Welcome back. We are beginning the meat of our lectures on the theory of knowledge. We did a little introductory discussion last time about some of the distinctive questions that arise within the context of this subject and now we’re going to dive right in with a discussion of empiricism and specifically the empiricism of John Locke.

Empiricism is the view that all substantive knowledge originates in sensory experience. Everything that we know that we would deem substantial comes to us through — originates through the senses. Now, I say substantive knowledge and not all knowledge. Because most empiricists will be willing to accept that certain capacities and inclinations may be innate, and by innate we mean inborn. So the empiricist may not deny, for example, that the desire to avoid pain and pursue pleasure is an innate, hard-wired kind of desire. The empiricist may also not deny that certain tautological forms of knowledge — for example, logical truths like the sentence A equals A is a logical truth. The empiricist may also be willing to admit that there may be some tautological logical truths which originate not in experience but are known a priori, a priori meaning independently of experience and typically conceived as knowledge by intuition. But the empiricist is going to insist that all of our substantial knowledge originates and sends experience.

John Locke is the most well known and influential empiricist. He not only establishes the basic arguments for and principles of empiricism as well as introduce its basic lingo, the concepts of empiricism, but his version of the doctrine is the one that everyone after him reacts to. So, in a sense, Locke begins a conversation about the origins of knowledge, the rest of which after him consist of responses to him. So in that sense he’s extraordinarily influential and important.

In the 20th century empiricism is kind of retooled. It’s preconceived by the logical positivist. But even this new empiricism doesn’t depart all that much from Locke’s
original. The essay concerning human understanding which you have selections from in your reading — in your course pack — the essay concerning human understanding is where Locke offers a complete articulation of an empiricist epistemology. We’ve already dipped into this text once already in our discussions on personal identity and the stuff on personal identity that we did from Locke is also from the essay.

The essay begins — an essay. When you think of an essay you think of something short. I mean, this is the essay and this is volume one of two volumes. And so this is a massive tome. We will read carefully selected excerpts that will give you a very good sense of what he’s doing here without sort of trudging through all the details which would go way beyond the scope of an introductory level course.

Locke begins the essay with an attack on the idea that there is innate knowledge of any kind — substantive knowledge of any kind. Indeed, the whole first book, Book 1 of the essay, is devoted to the critique of the concept of innate ideas. And by innate, remember we mean inborn, knowledge that we come furnished with at birth. And Locke rejects the idea of there being innate knowledge in two areas. He denies that there are any what he calls innate speculative ideas, by which he means abstract and theoretical principles such as mathematical, logical, and other such truths. He wants to say: Look, none of the truths of arithmetic, geometry, logic — none of the knowledge we have in these subjects is innate. None of it is inborn.

He also wants to deny that there are any innate practical principles. And by practical principles, he means knowledge which informs action. So when we’re talking about practical principles we mean primarily moral, legal, political, prudential — all the types of knowledge that informs our actions, Locke says none of this is innate either. That both our speculative ideas and our practical principles are acquired by way of sensory experience, not by way of an inborn store of knowledge.

Now, there’s a certain oddity in Locke’s critique. Because the aim of the essay
is to articulate and defend an empiricist theory of knowledge, it seems as if the critique of innate ideas is intended to be a tacit argument on behalf of empiricism. So it certainly at least looks like Locke is doing something like this. You know, first he’s saying, hey, there’s not knowledge that is inborn. We’re not born knowing anything. And from there it looks like it’s supposed to follow that since we’re not born knowing anything, all the knowledge that we have is acquired and acquired by means of experience. That’s at least what the structure of the argument looks like when we step back and look at Book 1 as a whole.

But of course there is a hole in the logic here. From the fact that knowledge is not innate, it does not follow that the sole source of knowledge could be — the sole source of knowledge must be experience. This leaves out the possibility that some of our knowledge, if not all of our knowledge, may be known \textit{a priori}. That is, not innate but also not from experience. It ignores the possibility that our knowledge may be, for example, intuitive.

And so indeed one of the things that Descartes is gonna say — because we’re gonna do Descartes after we do Locke — one of the things that Descartes is gonna say is that some of our knowledge must be known \textit{a priori}, that it’s impossible that all of our knowledge comes from experience, and Descartes will have some very compelling arguments as to why that’s the case. And so there’s at least the appearance of a kind of a logical error here to the extent to which it looks like Locke is trying to argue from there not being any innate ideas to the idea that all ideas come from experience. There seems to be a missing link there explaining why we should rule out the possibility that some, most, or all of our knowledge is known \textit{a priori}.

So the question then becomes, well, why — why this sustained critique of the concept of innate ideas? We get a clue — or actually we get more than a clue. We see another motivation for opposing innate ideas towards the end of Book 1, end of
Chapter 3. In order to explain this, it’ll require to talk a little bit about the more general the context that Locke is working in.

One of the most important ideas of what we’ll call the age of reason and enlightenment — so this is gonna be the 17th and 18th centuries. One of the most important ideas, as we’ve already seen and as I’ve already mentioned, is the idea that the individual is an autonomous agent. That this idea of individual autonomy or at liberty, as we sometimes call it — this idea unpacks into a series of smaller ideas. When we speak about the enlightenment idea of individual autonomy, what we really mean is the enlightenment’s belief that the individual is both free and capable in his actions and in his beliefs. That is, that we come to understand by our own efforts and we decide how to act by our own will.

The previous eras, the eras prior to the enlightenment, prior to the age of reason, remember, were characterized by the idea of external authority, that the individual is ruled over by external forces. And this idea was pervasive in the sense that it was believed that the individual is ruled over in every sphere of his life by external forces. Whether in politics, in religion, or in the realm of ideas.

Locke, I think — and it’s more than a speculation. The things he says, I think, pretty clearly indicate this. Locke was, in a sense, offended by the notion that there are innate ideas. Indeed, he saw such a notion as an offense against the idea of individual autonomy and specifically against the — it’s an offense against the idea of intellectual autonomy. Remember, if an idea is innate, that means that it’s inborn. And if it’s inborn, what that means is that one can’t help but hold it. So if some idea is inborn, it means that you have that idea whether you like it or not. To say an idea is innate is to say that no reasons are required to justify it. It’s to say that it is beyond dispute, that it is simply a matter of necessity.

Now, think about this. If you’re a person who believes strongly in human
intellectual autonomy, then the idea that there’s a whole bunch of pieces of knowledge, that there’s a whole stock of knowledge that is not the result of the individual’s effort but simply exists inborn, this speaks against the idea of intellectual autonomy and speaks against the idea that we come to understand, that we come to know, on our own engines under our own lights. And the larger that stock of innate knowledge is, the less intellectual autonomy we would seem to have.

Let me just point out a few of the passages where I think Locke expresses this idea. With respect to the idea that if knowledge is innate, then it’s not the product of human activity, of the individual’s effort. This is on page 116, paragraph 25. Locke says, “When men have found some general propositions that could not be doubted of as soon as understood, it was, I know, a short and easy way to conclude them innate. This being once received, it eased the lazy from the pains of search and stopped the inquiry of the doubtful concerning all that was once styled innate.” So Locke here is sort of saying that, look, to believe too strongly in innate ideas, to believe that there are innate ideas, is a force for laziness, for intellectual laziness. For lack of curiosity, for lack of inquisitiveness, for refusal to question.

On page 115 he says, quote, “I hope it will not be thought arrogance to say that perhaps we should make greater progress in the discovery of rational and contemplative knowledge if we sought it in the fountain in the consideration of things themselves and made use rather of our own thoughts than other men’s to find it. The floating of other men’s opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. Aristotle was certainly a knowing man but nobody ever thought him so because he blindly embraced and competently vented the opinions of another,” unquote.

So here again Locke is disparaging the notion that there’s anything that we know that isn’t the result of our own effort. Indeed, he’s disparaging the person who
embraces knowledge that’s not his own, that’s not the result of his own endeavors. And so I think that entirely aside from the question of justifying empiricism, showing the truth of empiricism, the attack on innate ideas is as much about making a statement on behalf of human intellectual autonomy as it is about trying to prove the truth of empiricism. Indeed, I don’t think that the attack of innate ideas by itself constitutes a sufficient proof on behalf of empiricism. Because once again, it leaves open the possibility that some, most, or all of our knowledge is neither innate nor empirical but rather *a priori* or intuitive.

Now, the main — now, let’s shift over to the actual details of Locke’s critique of innatism, of innate ideas. Locke says that the primary argument on behalf of innate ideas — in other words, the primary argument being advanced by those who think that there is innate knowledge — the primary argument that they invoke is an argument from universality. The idea is that, well, there are some things that everyone believes. And if that’s the case, if indeed there are things that everyone believes, that shows that those things must be inborn.

And I guess the logic is supposed to be that if knowledge was the product of the individual’s effort, one would expect a certain diversity within the context of knowledge. That is, one would — if people came to every belief by their own lights, we would expect people to have different beliefs. Because there are some beliefs that seem to be widespread, that seem to be within the province of everyone, that would seem to suggest that they are in fact innate. They are inborn. Locke takes this to be the primary argument on behalf of innatism and spends the entirety of Book 1 criticizing this argument, both in the context of speculative and practical knowledge.

Locke has a general reply to this argument, to this position. Although he offers a lot of sort of detailed arguments against individual innate ideas, his general reply to the concept of innate ideas and the argument I just articulated is nothing is universally
agreed to. So Locke, in a sense, denies the initial premise on which he claims the innateness theory is based. People who support the notion of innate ideas say, “Well, there’s some things that everybody agrees on, that everybody knows, and those things must be innate.” Locke’s answer is, “Actually, there’s nothing that everybody agrees to. There’s nothing that everybody knows.” And that shows, in fact, that no knowledge is innate. Because indeed, if knowledge — if there was innate knowledge, then everyone would know it. If there were certain things that were inborn, then anyone human should know them. And because there’s nothing that everyone human knows, Locke deduces that there’s no knowledge that is innate.

And Locke says — this is on page 39, paragraph 4 — he says, “This argument of universal consent which is made use of to prove innate principles seems to me a demonstration that there are none such because there are none to which all mankind give a universal assent.” So Locke is going to reject the innateness theory but denying its initial foundational premise by denying the idea that there are any — that there’s anything that everyone knows.

And then he goes to break down two — to run this argument in the area both of speculative knowledge and practical knowledge. And to give Locke credit, he does conduct the arguments in a way that gives his opponent his best possible case. In other words, the examples of innate — the examples of speculative knowledge, which Locke argues are not innate, are all the kinds of examples which if they were innate, they would be the most likely candidates for innate knowledge because they are by far the most universal.

So take, for example, the basic principle of identity: that everything is identical with itself, that A equals A. Now, this certainly seems to be — if any principle of logic is universal, the principle of identity would seem to be one of them. Another one would be the principle of non-contradiction which says that it cannot be the case that both P is
true and not P is true. In both of these cases we have speculative principles which, of
course, enjoy widespread agreement. That is, an enormous number of people know
these principles to be true. But the question is, does everyone know them to be true
and Locke says, well, certainly not.

And we have to be prepared that Locke is gonna use some language that we
don’t use today. Locke says, with respect to basic mathematical and logical trues like
the ones I’ve just given — Lock says, “Well, look. Children and idiots don’t know
them.” By idiots he means mentally impaired people and indeed idiot was the scientific
term at that time. And so I’m quoting him, of course. Today the word idiot is a word of
derision. It’s not a word — it’s not a descriptive word of science. But when you read
this, you have to realize — remember, this book is written in the 1600s. In the 1600s,
idiot was a technical term, a scientific term for someone who was mentally deficient.
And so Locke wants to say, “Look. There’s all sorts of people — whether we’re talking
about children or people who are mentally handicapped or retarded in some way — who
couldn’t tell you first thing about any of these logical or mathematical principles. But if
this knowledge is allegedly inborn, is endemic to the human species, then indeed
everyone should know them. And isn’t it odd that there are some who don’t?” He
says this on page 40. I won’t read the quotations, but this is — where he makes his
argument is on page 40.

Now, he does consider a possible response. The defender of innateness might
say, “No, no, no. That’s not a good counter example. What I meant to say was that
the knowledge is innate in that it’s inborn, but it’s only in a sense accessible to people
once they’ve come into the use of their reason. But it’s the sense that the knowledge
sort of sits latent until a person comes to be able to use their rational faculties,
whereupon that knowledge becomes explicit. Obviously, in the case of a child, they
haven’t come to the use of reasoning yet and so the knowledge hasn’t yet become
explicit. In the case of a so-called idiot, someone who’s mentally impaired, they may never attain the use of their reason and thus knowledge may never become active.

Locke does not think much of this reply. Locke says, “Look. If we know something as a result of reasoning, then that means it’s not known innately.” In other words, the only reason why a piece of knowledge might only come to be when one’s reason is employed is because one proves it. What reason is is an instrument of proof. Our ability to reason is identical with our ability to prove things. In a sense the reply contradicts itself. On the one hand, it says that knowledge is — a certain piece of knowledge is inborn. On the other hand, it says that that piece of knowledge only comes to the fore when we’re able to reason, which means that it comes to the fore when we are able to deduce it. And he says that this is just simply a convoluted, contradictory answer. He talks about this on page 43.

With respect to practical principles, the argument that there are either moral or other principles of action which are innate, Locke’s basic argument here is this. He says there’s far more universality, even though it’s not truly universal; there’s far more universality on basic logical principles, like A equals A, than there is on moral and other practical principles. That is, a lot more people agree that A equals A than agree on any particular moral or practical principle.

Now, if it was not the case that even — if even the universality of logical truths was not sufficient to show innateness, then how could the far lesser unanimity that we have with respect to practical principles constitute a case for innateness? There’s even less agreement on practical principles than on speculative truths, and so practical principles provide an even worse basis from which to infer — from which to infer innateness.

There’s two places where he makes this argument. He makes it on page 64, in the first paragraph, quote: “If those speculative maxims whereof we discoursed in the
foregoing chapter have none of the actual universal assent from all mankind as we there approved, it is much more visible concerning practical principles that they come short of a universal reception. And I think it will be hard to instance any moral rule which can pretend to so general and ready an assent as what is is, or to be so manifest a truth as this that it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be, whereby it is evident that they are further removed from a title to being innate."

There he’s just simply making the point that, look, if you couldn’t make the case for innateness on the basis of mathematical knowledge and logical knowledge, which is widespread though even there not universal, certainly you’re not gonna make the case for innateness on the grounds of moral principles and other practical principles which enjoy even less agreement and less universality than speculative ones.

He also points out on page 72 — on page 72 he points out the radically different values of peoples in different places in different times. He says on page 72, paragraph 9: “Robberies, murders, rapes are the sports of men instead of liberty from punishment and censure. Have there not been whole nations and those of the most civilized people amongst whom exposing their children and leaving them in the fields to perish by want or wild beasts has been the practice, as little condemned or scrupled as the beginning of them. Do they not still in some countries put them into the same graves with their mothers if they die in childbirth or dispatch them if a pretended astrologer declares them to have unhappy stars?” And so what he wants to say is — here he’s simply giving an illustration of just how radically different the mores and values are of peoples across the world, and from one time to another, in order to show that there isn’t anything like the kind of universality that one would need to suggest that such knowledge is innate.

Now, one thing that Locke acknowledges and concedes, although it’s not really a concession. I think it’s entirely consistent with his stand against innate ideas. Locke
does admit that there are certain innate practical mechanisms. I'll give you an example. This is the example that he gives. It would seem that every human organism is inclined to avoid pain and pursue pleasure. That is, we instinctively and naturally pull away from things that hurt and we instinctively and naturally reach out towards things that feel good. We're again talking about instinctual reactions. This does not mean that a fully developed conscious person necessarily follows these inclinations, only that these inclinations are indeed innate. They are hard-wired into every person.

Locke acknowledges this on page 67: “Nature, I confess, has put into man a desire of happiness and an aversion to misery. These indeed are innate practical principles which do continue constantly to operate and influence all of our actions without ceasing. They may be observed in all persons and all ages, steady and universal.”

But notice, this is not an instance of innate knowledge. These are only innate tendencies. They’re innate inclinations or dispositions. Locke is solely making an argument against the idea of there being innate knowledge. That there are substantive things that we know which do not come from our own investigations or our own reasoning which are simply inborn. And so Locke does on to say, “I do not deny that there are natural tendencies imprinted in the minds of men.” And so he acknowledges that there are things that are innate. He’s not against innateness in general. What he’s against is the concept of innate ideas. He’s against the concept that there is knowledge that is innate.

Now, the last thing I want to do — I want to take about is Locke’s speculations as to why people believe in innate ideas. Given that Locke apparently, so he thinks, has shown us that innate ideas — that the very notion is bogus, why do so many people believe in them and why do so many philosophers believe in them? Locke offers both
an innocent reason and a cynical reason. The innocent reason is that a number of things are taught early in childhood. That there are a number of fundamental things that we learn early on as children, as young children. And because we learn them when they were so young, we’ve forgotten the context of their acquisition. That is, there’s knowledge that we have that we literally don’t remember getting. That’s how long we’ve had it. And because these ideas, because this knowledge reaches back as far as we can remember, it’s easy to assume that they were innate, that they were there all along, that they were there from birth. In other words, because we can’t remember acquiring this knowledge, it’s easy for us then to conclude that it was never acquired; it was always there. And he says this on page 87. I won’t read it all, but there’s a page length discussion of this what I’m calling innocent reason for believing in innate ideas.

There is also, however, a more cynical reason for believing in innate ideas and this again taps into this more general point of contention that arises within the context of the age of reason and enlightenment. This cynical reason for believing in innate ideas goes right to the heart of Locke’s case for and love for individual autonomy specifically, especially intellectual autonomy. Think about it. Innate ideas, if there are any, are beyond dispute. That is, you can’t argue about something that’s inborn. Even if you prove it false, that does not stop the other person from holding it. If it is innate, if you are born thinking or believing P, then there’s no way to dispute or refute or reject P.

The concept, in short, provides cover for those would seek to control others’ beliefs and actions. If I want to control what you think, one way is to tell you that — is to convince you that what you think is imprinted on your brain from birth. In fact, there’s no other way that you could think. And I want you to consider — think about how often supposedly innate characteristics have been invoked in order to keep people down or in order to keep people confined to certain roles. In other words, how often is it that person A has convinced person B that something — some characteristic, some
idea — was innate in order to prevent person B from stepping outside their prescribed role or to keep person B somehow otherwise under person A’s control? Think about how common that is.

I give you one very prominent example. Until quite recently — indeed, until about the turn of the century, a little later than that in some places — women’s allegedly innate emotionalism — so the argument was that women have an innate emotionalism that men don’t have. This alleged innate emotionalism was used as an excuse, as a reason to deny women the right to vote, to deny them the political franchise as well as to deny them political office. In other words, it was asserted, “Well, women are so emotional by nature that they’re unable to engage in sustained clear thinking, and so we don’t want them in -- they shouldn’t be in any positions of authority or power.”

Now, of course this is totally bogus. Women are no less capable of these — have no more of an innate block against performing these sorts of leadership functions as anybody else — as men are. And yet at the time, because men wanted to keep women disenfranchised and men wanted to keep women from holding political office, they in a sense invented something, invented an obstacle. And by claiming it was innate, in a sense, made that obstacle unnegotiable. Took it off the table.

Locke talks about this on pages 116 to 117. Speaking of the idea of innate knowledge, quote, “It was of no small advantage to those who affected to be masters and teachers to make that the principle of principles; that principles must not be questioned. For having once established this tenet that there are innate principles, it put their followers upon a necessity of receiving some doctrines of such. Nor is it a small power it gives to one man over another to have the authority to be the dictator of principles and teacher of unquestionable truths, and to make a man swallow that for an innate principle which may serve to his purpose who teaches them. Whereas, had they examined the ways whereby men came to the knowledge of many universal truths, they
would have found them to result in the minds of men from the being of things themselves when duly considered.”

So Locke sees the doctrine of innate ideas as an instrument of intellectual oppression. The notion of innate ideas allows tyrants cover for their tyranny. It gives an excuse for people — some people to hold other people back, for some people to constrain other people’s thoughts and activities. And for this reason more than any other, I think, Locke is offended by the idea of innate knowledge.

And so aside from the purely academic and scholarly interest in providing an empiricist account of knowledge — in other words, sure, there’s enormous academic and scholarly interest behind Locke’s laying out a complete empiricistic kind of knowledge, but there is also a deeper, more sort of political purpose. For Locke, empiricism is in a way an articulation of human intellectual autonomy. Because empiricism is at its heart the doctrine that knowledge is acquired by the individual, in the individual going out and engaging in the world.

And that is a vision that affirms the intellectual autonomy of the individual in a way that is stronger than almost any other. I think that the entire essay operates at both of these levels. On the one hand, it is a philosophical and even a scientific document. It’s an attempt, in a sense, to offer the anatomy of human — give an account of the anatomy of human knowledge acquisition. But it also is a political text in that it purports to show the exercise of the individual’s intellectual autonomy in all of its glory. And I think that Locke is as much — who is intensely engaged in the liberation politics of his age — that is, in the argument Locke was at the forefront in the vanguard of those arguing for liberal democracy, as we will see towards the latter part of the course. I think that Locke is as motivated here by those political notions of autonomy, by the political idea of autonomy, as he is by this more scientific academic interest in the origins of knowledge.
Now, next time we're gonna go into the details. We're gonna examine more carefully Locke's account of how we acquire knowledge. Rather than things to think about in terms of sort of questions, I'm gonna give you a bunch of key terms to pay attention to. Because really what Locke is gonna do now is sort of, like I said, give an actual anatomy of human knowledge acquisition.

And so I want you to pay attention to the details of that story, that picture, and here are some key terms to sort of notice and to see if you can define. The first is simple ideas. Then complex ideas. Ideas of sensation. Ideas of reflection. Primary qualities and secondary qualities. So maybe jot these key terms down and as you're reading the next parts of the Locke selections, I want you to see if you can identify these terms, define them, and explain in your own words how they fit into Locke's account of knowledge acquisition.

So until next time, we'll see you later.