

JOHN LOCKE AN ESSAY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING (1690)

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BOOK I "OF INNATE NOTIONS"

Chapter 1 "Introduction"

Locke's "purpose [is] to enquire into the original, certainty, and extent of humane knowledge; together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent" (43) without, however, concerning himself with the "physical considerations of the mind" (43) or "wherein 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" (43). He intends to offer an "account of the ways, whereby our understandings come to attain those notions of things we have, and . . . set down any measures of the certainty of our knowledge, or the grounds of those persuasions, which are to be found among men, so various, different, and wholly contradictory" (44). He defines *ideas* as the "object of the understanding when a man thinks" (47) and "whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking" (47), that is, what it is, that we think about when we are thinking. His major concern being with the source or origin of our ideas: our "first enquiry . . . shall be, how they come into the mind" (48).

Chapter 2 "No Innate Principles in the Mind"

Gesturing towards the views of Plato and, later, Descartes, Locke's thesis is that it is a widespread but false view that

there are in the understanding certain *innate principles*; some primary notions, . . . 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. (48)

He begins by debunking certain commonly held assumptions in this regard. He points out that it is commonly assumed that ideas, for example, of colours must be "innate in a creature to whom God hath given sight, and a power to receive them by the eyes from external objects" (48). It is widely assumed, too, that there are

certain *principles*, both *speculative* and *practical* . . . universally agreed upon by all mankind: which therefore . . . must needs be the constant impressions which the souls of men receive in their first beings, and which they bring into the world with them. (49)

Locke hastens to point out that this "argument of universal consent" (49) is disproved by the fact that "there is none to which all mankind gives an universal assent" (49). In other words, there is no single idea which all humans everywhere agree upon. Moreover, he argues powerfully that if some or all ideas are really innate, even "children and idiots" (50) "must unavoidably perceive them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths" (50). For, as Locke points out, 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" (50). In other words, if ideas are innate in humans beings, even the mentally enfeebled must be aware of the existence these ideas.

Locke then turns to one important response to the objections which he raises: to be precise, that "all men know and assent to them *when they come to the use of reason*" (51). In other words, humans come to recognise the ideas which are innately lodged in their consciousness only when their capacity to reason has been developed. This argument takes two forms: either "as soon as men come to the use of reason these supposed native inscriptions come to be known and observed by them" (51) or the "use

and exercise of men's reason assists them in the discovery of these principles" (51). However, as Locke points out, there is a crucial contradiction at the heart of such an argument:

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 certainty can never be thought innate which we have need of reason to discover. . . . [T]o make reason discover those truths thus imprinted is to say that the use of reason discovers to a man what he knew before: and if men have those innate impressed truths originally, and before the use of reason, and yet are ignorant of them till they come to the use of reason, it is in effect to say that men know and know them not at the same time. (51-52)

Moreover, as Locke points out, how can it be that "what was imprinted by nature, as the foundation and guide of our reason, should need the use of reason to discover it?" (52).

Locke agrees that there are many ideas upon which many humans can agree upon (even though all humans do not agree upon all ideas). He agrees, too, that "there is no knowledge of these general and self-evident maxims, till it comes to the exercise of reason" (54), that is, ideas "are never known nor taken notice of" (54) before one is able to use one's reason. However, he argues that the "ready assent of the mind to some truths depends not either on native inscription [i.e. certain ideas being innate] or the use of reason, but on a faculty of mind quite distinct from both of them" (52-53). For Locke, the ability to assent to certain universal truths is the product of "discoveries made and verities introduced and *brought into* the mind" (my emphasis; 53) from outside.

In a nutshell, for Locke, ideas are acquired from without, "imprinted by external things" (55). The "senses at first let in *particular* ideas, and furnish the yet *empty cabinet*" (my emphasis; 55). Physical sensations lead to direct knowledge of specific things in the external world around the child as a result of which (s)he "knows as certainly as it can speak the difference between the ideas of sweet and bitter (i.e. that sweet is not bitter)" (55). In short, Locke is of the view that the "knowledge of some truths . . . is very early in the mind; but in a way that shows them not to be innate" (55). These ideas are "not innate, but acquired – it being about those first, which are imprinted about external things, with which infants have earliest to do, and which make the most frequent impressions on their senses" (55). Memory and language then intervene and build on this foundation: the

mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them [i.e. ideas based on sensations], they are lodged in the memory, and names go to them.

Afterwards, the mind proceeding further, abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names. (55)

It is in this manner that the "mind comes to be furnished with *ideas* and language, the *materials* about which to exercise its discursive faculty" (55).

BOOK II "OF IDEAS"

Chapter 1 "Of Ideas in General and their Original"

Locke agrees that "men have in their minds several ideas" (104) such as "those expressed by the words whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, elephant, army, drunkenness, and others" (104). His concern is with understanding how humans come by the ideas that they have in their minds: "[w]hence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety?" (104), he asks. The mind, he argues, is analogous to a "white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas" (104) until "experience" (104) comes to furnish it with "all the materials of reason and knowledge" (104). "In that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself" (104). "Our observation employed either about

external, sensible objects; or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by our selves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, spring" (104).

Locke is of the view that knowledge is primarily derived from our physical intercourse with the external world: our "[s]enses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to the various ways wherein those objects do affect them" (105). This effect which external objects has upon us is derived from the "sensible qualities" (105) of the objects in question: their colour, size, shape, texture, etc. Locke calls the ultimate source of such knowledge physical "SENSATION" (105). However, Locke argues, there is also an "other fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with *ideas*" (105), a source that is internal to humans (though not something innate): what Locke terms the "perception of the operations of our minds within us" (105). Locke argues that "when the soul comes to reflect on and consider" (105) the workings of the mind, this furnishes the understanding with another set of ideas, which could not be had from things without. And such are *perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing*, and all the different actings of our own minds – which we being conscious of, and observing in ourselves, do from these receive into our understandings as distinct ideas as we do from bodies affecting our senses. This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself. (105) This form of knowledge is, in short, "that notice which the mind takes of its own operations" (105). Locke calls this process "REFLECTION" (105) and the object thereof "internal sense" (105), i.e. sense "having nothing to do with external objects" (105).

Chapter 2 "Of Simple Ideas"

Locke is of the view that there are two kinds of ideas to be found in the mind. There are, firstly, "*simple*" (119) ideas derived from the direct sensing of physical objects: the "qualities that affect our senses" (119) produce ideas in the mind which "enter by the senses simple and unmixed" (119). Even though the same object can simultaneously produce several sensations, for example ice is both cold and hard, these each produce "distinct ideas in the mind, as the "smell and whiteness of a lily, or as the taste of sugar, and smell of a rose" (234). The result is that

nothing can be plainer to a man than the clear and distinct perception he has of those simple ideas; which being itself uncompounded, contains in it nothing but *one uniform appearance or conception in the mind*, and is not distinguishable into different ideas. (119)

These "simple ideas, the materials of all our knowledge" (119) are "furnished to the mind" (119) via "sensation and reflection" (119). Once "stored with these simple ideas" (119), Locke underscores that the "understanding" (119) has the "power" (119) to "repeat, compare, and unite them even to an almost infinite variety, and so can make at pleasure new complex *ideas*" (119). However, it is not within the "power of the most exalted wit, or enlarged understanding" (119) to "*invent or frame one new simple idea in the mind*" (120) nor "*destroy those that are there*" (120). It is not possible, he maintains, for anyone to "imagine any other *qualities* in bodies" (120) other than the "sounds, tastes, smells, visible and tangible qualities" (120) which they actually do have. In short, our ideas are a reflection of the physical world which we encounter around us.

Chapter 8 "Some Farther Considerations Concerning Our Simple Ideas"

Here, Locke argues that "whatsoever is so constituted in nature, as to be able to, by affecting our senses, to cause any perception in the mind, doth thereby produce in the understanding a simple idea" (132). Thus, the "*idea* of heat and cold, light and darkness, white and black, motion and rest, are equally clear and *positive ideas* in the mind" (132).

Locke stresses that even those qualities in objects which are traditionally construed in 'negative' terms (e.g. darkness is the absence of light) produce positive ideas in the mind: the "*idea of black* is no less positive in [the] mind, than that of white, *however the cause of that colour in the external object*" (133).

Chapter 12 "Of Complex Ideas"

Locke contends that there are also "*complex*" (163) ideas. These are compounded out of the 'simple' ideas produced by physical sensations. Complex ideas are produced via a process of generalisation in which language plays a key role (see Book III, chapters 2 and 3).

Chapter 27 "Of Identity and Diversity"

Here, Locke contends that the mind often undertakes to compare the "very being of things" (328). When "considering any thing as existing at any determined time and place, we compare it with itself existing at another time, and thereon form the *ideas of identity and diversity*" (328). When "we see any thing to be in any place in any instant of time, we are sure . . . that it is that very thing, and not another, which at that same time exists in another place" (328). This Locke terms the "*principium individuationis*" (330), according to which it is "existence itself which determines a being of any sort to a particular time and place incommunicable to two beings of the same kind" (330).

Locke is particularly concerned here with understanding the nature of human 'identity,' to be precise "what idea the word it is applied to stands for: it being one thing to be the same substance, another the same man, and a third the same person" (332). After all, all living creatures go through processes of growth and change which arguably risk changing their identity.

This is why Locke feels that to understand "wherein personal identity consists" (335), one must seek to understand "what *person* stands for" (335). A person is, he says,

a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places. Which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and it seems to me essential to it. It being impossible for anyone to perceive, without perceiving that he does perceive. When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. . . . For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that that makes everyone to be what he calls 'self,' and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things; in this alone consists personal identity, i.e., the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that the action was done. . . . Nothing but consciousness can unite remote existences into the same person. . . . [W]ithout consciousness there is no person. (335)

As Locke puts it, "it is by the consciousness it has of its present thoughts and actions that it is *self to itself* now, and so will be the same *self* as far as the same consciousness can extend to actions past or to come; and would be by distance of time, or change of substance, no more two persons than a man be two men, by wearing other cloaths to day that he did yesterday, with a long or short sleep between: the same consciousness uniting those distance actions into the same *person*, whatever substances contributed to their production" (336). Locke takes this claim to its controversial conclusion: "consciousness, as far as ever it can be extended, should it be to ages past, unites existences and actions, very remote in time, into the same person, as well as it does the existence and actions of the immediately preceding moment: so that whatever has the consciousness of present

and past actions is the same person to whom they both belong" (340).

At this point, firstly, Locke considers the degree to which "forgetfulness" (335) may undermine the unity of the self. In such cases, "our consciousness being interrupted, and we losing the sight of our past selves, doubts are raised whether we are the same thinking thing" (336). Locke's argument is that, where such interruptions occur, these are not the same person at all: it is wrong to "punish Socrates waking for what sleeping Socrates did" (342). Secondly, gesturing to Descartes' dualistic model of the mind, Locke wonders whether it is rather the "same immaterial substance or soul" (340) which provides the self's unity. Though he is not sure, he believes that the "more probable opinion is that this consciousness is annexed to and the affection of one individual immaterial substance" (345). The self is a thinking thing but, whether or not it consists in an immaterial substance distinct from the body, self is that "conscious thinking thing (whatever substance made up of, whether spiritual or material, simple or compounded, it matters not) which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery; and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends" (341). Whether or not there is an immaterial self, this

every intelligent being, sensible of happiness or misery, must grant, that there is something that is *himself*, that he is concerned for, and would have happy; that this self has existed in a continued duration more than one instance, and therefore 'tis possible may exist, as it has done, months and yers to come, without any certain bounds to be set to its duration; and may be the same self, by the same consciousness, continued on for the future. And thus, by this consciousness, he finds himself to be the *same self* which such or such an action some years since by which he comes to be happy or miserable. In all which account of self, the same numerical substance is not considered as making the same self: but the same continued consciousness, in which several substances may have been united and again separated from it, which, whilst they continued in a vital union with that wherein this consciousness then resided, made a part of that same self. (346)

'Person'

is the name for this *self*. Wherever a man finds what he calls himself, there I think another may say is the same person. It is a forensick term appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law, and happiness and misery. This personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness, whereby it becomes concerned and accountable, owns and imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground and for the same reason that it does the present. (346)

BOOK III "OF WORDS"

Chapter 2 "Of the Signification of Words"

Here, Locke turns his attention to language and the role of words in the development of complex ideas. He argues that humans apply particular words (e.g. 'hardness' or 'whiteness') to denote the simple ideas produced in our minds from our encounter with the tangible qualities associated with specific objects. Words, firstly, 'express' the particular ideas which men have in their minds (this is what philosophers of language call an *expressivist* or instrumentalist model of language) and a vehicle for communicating these ideas to others.

Locke stresses that humans do not need words in order to think in that the ideas which we have in our minds precede language (a view that many linguists and philosophers of language do not accept today). However, words are necessary for the communication of ideas from one person to another. Words are, as Locke puts it, the "*sensible signs of his ideas who uses them*" (my emphasis; 405). Without the aid of

language, ideas remain "all within his own breast, invisible and hidden from others" (405). Therefore, Locke argues, "it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs whereby those invisible ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others" (405). Nothing was more suited to this purpose than "articulate sounds" (405). Men make use of such "marks" (405) in order either "to record their own thoughts for the assistance of their own memory" (405) or "to bring out their ideas and lay them before the view of others" (405). In short, words "in their primary or immediate signification stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them" (405) and the "end of speech is that these sounds . . . may make known his ideas to the hearer" (405).

In Locke's view, the meaning of a word is the idea which it denotes. The "*ideas* they stand for are their proper and immediate signification"(405):

words in their primary or immediate signification stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever, or carelessly those ideas are collected from the things which they are suppose to represent. (405)

Locke stresses in this regard that there is no natural or immutable connection between a sign and a particular idea about reality. Words

came to be made use of by men as the signs of their ideas, not by any natural connexion that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas, for then there would be one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea. (405)

Although words, "by long and familiar use . . . come to excite in men certain ideas so constantly and readily, that they are apt to suppose a natural connexion between them" (408), signification is, Locke stresses, a "perfectly arbitrary" (408) affair with the result that "every man has so inviolable a liberty to make words stand for what ideas he pleases, that no one hath the power to make others have the same *ideas* in their mind that he has" (408).

Words, Locke argues, also have "secret reference to two other things" (406). Firstly, their words are "*marks of the ideas in the minds also of other men with whom they communicate: for else they should talk in vain*" (406). Humans "stand not usually to examine whether the idea they and those they discourse with have in their minds be the same" (407), assuming that the "idea they make it a sign of is precisely the same, to which the understanding men of that country apply that name" (407). Secondly, because "men would not be thought to talk barely of their own imagination, but of things as they really are" (407), it is also assumed that words "stand also for the reality of things" (407). In other words, they assume that words are referential, to be precise, that they label things (referents) found in the real world (this is what philosophers of language term a *mimetic* or *referential* model of signification).

Chapter 3 "Of General Terms"

Here, Locke points out that though "[a]ll things that exist" (409) are "particulars" (409), the "far greatest part of words . . . are general terms" (256). The reason for this is two-fold. Firstly, it is impossible that "every particular thing should have a distinct peculiar name" (409). It is necessary in the "application of names to things, that the mind should have distinct ideas of the things, and retain also the particular name that belongs to every one, with its peculiar appropriation to that *idea*" (409). However, Locke points out, it is "beyond the power of human capacity to frame and retain distinct ideas of all the particular things we meet with: every bird, and beast men saw, every tree and plant, that affected the senses could not find a place in the most capacious understanding" (409). Secondly, to "heap up names of particular things" (409) would not "serve them to communicate their thoughts" (409). If names were solely "applied to particular things, whereof I alone having the ideas in my mind, the names of them could not be significant or intelligible to

another who as not acquainted with all those very particular things which had fallen under my notice" (410). In short, a "distinct name for every particular thing which not be of any great use for the improvement of knowledge: which though founded in particular things, enlarges itself by general views; to which things reduced into sorts under general names are properly subservient" (410)

All this raises a key question for Locke: "since all things that exist are only particulars, how come we by general terms, or where find we those general natures they are supposed to stand for?" (410). His answer: words

become general by being made the signs of general ideas; and ideas become general by separating them from the circumstances of time and place. . . By this way of abstraction they are made capable of representing more individuals than one. (410-411)

In other words, for example, children start out by coming into contact with specific individuals such as their mother or nurse or a particular animal (e.g. a horse named Bucephalus). On the basis of this experience of specific individuals, children come to derive an understanding of mothers or nurses in general or species of animals (e.g. horses in general) in terms of certain qualities which these individuals share:

when time and a larger acquaintance have made them observe that there are a great many other things in the world, that in some common agreements of shape, and several other qualities, resemble their father and mother, and those persons they have been used to, they frame an idea, which they find those many particulars do partake in; and to that they give . . . the name man for example. And thus they come to have a general name, and a general idea. (411)

General "natures or notions are . . . abstract and partial ideas of more complex ones, taken at first from particular existences" (412) by leaving out those things which are "peculiar to each individual" (412) and retaining those "they are found to agree in" (412).

This is why Locke concludes that "general and universal belong not to the real existence of things; but are the inventions and creatures of the understanding, made by it, for its own use, and concern only signs" (414). In other words, it is humans who do the classifying by which both similarities and differences are noted. Words are general, he argues, "when used for signs of general ideas" (414) and ideas are general "when they are set up as the representatives of many particular things" (414). However, "universality belongs not to things themselves which are all of them particular in their existence" (414). What general words signify, Locke argues, is a "sort of things" (414). Each general word is the "sign of an abstract idea in the mind, to which idea, as things existing are found to agree, so they come to be ranked under that name" (414). By general words, Locke means what we would normally refer to as 'species.' It is the mind which attributes particular objects to specific species on the basis of what they have in common with each other.

Locke is evidently targetting in all this the belief of Platonists in the existence of essences or ideal forms. The "essences of the . . . species of things, are nothing else but these abstract ideas" (414) to which humans give general names that unite objects that possess similar qualities. The grouping of things into species is based on the natural "similitude" (415) that some things have with others. Nature, he admits, "in the production of things makes several of them alike" (415). However, the "*sorting* of them under names is the *workmanship of the understanding*" (415) which,

taking occasion from the similitude it observes among them to make abstract general ideas, and set them up in the mind, with names annexed to them, as patterns or forms (for in that sense the word form has a very proper signification), to which as particular things existing are found to agree, so they come to be of that species, have that denomination, or are put into that *classis*. For when we say that this is a *man*, that a *horse*, this *justice*, that *cruelty*, this a *watch*, that a *jack*; what else do we do but rank things under different specific names, as agreeing to those abstract ideas, of

which we have made the names the signs? And what are the essences of those species, set out and marked by names, but those abstract ideas in the mind, which are, as it were, the bonds between particular things that exist, and the names they are to be ranked under? (415)

Locke concludes that the "essences of species . . . neither are, nor can ever be any thing, but those precise abstract ideas we have in our minds" (415-416).

Locke argues that these "essences, or abstract ideas (which are the measures of names and the boundaries of species)" (416) are entirely the "*workmanship of the understanding*" (416). The proof of this is that complex ideas are "often, in several men, different collections of simple ideas: and therefore that is covetousness to one man, which is not so to another" (416). Even "in substances, where their abstract ideas seem to be taken from the things themselves, they are not constantly the same" (416). The result is that "every distinct idea is a distinct essence: and the names that stand for such distinct ideas are the names of things essentially different. Thus a circle is as essentially different from an oval, as sheep from a goat" (416). Thus, he concludes, "any two abstract ideas, that in any part vary one from another, with two distinct names annexed to them, constitute two distinct sorts, or, if you please, *species*" (416-417).

Locke then attempts to define the "several significations of the word essence" (417). Locke draws a distinction between what he terms "real" (417) and "nominal" (417) essences. The former term alludes to its original definition as the "very being of any thing, whereby it is what it is" (417), the "real internal, but generally in substances, unknown constitution of things, whereon their discoverable qualities depend" (417). The latter term refers to the "essence of each genus or sort" (417) which is nothing less than "that abstract idea, which the general or sortal . . . name stands for" (417). There are two views "concerning the real essences of corporeal substances" (417). One camp argues that there exist a "certain number of those essences, according to which all natural things are made, and wherein they exactly every one of them partake and so become this or that species" (418). The "other, and more rational opinion, is of those who look on all natural things to have a real, but unknown constitution of their insensible parts, from which flow those sensible qualities which serve us to distinguish them one from another, according as we have occasion to rank them into sorts under common denominations" (418). However, the former view of "essences as a certain number of forms or moulds, wherein all natural things that exist are cast" (418) cannot account for the existence of monsters and other anomalies: the "frequent productions of monsters, in all the species of animals and of changelings, and other strange issues of humane birth, carry with them difficulties not possible to consist with this hypothesis: since it is as impossible that two things partaking exactly of the same real essence should have different properties" (418).

In short, Locke is of the view that

men making abstract ideas, and settling them in their minds with names annexed to them, do thereby enable themselves to consider things, and discourse of them, as it were in bundles, for the easier and readier improvement and communication of their knowledge; which would advance but slowly, were their words and thoughts confined only to particulars. (420)