section 9 topic of the widespread breaches of this rule. Then a quite different point:] •*Parents, preserve your children* is so far from being an innate truth that it isn't a truth at all: it is a •command, not a •proposition, so it cannot be true or false. To make it capable of being assented to as *true*, we must turn it into some such proposition as •*It is the duty of parents to preserve their children*. But what *duty* is cannot be understood without a law; and a law cannot be known or supposed without a law-maker, or without reward and punishment. So it is impossible that this or any other practical principle should be innate, i.e. be imprinted on the mind as a duty, without presupposing the innateness

of the ideas of *God*, of *law*, of *obligation*, of *punishment*, and of *a life after this*. . . . But these are so far from being innate that they are not to be found clear and distinct in the mind of every studious or thinking man, let alone in the mind of every man who is ever born. In my next chapter I shall show that the one of them that seems most likely to be innate—I mean the idea of God—is not so.

13. From what I have said I think we may safely conclude that no principle is innate if it is in any place generally allowed to be broken, for it is impossible that men should confidently and serenely break a rule that they know (and if it were innate they would have to know) had been set by God, who would certainly punish any breach of it so severely as to make the transgression a poor bargain. [In the remainder of this long section Locke elaborates this point: if a practical principle were innate, men would *have to* know that it was set by God who would certainly punish breaches of it very severely; and someone who knows *that* about a law will certainly be deterred from breaking it. He concludes with a different point:] Don't think that because I deny an innate law I hold that there are only man-made laws. There is a great deal of difference between an •innate law ·which I deny· and a •law of nature ·which I accept·, between •something imprinted on our minds in their very origin and •something we can come to know of through the proper use of our natural faculties. There are two extremes: •those who affirm that there are innate laws, and •those who deny that any law can be known by the light of nature, i.e. without the help of revelation; and I think they are both far from the truth.

14. The way men differ in their practical principles is so obvious as to doom all attempts to identify any moral rules as innate on the basis of their being generally accepted. I suspect that the supposition of such innate principles is merely an irresponsible free-floating opinion, because those who talk about them so confidently don't tell us which they are, as one might reasonably expect them to do. . . . Since nobody, so far as I know, has yet ventured to give a catalogue of the innate practical principles, their supporters can't blame those of us who doubt that they exist. . . . Very many men are so far from finding any such innate moral principles in themselves that by denying freedom to mankind and thereby making men no more than mere machines, they take away not only *innate* but *all* moral rules whatsoever, making it impossible for such rules to be believed in by those who can't conceive how anything except a free agent can be capable of a law. Upon that ground, those who can't reconcile morality with mechanism (which is hard to do) must necessarily reject all principles of virtue.

[In sections **15–19** Locke discusses a writing by Lord Herbert of Cherbury. After completing the previous sections, he reports, he learned that Lord Herbert had given a list of innate principles and an account of the criteria by which they can be classified as innate. Locke says that not all the items on the list satisfy all the criteria, and that they are satisfied by plenty of things not on the list. Some are criticized as vague or ambiguous, some as trivial, etc.]

20. It may be said that the innate principles of morality may be darkened in the minds of men, and eventually quite worn out, by education and custom and the general opinion of the members of one's society. If this is true it destroys the argument from universal consent for the existence of innate principles, unless the members of this or that sect regard *their* agreeing on something as 'universal consent'. People do this, presuming themselves to be the only masters of right reason, and throwing out the votes and opinions of the rest of mankind, as not worth taking into account. So this is

their argument:

> The principles that all mankind count as true are innate; those that men of right reason accept are the principles allowed by all mankind; we and like-minded people are men of reason; therefore, since *we* agree, our principles are innate;

which is a very clever way of arguing, and a short cut to infallibility! For without that ·absurd approach·, it will be very hard to understand how there can be principles that all men agree on, though they are all blotted out of the minds of many men by depraved custom, and bad education—that is principles that all men accept and many men deny! [In the remainder of the section Locke elaborates this point.]

[Sections **21–6** discuss the absolute confidence that people have in the truth of certain doctrines—different doctrines in different societies. Locke offers to explain this phenomenon, largely in terms of early education. In **23** he inserts a connection between early education and the belief that there are innate principles: 'When people who have been so instructed grow up and reflect on their own minds, they can't find anything more ancient there than the opinions that they were taught before their memory began to keep a record of the happenings in their lives or to note the time when any new thing appeared to them. They can't remember any *source* for those opinions, and that makes them sure that the opinions were impressed on them by God and nature.' In section **24**: 'There is scarcely anyone so floating and superficial in his understanding that he doesn't have some revered propositions that he takes to be the principles on which he bases his reasonings, and by which he judges of truth and falsehood, right and wrong.' In section **25** the topic is the effect of social pressure in stopping people from examining the revered propositions critically. Near the end of **26**:] Anyone who takes any such supposed principles into his mind and regards them with the reverence usually paid to principles, never venturing to examine them but getting the habit of believing them because *they are to be believed*, can be led by his education and the fashions of his country to regard any absurdity as an innate principle.

[In section **27** Locke contends that his explanation in the preceding sections seems to be the only one that can explain why so many *conflicting* propositions are thought to be innate.]

Chapter iv: Further points about innate principles, speculative and practical

1. If the supporters of innate principles had thought not merely about •whole propositions but also about •the parts out of which propositions are made, they mightn't have been so ready to believe that some principles are innate. ·That is because· if the ideas that make up those truths are not innate, the propositions made up of them can't be so. For if the *ideas* are not innate, then there was a time when the mind didn't contain those *principles*; in which case the

principles are not innate but have some other source. . . .

2. If we attentively consider new-born children, we find little reason to think that they bring many ideas into the world with them. Except perhaps for some faint ideas of hunger and thirst, and warmth, and some pains, which they may have felt in the womb, they seem not to have any settled ideas at all—and especially not ideas matching the words that make up the universal propositions that are thought to be innate. We can see how they gradually come to have more ideas, which they do *only* by acquiring ideas that are furnished by experience and the observation of things. That might be enough to satisfy us that they—·the ideas·—are not characters stamped on the mind from birth.

3. If there are any innate principles, then surely this is one: *It is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be.* But can anyone think, or will anyone say, that *impossibility* and *identity* are two innate ideas? Are they ideas that mankind have, and bring into the world with them? Are they ones that children have before they acquire any others ·from experience·?. . . . The words 'impossibility' and 'identity' stand for two ideas which, far from being innate or born with us, can be properly formed in our understandings only through great care and attention. . . . Upon examination it will be found that many grown men don't have them.

[In section **4** Locke discusses the idea of *identity*, sketching some philosophical problems involving it, as evidence that the idea isn't 'clear and obvious to us'.]

[In section **5** he argues that these questions are not trivial, because they come into our thinking about how we shall fare on Judgment Day: am I, who now stand before God awaiting his judgment, *the very same person* as the one who performed such and such actions? Locke will discuss this at length in II.xxvii.]

[In section **6** Locke gives a somewhat technical reason why the ideas of *whole* and *part* cannot be innate, so that the 'principle of mathematics *The whole is bigger than a part*' cannot be innate either.]

7. *That God is to be worshipped* is without doubt as great a truth as any that can enter into the human mind, and deserves the first place among all practical principles. But it can't be innate unless the ideas of *God* and *worship* are innate. But the idea the term 'worship' stands for is *not* in the understanding of children, is *not* a character stamped on their minds at birth; you'll easily agree with that if you consider how few adults, even, have a clear and distinct notion of it. . . .

8. If any idea can be imagined to be innate, the idea of *God* is the most likely one, for many reasons. ·But· ancient writers noted that there were atheists then, and in recent times explorers have discovered whole nations amongst whom there is to be found no notion of a God, no religion. [Through much of the section Locke evaluates the evidence for this as it relates to Brazil, China and other nations. Then:] And if we attended to the actions and speech of people closer to home, we might have reason to fear that many people in more civilized countries have no very strong and clear impressions of a God in their minds, and that preachers' complaints of atheism are not without reason. At present ·in our part of the world· the only people who avow their atheism openly and without shame are wretches who are entirely given over to vice; but if the fear of legal or social consequences didn't tie up people's tongues, so that prospects of punishment or shame were taken away, many more people would proclaim their atheism as openly as their lives do.

[In sections **9–11** Locke argues that even if all mankind, at all times and places, had a notion of God, this wouldn't be

good evidence that the idea was innate. That is because 'the visible marks of extraordinary wisdom and power appear so plainly in all the works of the creation that any rational person who thinks seriously about them must conclude that they are the work of a God' (**9**); and this belief could then spread throughout the world through communication amongst humans, so that the (supposed) universality of the idea of God could be explained in epidemiological terms (so to speak) rather than through innateness.]

12. Indeed it has been argued that •it is suitable to God's goodness that he should imprint characters and notions of himself on the minds of men, rather than leaving them in darkness and doubt regarding a matter of such importance to them, and also to secure for himself the homage and veneration that is his due from a thinking creature such as man; and that therefore •he has done this. But if this argument has any force, it will prove much more than its friends want it to. From the premise *It is suitable to God's goodness that he should do for men all that they judge is best for them* it infers *God has indeed done for men all that they judge is best for them*. [Locke attacks this on the ground that it implies that God has done things that he plainly has not, e.g. made all men obedient to his will. He then attacks the argument at its root.] I think it a very good argument to say:

> The infinitely wise God has made it so; and therefore it is best.

But we put too much confidence in our own wisdom if we argue:

> I think it best, and therefore God has made it so.

Applying this to our present topic: it is futile to argue that God has done so—·that is, has innately imprinted our minds with an idea of him·—when experience shows us clearly that he has not. . . . ·This isn't to imply any lack of goodness in God·. I expect to show ·in IV.x· that a man, by the right use of his natural abilities and without any innate principles, can acquire a knowledge of a God and of other things that concern him. Once God had endowed men with the faculties of knowledge that they have, he was no more obliged by his goodness also to plant innate notions in their minds than he is obliged, after giving men reason, hands, and materials, also to build bridges or houses for them. . . .

13. I agree that if there *were* any idea imprinted on the minds of men, we have reason •to expect it to be the notion of his maker, as a mark God set on his own workmanship, to keep men in mind of their dependence and duty, and •to expect that the first instances of human knowledge would involve that idea. But in fact children don't show themselves to have any such notion until quite late, and when they *do* have an idea of God it reflects the opinion and notion of the child's teacher more than it represents the true God. . . .

[Sections **14–17** discuss at length the variety there is among different peoples' ideas of God. A core thought in these sections is this: 'The truest and best notions men have of God were not ·innately· imprinted, but acquired by thought and meditation and a right use of their faculties' (**16**).]

[In section **18** Locke mentions a supposed 'idea of substance', sketching a view about it that he will develop at length in II.xxiii and elsewhere. It isn't usefully relevant to the innateness issue.]

[In section **19** Locke repeats various anti-innateness arguments that he has already presented.]

20. Here is another argument. If there are any ideas—innate or not—in a mind at a time when it doesn't actually think of them, they must be lodged in the *memory*. ·That's the only way something can be 'in the mind' without being involved in

thoughts that the mind is consciously having·. For such an idea to be brought into view ·in the conscious mind· it must be *remembered*, and to remember something is to *perceive it with a consciousness that one has known or perceived it before*. Without this, whatever idea comes into the mind is •new and not •remembered, for this consciousness of its having been in the mind before is what distinguishes remembering from every other kind of mental event. . . . If therefore there are any innate ideas, they must be in the memory or else nowhere in the mind; and if they are in the memory they can be revived without any impression from outside; and whenever they are brought into the mind, they bring with them a perception of their not being wholly new to it. . . . In the light of this, consider whether there are any innate ideas in the mind before ·any are brought in by the· impression from sensation or reflection. . . . I would like to meet the person who, when he came to the use of reason or at any other time, *remembered* any such ideas, and who never in his life experienced them as new. If anyone says that there are ideas in the mind that are not in the memory ·and that the mind isn't conscious of·, I ask him to explain himself and make what he says intelligible.

21. Here is a further reason why I doubt that any principles are innate. I am sure that the infinitely wise God made all things in perfect wisdom; and I can't see *why* he should print on the minds of men some universal principles of which

> •the non-moral ones that are claimed to be innate are of no great use, and •the moral ones that are claimed to be innate are not self-evident, and •nothing distinguishes those two groups from some other truths that are not said to be innate.

What reason would God have to inscribe on the mind of man messages that are no clearer than (or can't be distinguished from) messages that came there later? If anyone thinks there are such innate ideas and propositions that are clearer and more useful than anything that comes into the mind from the outside, it won't be hard for him to tell us which ones they are, and then we can all judge for ourselves whether they are as he says. . . .

[Section **22** continues the attack on innateness, warning against mistaking other phenomena for innate ideas, and warning against intellectual laziness. The chief emphasis is that we have to *work for* knowledge, and not expect it to be handed to us on a plate, so to speak.]

23. I don't know how much I will be *blamed* for doubting that there are any innate principles—blamed by men who will be apt to say that I am pulling up the old foundations of knowledge and certainty. But I think that what I am saying squares with the truth, and that it will therefore replace those old foundations by newer and more secure ones. I am certain of this: in the rest of this work I shan't be concerned either to •depart from any authority or to •follow any authority. My only aim has been *truth*, and wherever that has appeared to lead my thoughts have impartially followed, without caring whether anyone else's footsteps have gone that way before me. [The section continues with a long and colourful attack on the practice of basing one's beliefs on what authorities say rather than on one's own investigations.]

24. When men have found some general propositions that couldn't be doubted as soon as they were understood, it was a short and easy way to conclude that they are innate. This conclusion excused lazy people from the effort of further research. . . . Those who purported to be masters and teachers were much helped by making this the principle of principles: *Principles must not be questioned*! Once they had laid it down that there are innate principles, they

required their followers to accept some doctrines as innate; which meant accepting them on trust, without bringing their own reason and judgment to bear on them. This posture of blind credulity makes a person easier to be governed and manipulated by those who •have the skill to inculcate principles into him and guide his thoughts, and are •in a position to do this. It is no small power that one man has over others if he has the authority to dictate principles and teach unquestionable truths, and can make them swallow as 'innate' something that it serves *his* purposes to have them believe. If these victims had ·declined to swallow, and instead had· examined *how* we come to our knowledge of many universal truths, they would have found the truths to result in our minds from properly attending to the nature of things themselves, and that they were discovered through the proper use of those faculties of ours that are fitted by nature to receive and judge them.

25. *How the understanding goes about this*—that is what I aim to show in the rest of this book. I started with an account of my reasons for doubting that there are innate principles, because this was needed in order to clear my way to the foundations that I think are the only true ones on which to base the notions we can have of our own knowledge. Because some of the arguments against innate principles arise from commonly accepted opinions, I have been forced to take some things for granted; as one can hardly avoid doing when showing the falsehood or improbability of some doctrine. What happens in intellectual controversy is like what happens in attacking towns: if the ground on which the cannons are placed is firm and serves the purpose, nobody asks who owns it! But in the remainder of this work I shall ·not be trying to pull anything down, but rather· trying—with what help I can get from my own experience and observation—to raise an edifice that is uniform and self-consistent. And I hope to erect it on such a basis that I shan't need to shore it up with props and buttresses, leaning on borrowed or begged foundations. Even if it turns out to be a castle in the air, I shall try to make it one that is all of a piece and that hangs together. I warn the reader not to expect me to do this with undeniable and compelling demonstrations; though I *could* do that if I were allowed the privilege, which many allow themselves, of taking my principles for granted. All that I shall say for •the principles from which I start is that I appeal to your own unprejudiced experience and observation ·to decide· whether •they are true. This is enough for a man who claims only to be laying down candidly and freely his own views about a subject that lies somewhat in the dark, aiming at nothing but an unbiased enquiry after truth.