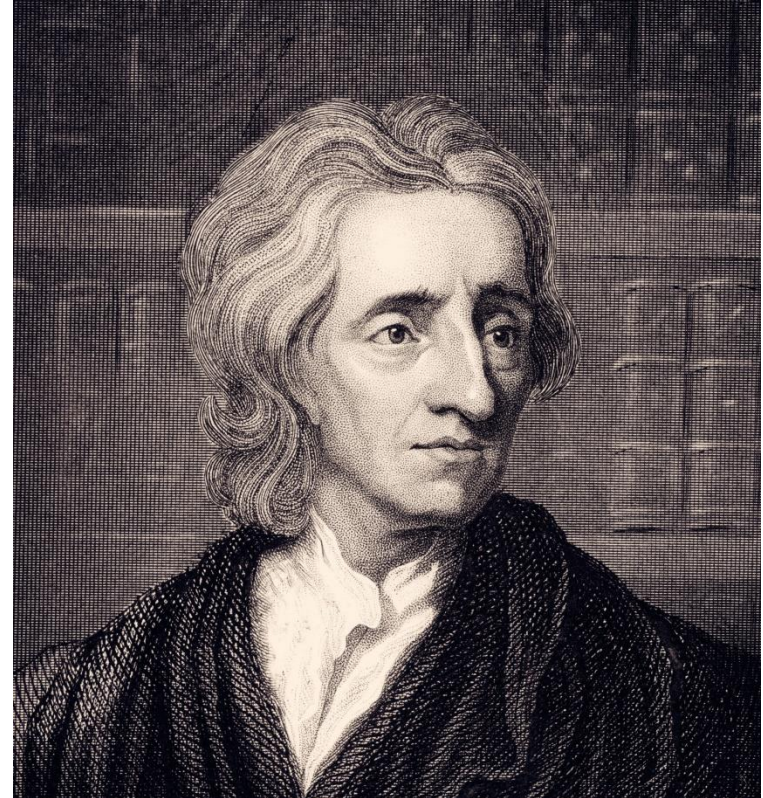


John Locke's Early Life

John Locke was born in 1632 in Wrington, Somerset. His father was a lawyer and small landowner who had fought on the Parliamentary side during the English Civil wars of the 1640s. Using his wartime connections, he placed his son in the elite Westminster School.

The English philosopher and political theorist John Locke (1632-1704) laid much of the groundwork for the Enlightenment and made central contributions to the development of liberalism. Trained in medicine, he was a key advocate of the empirical approaches of the Scientific Revolution. In his "Essay Concerning Human Understanding," he advanced a theory of the self as a blank page, with knowledge and identity arising only from accumulated experience. His political theory of government by the consent of the governed as a means to protect the three natural rights of "life, liberty and estate" deeply influenced the United States' founding documents. His essays on religious tolerance provided an early model for the separation of church and state.



Book 1-Chapter 1: Introduction

- Locke explains in more detail what the *Essay* is about, and why one might care about such subjects.
- It is pleasant and useful.
- Locke maintains, to learn about both the capabilities and the limits of human understanding.
- Knowing our own limited capacity for reasoning and knowledge will prevent people from idly speculating about things they can never understand.
- Instead, those who understand the workings of their own minds will be freed "to busy their heads, and employ their hands with variety, delight and satisfaction."

Chapter 2: No Innate Principles in the Mind

- Locke observes that many people of his era believe in "innate principles," essential ideas which are "stamped upon the mind of man" from the moment the human mind is created.
- Locke says, is a false supposition, and everything that is usually thought of as an "innate principle" is actually learned through experience.
- Some people argue that certain principles must be innate because everyone agrees they are true. Principles cited as examples include "whatever is, is" and "it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be."
- Locke points out, such principles are not universally agreed to, since children and intellectually disabled individuals—among others—do not always accept them. If the principles were really innate, he says, they would be obvious even to a child.

Chapter 3: No Innate Practical Principles

- Locke now turns his attention to the special case of "practical principles"—those which tell us how to act, rather than what to believe.
- These, he says, cannot be innate either, because people in different societies differ so greatly in which principles they esteem.
- What is considered justice in one country, for example, might be considered cruelty in another. Similarly, what one religion preaches as a duty might be decried as a sin in another religious tradition. Far from being innately present in the mind, he says, principles come from the social influence which shape a person's habits and beliefs from infancy.

Chapter 4: Concerning Innate Principles, Both Speculative and Practical

- Locke draws a relationship between principles and the simpler ideas that make them up. Principles cannot be innate unless the ideas of which they consist are also innate.
- The idea that "the whole is greater than the parts," for example, can't be an innate principle unless the mind also innately understands the concepts of "whole" and "parts."
- For Locke, this is further proof that principles are not innate at all, since many of the ideas that make them up are clearly not innate. Babies, for instance, have no concept of "whole" and "parts," and people brought up in atheistic cultures may have no idea of "God" at all. If the innate.

CONCLUSION

Locke will give plenty of examples of what constitutes an idea in later chapters. As he discusses these, the *Essay's* basic model of the mind will come into focus.

Most of Book 1 is devoted to a critique of philosophical **nativism**. Nativists believe that the mind comes preloaded with general abstract ideas which it uses to reason about the world. Locke, in contrast to the nativists, is an **empiricist**. From his viewpoint, the mind brings no ideas of its own into the world. None are "pre-installed"; all must be acquired through experience.

Although the *Essay* is a remarkable **intellectual achievement**, it shows its age in many respects.