A number of prominent philosophers and scientists have argued that innateness is a confused—even incoherent— notion, on the grounds that it confounds under a single term several empirically dissociable characteristics—e.g. presence at birth, universality and being the product of evolution. In this chapter I aim to deflect this charge of incoherence and to sketch an account of innateness that explains the relationship between these apparently disparate properties.

Here’s how I proceed. In section 1, I set out the argument for incoherence. In section 2, I sketch two (not mutually exclusive) responses to the argument: the first which turns on the claim that “innate” is a natural kind term, the second which relies on drawing a clear distinction between those characteristics that are constitutive of a trait’s being innate and those that are merely evidence for the trait’s innateness. Either response, I maintain, suffices to blunt the force of the argument for incoherence. Yet neither explains how the various properties associated with innateness are related. In section 3 I take up this explanatory challenge. Drawing on an account of innateness suggested elsewhere—which for want of a better label I call primitivism—I show that, far from being conflated, the various apparently disparate properties associated with innateness bear important relations to each other. In section 4, I conclude by addressing a residual puzzle: If innateness is not a confused notion, then why are debates over innateness mired by so much confusion?