



An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

John Locke

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The main thesis is that there are “No Innate Principles”, by this reasoning:

If we will attentively consider new born children, we shall have little reason to think that they bring many ideas into the world with them

and that “by degrees afterward, ideas come into their minds.” Book I of the Essay is devoted to an attack on nativism or the doctrine of innate ideas. Locke allowed that some ideas are in the mind from an early age, but argued that such ideas are furnished by the senses starting in the womb: for instance, differences between colours or tastes. If we have a universal understanding of a concept like sweetness, it is not because this is an innate idea, but because we are all exposed to sweet tastes at an early age.

One of Locke’s fundamental arguments against innate ideas is the very fact that there is no truth to which all people attest. He took the time to argue against a number of propositions that rationalists offer as universally accepted truth, for instance the principle of identity, pointing out that at the very least children and idiots are often unaware of these propositions.

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