

Class 13 - Against Innate Ideas, For the Primary/ Secondary Distinction
Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*
Book I, Chapters 1-2 (AW 316-322)
Book IV, Chapters I-II (AW 386-392)
Book II, Chapters I-IX (AW 322-339)

I. Locke's *Essay*

Locke's 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is over-written and long-winded, but contains some of the most insightful and fecund work of his time.

Reading Locke's *Essay* has been compared to going into your grandmother's attic.

There's a lot of stuff in there, and a lot of it is really cool.

But, you have to find it amid the dust and clutter.

Leibniz worked through the *Essay* in detail, responding with a book-length commentary, *New Essays on Human Understanding*.

If you are [looking for a paper topic](#), there are lots of good ones to be found in the contrasts between Leibniz and Locke.

Ariew and Watkins present just a portion of the *Essay*.

We will read only a portion of their selections.

Locke's work comes in large part as a response to Descartes, and also to Spinoza and Leibniz, though Leibniz is really a contemporary of Locke.

Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* was written four years before Locke's *Essay*, though the *Monadology* was not written until almost twenty-five years later.

The rationalists embraced intuition and reasoning, what Locke calls *koinai ennoiai* (primary notions) or innate ideas, as central aspects of their work.

Descartes claimed that we have pure intuitions, clear and distinct perceptions of innate ideas.

For Descartes, ideas of the self, God, and mathematics are innate, built into our minds.

Laws of physics, depending as they do on mathematics, are also innate, the result of pure, intellectual judgment.

Spinoza relied on innate ideas, as well, calling them rational and intuitive knowledge.

Leibniz defended innate truths of reason as the source of the most certain beliefs, opposing truths of fact.

The very nature of the monad, which reflects the entire history of the universe, makes its ideas innate.

Leibniz denied transeunt causation, which entails that ideas can not, strictly speaking, ever be acquired.

All three of the rationalists we read built grand metaphysical systems which claimed that reality is much different from our ordinary interpretations of sense experience.

Locke wants to limit the scope of pure understanding and reign-in speculative metaphysics.

It may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension, to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether, and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities (I.I.4, AW 317a).

Locke's belief that many philosophers claim to know more than they can know might seem to lead to skepticism, a denial that we can know anything.

Recall that Descartes seemed unable to justify any of his beliefs without relying on the existence and goodness of God, the arguments for which he supposed to be innate.