

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 to 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. . . .