The purpose of Locke’s *Essay* is: “...to inquire into the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion and assent.” (I.1, §2; p.4)

1) None of our knowledge, either of *speculative* or of *practical* principles, is innate. I.2: no *speculative principles* are innate.

   **Negative argument:** either the nativist asserts the existence of actual innate knowledge of such principles—in which case the assertion is empirically false (children & idiots); or the nativist asserts that our knowledge of them is merely potential—in which case the claim is trivialized (everything we’re capable of coming to know is innate).

   **Positive argument:** there is a better explanation for how we acquire whatever knowledge we have: we are equipped sufficient capacities to enable us to acquire through their use all the knowledge we need:

   It would be sufficient to convince unprejudiced readers of the falseness of [the supposition that there are in the understanding certain innate principles], if I should only show (as I hope I shall in the following parts of this Discourse) how men, barely by the use of their natural faculties, may attain to all the knowledge they have, without the help of any innate impressions; (I.2; §1; p.7)

2) For Locke, as for his predecessors, knowledge is knowledge of *ideas*. An idea is “whatever is the object of understanding when a man thinks.” (I.1, §8; p.6) They are mind-dependent, and Locke takes it for granted that we all have them.

   ...it is past doubt that men have in their minds several *ideas* such as are those expressed by the words *whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, man, elephant, army, drunkenness*, and others.  
   (II.1, §1; p.33)

   He is less interested in clarifying their status than in their origins. All ideas originate in experience:

   Our observation employed either about *external sensible objects* or about *internal operations of our minds*, perceived and reflected upon by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the *materials of thinking*. These two are the fountains of knowledge from which all the *ideas* we have, or can naturally have, do spring.  
   (II.1, §2; p.33)

3) **Locke’s taxonomy of ideas**  Ideas are either i) **simple** or ii) **complex**.

   **ia) A simple idea**

   ...[is] in itself uncompounded, contains in it nothing but *one uniform appearance*, or conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different *ideas*.  
   (II.2, §1, p.40)

   These are the atoms of experience. Typical examples might be colors and tastes. But there are also simple ideas of reflection, when the mind “turns its view inwards upon itself and observes its own actions” (II.6, §2, p.44)—e.g. the ideas of perceiving, doubting, thinking, knowing, willing.

   **ib) The mind passively receives simple ideas; it cannot create them.**

   **ic) Simple ideas are of four different types:** those which come into the mind by one sense only (e.g. colors), those which enter by more than one sense (e.g. shape, motion), those which are obtained by reflection (e.g. *remembrance, discerning, reasoning, judging, knowledge, faith*) and those “which are suggested to the mind by *all the ways of sensation and reflection*” (e.g. pleasure, pain, power, existence and unity). See chapters 2-7 of Bk.II.
id) Locke takes it for granted that there are external objects which give rise to simple ideas of sensation.

External objects furnish the mind with the ideas of sensible qualities, which are all those different perceptions they produce in us; and the mind furnishes the understanding with ideas of its own operations.

(II.1, §5; p.34)

This leads him to consider the qualities of objects which are responsible for causing these ideas—a quality being whatever it is in an object that is able to give rise to an idea in our minds—the different kinds of quality (primary, secondary and tertiary), and the ‘impulse’ mechanism whereby objects are able to produce ideas in our minds. See chapter 8 of Bk.II.

iia) The mind plays an active role in constructing complex ideas out of simple ones. In particular, they are formed by combination, juxtaposition or abstraction:

But as the mind is wholly passive in the reception of all its simple ideas, so it exerts several acts of its own, whereby out of its simple ideas, as the materials and foundations of the rest, the others are framed. The acts of the mind, wherein it exerts its power over its simple ideas, are chiefly these three: (1) Combining several simple ideas into one compound one; and thus all complex ideas are made. (2) The second is bringing two ideas, whether simple or complex, together, and setting them by one another, so as to take a view of them at once, without uniting them into one; by which way it gets all its ideas of relations. (3) The third is separating them from all other ideas that accompany them in their real existence: this is called abstraction: and thus all its general ideas are made.

(II.12,§1, p.66)

Examples of complex ideas are: “beauty, gratitude, a man, an army, the universe.”

iib) The power of separation or abstraction is supposed to explain how we arrive at general ideas on the basis of particular impressions:

...ideas become general by separating from them the circumstances of time and place, and any other ideas that may determine them to this or that particular existence. By this way of abstraction they are made capable of representing more individuals than one: each of these, having in it a conformity to that abstract idea, is (as we call it) of that sort.

(III.3, §6; p.181)

For example, the idea of man or triangle is “abstracted” from the impression of some particular man or triangle. Although Locke insists:

...that general and universal belong not to the real existence of things; but are the inventions and creatures of the understanding, made by it for its own use, and concern only signs, whether words or ideas.

Abstract ideas are not simply arbitrary ways of grouping particulars together; they reflect features of the world:

I would not here be thought to... deny, that Nature, in the production of things, makes several of them alike... But yet I think we may say, the sorting of them under names is the workmanship of the understanding, taking occasion, from the similitude it observes amongst them, to make abstract general ideas, and set them up in the mind, with names annexed to them, as patterns or forms

(III.3, §13; p.184)

iic) Complex ideas are themselves classified according to whether they are ideas of substances, modes or relations.

Complex ideas, however compounded and decompounded,... must all be reduced under these three heads: 1. Modes, 2. Substances, 3. Relations.

(II.12, §3; p.67)
An idea of **relation** “consists in the consideration and comparing one **idea** with another.” (II.12, §7; p.68). E.g. the idea of ‘being of a brighter hue than’ is obtained by comparing two ideas with respect to color.

Ideas of **substance** turn out to be ideas of material/spiritual (i.e. mental) objects; they appear to us to represent “distinct particular things subsisting by themselves.” According to Locke, we get used to *receiving* certain simple ideas of sensation/reflection in combination, which leads us to suppose that they are all evoked by qualities of a single subject. Hence, “the supposed or confused **idea** of substance, such as it is” is also part of the complex. (II.12, §6; p.68; II.23, §5, pp.119-20) However, if we try to form an idea of substance in general, as opposed to ideas of particular substances, we find nothing but a confused notion of some kind of substratum in which the qualities we perceive inhere. (II.23, §2 and §4, pp.118-9)

...all our ideas of the several sorts of substances are nothing but collections of simple ideas, with a supposition of something to which they belong, and in which they subsist, though of this supposed something we have no clear distinct **idea** at all. (II.23, §77, p.128)

In contrast, **modes** are “scattered and independent **Ideas** put together by the Mind.” (II.22, §1; pp.114-5), which:

*often exercises an active power in making these several combinations... without examining whether they exist so together in nature.*

(II.22, §2; p.115)

Locke gives various examples of modes—in particular, our mathematical concepts, like number and geometrical figures, are examples of **simple** modes (“variations or different combinations of the same simple **idea**”), while various notions descriptive of human conduct, often with a moral dimension such as murder, theft and hypocrisy, are examples of mixed ones (“compounded of simple **ideas** of several kinds put together to make one complex one”). What ties together the ideas which go to make up a mode is not some confused notion of substance; rather “it has its unity from an act of the mind combining those simple **ideas** together, and considering them as one complex one.” That we have created such a unity is indicated by our giving it a name. (II.22, §9; p.116)

4) Locke claims that we can form no clear idea of substance in general, only ideas of particular substances. In fact, the idea of substance in general is just a confused notion of some kind of substratum in which the sensible qualities we perceive inhere.

So that if any one will examine himself concerning his notion of pure substance in general, he will find he has no other idea of it at all, but only a supposition of he knows not what support of such qualities which are capable of producing simple ideas in us; (II.23, §2; p.118)

5) What Locke says about the nature of substance applies to what he calls **spiritual** substances no less than to **material** ones. The only difference is that we form our ideas of spiritual substances by reflecting on our mental activity.

The same thing happens concerning the operations of the mind, viz. thinking, reasoning, fearing, &c., which we concluding not to subsist of themselves, nor apprehending how they can belong to body, or be produced by it, we are apt to think these the actions of some other substance, which we call spirit; (II.23, §5; pp.119-20)
6) Locke supposes material objects have a hidden constitution that gives rise to the qualities we perceive in them. This reflects his allegiance to the corpuscularian view of matter, and illustrates the tension in his thought between his defense of the scientific view of the world and his empiricism. E.g. Locke holds that the primary qualities of the corpuscles which go to make up an individual substance are responsible for all its sensible properties. However, he insists that we are unable to observe this microscopic structure and hence must depend on the secondary properties of objects to identify them by:

For our senses failing us in the discovery of the bulk, texture, and figure of the minute parts of bodies, on which their real constitutions and differences depend, we are inclined to make use of their secondary qualities as the characteristic notes and marks by which to frame ideas of them in our minds and distinguish one from the other.

(II.23, §8; p.120)

7) This helps to clarify the distinction he draws between the real and nominal essence of a substance. He defines real essence as:

...the being of any thing whereby it is what it is. And thus the real internal, but generally (in substances) unknown constitution of things whereon their discoverable qualities depend, may be called their “essence”.

(III.3, §15, p.185)

And contrasts it with nominal essence:

But it being evident that things are ranked under names into sorts or species only as they agree to certain abstract ideas to which we have annexed those names, the essence of each genus or sort comes to be nothing but that abstract idea which the general or “sortal”... name stands for. (Ibid.)

So, for example, the nominal essence of gold, the kind or sort,

...is its color, weight, fusibility, fixedness, etc, which makes it to be gold, or gives it a right to that name.

But the real essence of any particular piece of gold

...is the real constitution of its insensible parts, on which depend all those properties of color, weight, fusibility, fixedness, etc, which are to be found in it; which constitution we know not, and so, having no particular idea of, have no name that is the sign of it. (III.3, §18, p.186-7)

8) He identifies the real essence of a substance with its micro-structure and this means that the real essence is hidden from us. It is by its nominal essence that we identify a substance as being of some particular kind (a nugget of gold as gold, for example, or a human being as a human being). The nominal essence, on the other hand, is just that compound of simple ideas (of sensation) to which the name “gold” or “human being” has been given.

...it is evident [that substances are determined into sorts or species] by the nominal essence; for it is that alone that the name, which is the mark of the sort, signifies. It is impossible therefore that anything should determine the sorts of things which we rank under general names, but that idea which that name is designed as a mark for; ...which we call nominal essence.

(III.6, §7, p.195)

9) Locke does not believe in fixed natural kinds. (See III.6, §14 ff.; p.197) It is we who sort particulars into kinds by means of the abstract ideas we frame, i.e. we are responsible for nominal essences and use these to organize our experience. However, this is not to say that our classifications are arbitrary; they reflect the way the world is or, at least, the world as we experience it:
This then, in short, is the case: *Nature makes many particular things which do agree* one with another in many sensible qualities and probably too in their internal frame and constitution; but it is not this real essence that distinguishes them into species; it is *men* who, taking occasion from the qualities they find united in them, and in which they observe often several individuals to agree, range them into sorts...

(III.6, §36, p.202)

10) Locke also applies the distinction between real and nominal essence to modes. In this case, however, he maintains that real and nominal essence coincide. The distinction can still be maintained because it depends only upon being able to distinguish between characteristic observable features and what produces, accounts for, or explains them. Locke thinks that such a distinction can also be drawn in the case of modes:

Figure including a Space between three Lines, is the real, as well as nominal Essence of a Triangle; it being not only the abstract Idea to which the general Name is annexed, but the very *Essentia*, or Being, of the thing itself, that Foundation from which all its Properties flow, and to which they are all inseparably annexed.

(III.3, §18; pp.186-7)

11) Our inability to know the real essences of substances limits what we can know about the natural world—indeed deprives us of physical knowledge (in Locke’s strict sense) altogether. For Locke, all knowledge is knowledge of relationships between ideas:

*Knowledge then seems to me to be nothing but the perception of the connection and agreement, or disagreement and repugnance, of any of our ideas.* In this alone it consists. Where this perception is, there is knowledge; and where it is not, there, though we may fancy, guess or believe, yet we always come short of knowledge. For, when we know that white is not black, what do we else but perceive that these two ideas do not agree? When we possess ourselves with the utmost security of the demonstration that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right ones, what do we more but perceive that equality to two right ones does necessarily agree to, and is inseparable from, the three angles of a triangle?

(IV.1, §2, p.224)

12) Different kinds of ‘agreement’ or ‘disagreement’ give rise to different kinds of knowledge (IV.1, §3-7; pp.224-6):

1) **Identity or diversity**: e.g. that white is white, or that white is not black.
2) **Relation**: the kind of logical relations that are employed in any deductive process establishing a connection between ideas.
3) **coexistence**: e.g. all gold is fixed
4) **real existence**: “Actual real existence agreeing to any idea.” This is the basic relationship between an idea and the reality it’s supposed to represent.

Within these four sorts of agreement or disagreement is, I suppose, contained all the knowledge we have, or are capable of. For all the inquiries we can make concerning any of our ideas, all that we can know or affirm concerning any of them, it that it is, or is not, the same with some other; that it does or does not always coexist with some other idea in the same subject; that it has this or that relation with some other idea; or that it has a real existence outside the mind. Thus “blue is not yellow”“ of identity. “Two triangles upon equal bases between two parallels are equal” is of relation. “Iron is susceptible of magnetic impressions” is of coexistence. “God is” is of real existence.

(IV.1, §7; p.226)

13) Locke also classifies knowledge according to degree i.e. degrees of certainty:

1) **intuitive**: this is the most certain; here the mind perceives the truth of a statement *immediately*, “at first sight of the ideas together, by bare intuition, without the intervention of any other idea”. (IV.2, §1; pp.228-9)
2) It contrasts with **demonstrative**, where reasoning is required; i.e. the relationship is perceived through a series of intuitively evident steps. Demonstrative knowledge is a little less certain, since it depends on memory as well as intuition.

Intuition and demonstration provide us with all our knowledge of general truths.

3) Finally, there is **sensitive** knowledge, “knowledge” of the existence of particular things, which Locke says is not as certain as the other two kinds, but is more than merely probable:

There is indeed another *perception* of the mind, employed about the particular existence of finite beings without us, which going beyond bare probability, and yet not reaching perfectly to either of the foregoing degrees of certainty, passes under the name of knowledge. (IV.2, §14; p.233)

14) Although Locke acknowledges the possibility of skepticism about a world external to the mind, he tends to dismiss such worries:

There can be nothing more certain than that the *idea* we receive from an external object is in our minds; this is intuitive knowledge. But whether there is anything more than barely the idea in our minds, whether we can certainly infer from this the existence of anything without us, which corresponds to that idea, is that of which some men think there may be a question made; because men may have such *ideas* in their minds when no such thing exists, no such object affects their senses. (IV.2, §14; p.233)

We can know that external objects exists with “a certainty as great as our happiness and misery, beyond which we have no concern to know or to be.” ([Ibid.](#))

15) However, he does maintain that knowledge is genuine: “only so far as there is a conformity between our ideas and the reality of things.” (IV.4, §3, p.251) In other words, our ideas must correspond with the way things are. In the case of simple ideas, we can be certain of such a conformity...

...since the mind, as has been shown, can by no means make to itself [simple ideas, these] must necessarily be the product of things operating on the mind in a natural way, and producing in there those perceptions which by the wisdom and will of our maker they are ordained and adapted to. (IV.4, §4; p.251)

As we can be in the case of modes as well. since these are:

...*archetypes* of the mind’s own making, not intended to be copies of anything, nor referred to the existence of anything, as to their origins, [they] cannot want any conformity necessary to real knowledge. ([Ibid.](#), §5)

This means that we can have both mathematical and moral knowledge (see §6-§8), although we have not yet attained the latter. Mathematical theorems are not about physical objects, but apply to them only insofar as they conform to ideal constructions of the mind,—e.g. the definition of triangle, circle etc. This makes the truths of mathematics non-empirical, i.e. not directly about the world at all. As for the latter, Locke claims that the truths of ethics can be deduced from ideas of God and of ourselves as rational beings. (See chapter IV.3, §18ff. for a discussion of this and of the reasons why ethics has, as yet, failed to develop into a science.)

16) Only in the case of ideas of substance is it possible that an idea may fail accurately to represent its object.

...our *ideas* of substances, which, consisting of a collection of simple *ideas* supposed taken from the works of nature, may yet vary from them by having more or different *ideas* united in them than are to be found united in the things themselves. From this it comes to pass that they may, and often do, fail of being exactly conformable to things themselves. (IV.4, §11)
The problem is that we don’t know the inner constitution of substances which accounts for their properties; hence no general (demonstrative) knowledge of them is available to us. What knowledge we have extends no further than our observations:

...because we knowing not what real constitution it is of substances on which our simple ideas depend, and which really is the cause of the strict union of some of them one with another, and the exclusion of others, there are very few of them that we can be sure are or are not inconsistent in nature, any further than experience and sensible observation reach. In this therefore is found the reality of our knowledge concerning substances that all out complex ideas of the must be such, and such only, as are made up of such simple ones as have been discovered to coexist in nature.  

(IV.4, §12; pp.253-4)

17) The limitations on our physical knowledge are discussed in chapter IV.3. (See §9-§16, pp.239-242.) Since our general words, like “gold” for example, stand for nominal essences, a proposition like “All gold is malleable” is either what Locke calls trifling, i.e. malleability is already included in this essence, or it is uncertain because our ignorance of the real constitutions of things deprives us of certain knowledge about the interdependence of characteristics.

18) In the end, Locke reduces human knowledge to a very meager stock: general propositions are only about ideas and tell us nothing about the existence of objects in the real world. In addition, however, we do have some knowledge about the existence of particular objects in the world:

1) We each have an intuitive knowledge of our own existence.
2) We have demonstrative knowledge of God’s existence.

Locke discusses the proof of God’s existence in chapter IV.10 (p.275 ff.). The proofs he offers are a posteriori: “our own being furnishes us,... , with an evident and incontestable proof of a deity.” (pp.277-8)
3) Finally, we have sensitive knowledge of the existence of particular objects outside us. (See IV.3, §21, p.245.)

19) For Locke, experience is the only source of ideas. On the other hand, much the greatest part of our knowledge is not based on experience, nor refutable by it. It’s concerned with relationships between ideas. What we would think of as scientific laws fall outside his scheme altogether and are relegated to opinion or belief—the merely probable. (For Locke’s discussion of probability and degrees of assent, see chapters IV.15 & 16, pp.302-312.)

Two interesting topics discussed in the Essay, but only mentioned in class, are:

1) Locke’s account of moral motivation and free will in II.21 (beginning with §7, p.95).
2) Locke’s account of personal identity.  (See II.27, beginning with §6, p.137.)