

**John Locke**

*Of the Conduct  
of the Understanding*

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# **Of the Conduct of the Understanding**



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*Quid tam temerarium tamque indignum sapientis gravitate atque constantia quam aut falsum sentire aut quod not satis explore perceptum sit et cognitum sine ulla dubitationis defendere?*

«What is so reckless and so unworthy of the earnest and unrelenting endeavour of the philosopher than either to hold a false opinion or to maintain unhesitatingly what has been accepted as knowledge without adequate observation and enquiry?» Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, Lib. I.



# **SECTION 01. INTRODUCTION.**

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The last resort a man has recourse to in the conduct of himself is his understanding; for though we distinguish the faculties of the mind and give the supreme command to the will as to an agent, yet the truth is, the man which is the agent determines himself to this or that voluntary action upon some precedent knowledge or appearance of knowledge in the understanding. No man ever sets himself about anything but upon some view or other which serves him for a reason for what he does; and whatsoever faculties he employs, the understanding, with such light as it has, well or ill informed, constantly leads; and by that light, true or false, all his operative powers are directed. The will itself, how absolute and uncontrollable however it may be thought, never fails in its obedience to the dictates of the understanding. Temples have their sacred images, and we see what influence they have always had over a great part of mankind. But in truth the ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them, and to these they all universally pay a ready submission. It is therefore of the highest concernment that great care should be taken of the understanding to conduct it right in the search of knowledge and in the judgments it makes.

The logic now in use has so long possessed the chair, as the only art taught in the schools for the direction of the mind in the study of the arts and sciences, that it would

perhaps be thought an affectation of novelty to suspect that rules that have served the learned world these two or three thousand years and which without any complaint of defects the learned have rested in are not sufficient to guide the understanding. And I should not doubt but this attempt would be censured as vanity or presumption did not the great Lord Verulam's authority justify it, who, not servilely thinking learning could not be advanced beyond what it was because for many ages it had not been, did not rest in the lazy approbation and applause of what was, because it was, but enlarged his mind to what might be. In his preface to his *Novum Organum* concerning logic he pronounces thus, *Qui summas dialecticae partes tribuerunt atque inde fidissima scientiis praesidia comparari putarunt, verissime et optime viderunt intellectum humanum sibi permissum merito suspectum esse debere. Verum infirmior omnino est malo medicina; nec ipsa mali experts. Siquidem dialectica quae recepta est, licet ad civilia et artes quae in sermone et opinione positae sunt rectissime adhibeatur, naturae tamen subtilitatem longo intervallo non attingit; et prensando quod non capit, ad errores potius stabiliendos et quasi figendos quam ad viam veritati aperiendam valuit.* «They,» says he, «who attributed so much to logic perceived very well and truly that it was not safe to trust the understanding to itself without the guard of any rules. But the remedy reached not the evil but became a part of it; for the logic which took place, though it might do well enough in civil affairs and the arts which consisted in talk and opinion, yet comes very far short of subtlety in the real performances of nature and, catching at what it cannot reach, has served to confirm and

establish errors rather than to open a way to truth.» And therefore a little after he says, «That it is absolutely necessary that a better and perfected use and employment of the mind and understanding should be introduced.»  
Necessario requiritur ut melior et perfectior mentis et intellectus humani usus et adoperatio introducatur.



## **SECTION 02. PARTS.**

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There is, it is visible, great variety in men's understandings, and their natural constitutions put so wide a difference between some men in this respect that art and industry would never be able to master, and their very natures seem to want a foundation to raise on it that which other men easily attain unto. Amongst men of equal education there is great inequality of parts. And the woods of America, as well as the schools of Athens, produce men of several abilities in the same kind. Though this be so, yet I imagine most men come very short of what they might attain unto in their several degrees by a neglect of their understandings. A few rules of logic are thought sufficient in this case for those who pretend to the highest improvement, whereas I think there are a great many natural defects in the understanding capable of amendment which are overlooked and wholly neglected. And it is easy to perceive that men are guilty of a great many faults in the exercise and improvement of this faculty of the mind which hinder them in their progress and keep them in ignorance and error all their lives. Some of them I shall take notice of and endeavor to point out proper remedies for in the following discourse.

## **SECTION 03. REASONING.**

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Besides the want of determined ideas and of sagacity and exercise in finding out and laying in order intermediate ideas, there are three miscarriages that men are guilty of in reference to their reason, whereby this faculty is hindered in them from that service it might do and was designed for. And he that reflects upon the actions and discourses of mankind will find their defects in this kind very frequent and very observable.

(i) The first is of those who seldom reason at all, but do and think according to the example of others, whether parents, neighbors, ministers or who else they are pleased to make choice of to have an implicit faith in for the saving of themselves the pains and trouble of thinking and examining for themselves.

(ii) The second is of those who put passion in the place of reason and, being resolved that shall govern their actions and arguments, neither use their own nor hearken to other people's reason any further than it suits their humour, interest or party; and these, one may observe, commonly content themselves with words which have no distinct ideas to them, though in other matters that they come with an unbiased indifference to they want not abilities to talk and hear reason, where they have no secret inclination that hinders them from being tractable to it.

(iii) The third sort is of those who readily and sincerely follow reason but, for want of having that which one may call large, sound, roundabout sense, have not a full view of all that relates to the question and may be of moment to decide it. We are all shortsighted and very often see but one side of a matter; our views are not extended to all that has a connection with it. From this defect I think no man is free. We see but in part and we know but in part, and therefore it is no wonder we conclude not right from our partial views. This might instruct the proudest esteemer of his own parts how useful it is to talk and consult with others, even such as came short of him in capacity, quickness and penetration; for since no one sees all and we generally have different prospects of the same thing according to our different, as I may say, positions to it, it is not incongruous to think nor beneath any man to try whether another may not have notions of things which have escaped him and which his reason would make use of if they came into his mind. The faculty of reasoning seldom or never deceives those who trust to it; its consequences from what it builds on are evident and certain; but that which it oftenest, if not only, misleads us in is that the principles from which we conclude, the grounds upon which we bottom our reasoning are but a part; something is left out which should go into the reckoning to make it just and exact. Here we may imagine a vast and almost infinite advantage that angels and separate spirits may have over us, who in their several degrees of elevation above us may be endowed with more comprehensive faculties and some of them perhaps have perfect and exact views of all finite beings that come under

their consideration, can, as it were, in the twinkling of an eye collect together all their scattered and almost boundless relations. A mind so furnished, what reason has it to acquiesce in the certainty of its conclusions!

In this we may see the reason why some men of study and thought that reason right and are lovers of truth do make no great advances in their discoveries of it. Error and truth are uncertainly blended in their minds; their decisions are lame and defective, and they are very often mistaken in their judgments; the reason whereof is, they converse but with one sort of men, they read but one sort of books, they will not come in the hearing but of one sort of notions; the truth is, they canton out to themselves a little Goshen in the intellectual world where light shines and, as they conclude, day blesses them; but the rest of that vast expansion they give up to night and darkness and so avoid coming near it. They have a pretty tragic with known correspondents in some little creek; within that they confine themselves and are dexterous managers enough of the wares and products of that corner with which they content themselves, but will not venture out into the great ocean of knowledge to surveys the riches that nature has stored other parts with, no less genuine, no less solid, no less useful than what has fallen to their lot in the admired plenty and sufficiency of their own little spot, which to them contains whatsoever is good in the universe. Those who live thus mewed up within their own contracted territories and will not look abroad beyond the boundaries that chance, conceit or laziness has set to their enquiries, but live separate from the notions, discourses and attainments of the rest of mankind, may not

amiss be represented by the inhabitants of the Mariana Islands, which, being separate by a large tract of sea from all communion with the habitable parts of the earth, thought themselves the only people of the world. And though the straitness of the conveniences of life amongst them had never reached so far as to the use of fire till the Spaniards, not many years since, in their voyages from Acapulco to Manilla brought it amongst them, yet in the want and ignorance of almost all things they looked upon themselves, even after that the Spaniards had brought amongst them the notice of variety of nations abounding in sciences, arts and conveniences of life of which they knew nothing, they looked upon themselves, I say, as the happiest and wisest people of the universe. But for all that, nobody, I think, will imagine them deep naturalists or solid metaphysicians; nobody will deem the quickest sighted amongst them to have very enlarged views in ethics or politics; nor can anyone allow the most capable amongst them to be advanced so far in his understanding as to have any other knowledge but of the few little things of his and the neighboring islands within his commerce, but far enough from that comprehensive enlargement of mind which adorns a soul devoted to truth, assisted with letters and a free consideration of the several views and sentiments of thinking men of all sides. Let not men therefore that would have a sight of what everyone pretends to be desirous to have a sight of, truth in its full extent, narrow and blind their own prospect. Let not men think there is no truth but in the sciences that they study or the books that they read. To prejudge other men's notions before eve have looked into