

History of Philosophy

41 John Locke

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Abstract:

Dr. Arthur Holmes presents **John Locke** as a foundational figure of the **Enlightenment**, an era defined by the "light of reason" and the application of **scientific methods** to human understanding. Locke rejected the existence of **innate ideas**, arguing instead that the human mind begins as a **tabula rasa**, or blank slate, which gathers all knowledge through **sensory experience**. This empirical approach reflects a **Newtonian model**, viewing thoughts as "social atoms" that combine into complex beliefs according to fixed logical laws. By emphasizing the **rule of reason**, Locke sought to establish an objective basis for **individual rights**, such as life, liberty, and property, which underpin modern democratic systems. However, his focus on **mental representations** eventually paved the way for the **philosophical skepticism** of David Hume, who questioned whether we can truly know anything beyond our own subjective perceptions. Ultimately, the text illustrates how Locke's synthesis of **Puritan heritage** and scientific objectivity shaped the trajectory of Western political and metaphysical thought.

Briefing Document:

John Locke and the Philosophical Foundations of the Enlightenment

Executive Summary

John Locke is frequently cited as the progenitor of the philosophical Enlightenment, with the 1691 publication of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* marking a pivotal shift in Western thought. This period, characterized by the "light of reason," prioritized scientific knowledge and objective methods over tradition, authority, and revelation. Locke's philosophy is defined by three central pillars:

- **Empiricism:** The rejection of innate ideas in favor of the *tabula rasa* (blank slate) theory, asserting that all human knowledge originates in sense experience.
- **Atomism:** Borrowing from Newtonian physics, Locke applied an atomistic model to the mind (simple ideas) and society (individual "social atoms" joined by contract).
- **The Rule of Reason:** The belief that human freedom is achieved by detaching from emotional impulses through rational reflection, leading to a political and ethical focus on individual rights (life, liberty, and property).

Locke's work established the framework for modern epistemology and the American political heritage, while simultaneously providing the starting point for later skeptics, such as David Hume, to challenge the possibility of objective metaphysical knowledge.

The Nature of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment is defined by the "light of reason," which refers to the application of scientific knowledge and objective methods—both inductive and deductive—to all facets of human life.

Key Characteristics

- **Skepticism of Authority:** The age was marked by a rejection of tradition and religious dogma. Revelation was often viewed as an "add-on" to reason rather than a foundational perspective.
- **Shift from Systems to Criticism:** Unlike 17th-century "system builders" like Descartes or Spinoza, Enlightenment thinkers focused on "criticism"—investigating the very possibility of knowledge and the limits of the human mind.
- **The Rule of Reason:** Reason was intended to govern both thinking and living. True freedom was defined as the ability to stand back from emotional compulsions and act according to rational principles.

- **Ethics and Law:** Ethical focus shifted from "the good" (striving toward God) to "the right" (identifying objective rules and principles). This mindset birthed the concept of individual rights and the rule of law as a manifestation of the rule of reason.

Locke's Influences and Framework

Locke's philosophy was shaped by a unique convergence of scientific progress and religious heritage.

Newtonian Atomism

A personal friend of Isaac Newton, Locke applied the Newtonian model of physical atoms to other fields:

- **Psychology/Epistemology:** The mind consists of "simple ideas" (indivisible units) that combine into complex thoughts according to laws of association.
- **Social Philosophy:** Society is composed of "social atoms" (individuals) who join together through the laws of a social contract.

Puritan Heritage

Despite his Enlightenment leanings, Locke maintained a Puritan Reformed emphasis on creation. He argued that human rationality gives man "dominion" over nature, a concept rooted in his religious background. He used the existence of a Creator to justify the trustworthiness of human senses.

The Theory of Ideas

Locke's epistemology begins with the premise that the mind does not perceive external objects directly, but rather perceives "ideas"—mental representations of those objects.

The Rejection of Innate Ideas

Locke argued strenuously against the notion (held by Plato and the Cambridge Platonists) that humans are born with certain pre-existing knowledge, such as ideas of God or morality. His critique followed a logical path:

1. **Lack of Universal Consensus:** If ideas were innate, they would be known universally. However, "children and idiots" do not possess these ideas, and cultural diversity reveals vastly different moral and religious concepts.
2. **Definition of Understanding:** To be "in the understanding," a thing must be understood. Since children do not understand complex abstract principles, those principles cannot be innate to their minds.
3. **Alternative Explanations:** Even if an idea were universal, it could be explained by common human experience rather than biology or divine imprinting.

The Origin of Knowledge: Tabula Rasa

Locke proposed that the mind at birth is a *tabula rasa*—a blank piece of paper. Experience leaves "marks" on this paper through two types of senses:

- **External Senses:** The five senses that provide data about the outside world.
- **Internal Senses (Reflection):** The mind's ability to reflect on its own operations, such as thinking, doubting, and believing.

Classification of Ideas and Qualities

Locke categorized the contents of the mind to explain how complex knowledge is constructed from simple sensory inputs.

Simple vs. Complex Ideas

- **Simple Ideas:** These are indivisible units of perception (e.g., the color blue). They are the "atoms" of thought and must be clear and distinct.
- **Complex Ideas:** These are formed by the mind conjoining multiple simple ideas (e.g., combining the ideas of "blue," "shirt-shaped," and "fabric-textured").

Primary and Secondary Qualities

Locke distinguished between the properties of objects and how we perceive them:

Quality Type	Description	Examples
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Primary Qualities	Objective properties inherent in the matter itself; they exist whether or not they are perceived.	Size, shape, weight, density, motion.
Secondary Qualities	Subjective sensations produced in the perceiver by the primary qualities of an object; they have no objective reality in the object.	Color, sound, taste, smell, texture.

Knowledge vs. Opinion

Locke defined **knowledge** as the perception of the connection and agreement (or disagreement) of our ideas. Knowledge must be objective, certain, and scientifically or logically guaranteed.

- **Propositions:** All knowledge takes the form of judgments or propositions (e.g., "all humans are mortal"), which involves adding or subtracting ideas.
- **Opinion/Belief:** In areas where scientific-like proof is unavailable, we do not have knowledge, but rather "opinion" or "belief." Locke argued that humans have the freedom to regulate their "assent" (belief) based on the strength of the evidence provided by reason.

Legacy and Transition to Skepticism

While Locke established the groundwork for the Enlightenment's confidence in reason, his "representational theory of knowledge" (the idea that we only know our own mental representations) inadvertently led to the skepticism of David Hume. If the mind only knows its own ideas, critics like Hume later argued that we cannot truly "prove" the existence of the external world, other minds, or God, ultimately reducing the mind to a "bundle of perceptions."

Study Guide:

A Study Guide to John Locke and the Enlightenment

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the philosophical contributions of John Locke as a representative figure of the Enlightenment. It explores his theory of ideas, his rejection of innate knowledge, and the influence of scientific and religious contexts on his thought.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. How does the text characterize the general spirit of the Enlightenment?
 2. What is the "rule of reason," and how does it relate to human freedom?
 3. In what way did Isaac Newton's scientific model influence Locke's philosophy?
 4. How does Locke distinguish between "knowledge" and "opinion"?
 5. What is Locke's "representational theory of knowledge"?
 6. Why does Locke reject the existence of innate ideas based on "universal consensus"?
 7. How does Locke use "children and idiots" to argue against innate knowledge?
 8. What are "internal senses" according to Locke's theory of ideas?
 9. What is the difference between simple and complex ideas?
 10. How does Locke's Puritan heritage justify his reliance on sensory experience?
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Part II: Answer Key

1. **How does the text characterize the general spirit of the Enlightenment?** The Enlightenment is characterized by the "light of reason," which refers to knowledge gained through objective scientific methods. It is an age of criticism that is skeptical of tradition, authority, and often revelation, favoring scientific conclusiveness over dogmatic systems.

2. **What is the "rule of reason," and how does it relate to human freedom?** The rule of reason suggests that humans are only truly free when they detach themselves from emotional or impulsive compulsions to think objectively about their actions. Just as political freedom exists under the rule of law, individual freedom is found when one's life is governed by rational principles rather than causal conditions.
3. **In what way did Isaac Newton's scientific model influence Locke's philosophy?** Locke applied Newton's atomistic model—where the universe is composed of indivisible particles—to psychology and social philosophy. He viewed the mind as containing "simple ideas" (mental atoms) and society as composed of individuals (social atoms) joined by a social contract.
4. **How does Locke distinguish between "knowledge" and "opinion"?** Knowledge must be objective, certain, and scientifically or logically guaranteed through the regulation of assent. In contrast, opinion refers to beliefs and persuasions that lack such certainty or demonstrative proof, falling short of the standard of scientific-like knowledge.
5. **What is Locke's "representational theory of knowledge"?** Locke's theory posits that the mind is directly aware only of its own ideas rather than external objects themselves. These ideas serve as mental representations of external properties and things, requiring proofs or demonstrations to infer the existence of the outside world.
6. **Why does Locke reject the existence of innate ideas based on "universal consensus"?** Locke argues that if ideas were innate, they would be known universally by all human beings. However, since there is no universal consensus on ideas regarding God or morality, he concludes that they cannot be innate, adding that even if consensus existed, it could be explained by common empirical factors.
7. **How does Locke use "children and idiots" to argue against innate knowledge?** Locke points out that ideas claimed to be innate, such as those of God or morality, are unknown to children and those with mental disabilities ("idiots"). He argues that for an idea to be "in the understanding," it must be understood; since these groups do not understand these concepts, the ideas cannot be innate to the human mind.

8. **What are "internal senses" according to Locke's theory of ideas?** Internal senses refer to the mind's reflection on its own internal states and operations. This includes reflecting on existing ideas (like an afterimage) or mental acts such as thinking, wishing, and believing.
9. **What is the difference between simple and complex ideas?** Simple ideas are indivisible units dealing with one property at a time, such as the color blue. Complex ideas are formed by the mind conjoining several simple ideas together to represent a more complicated object, such as a blue shirt.
10. **How does Locke's Puritan heritage justify his reliance on sensory experience?** Locke argues that it would be an affront to God to suppose that the senses He provided are unreliable for navigating the world. Much like Descartes appealed to a Creator to trust the mind, Locke uses a theological justification to assert the fundamental trustworthiness of the senses.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the source context to develop detailed responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Shift from System-Building to Criticism:** Explain why the 18th-century Enlightenment favored "criticism" over the "dogmatic systems" of 17th-century thinkers like Descartes and Spinoza.
2. **The Atomistic View of Society and Mind:** Analyze how Locke's adoption of the Newtonian model shaped his views on both human psychology and the structure of a political state.
3. **Locke vs. the Cambridge Platonists:** Compare Locke's empiricism with the views of the Cambridge Platonists, specifically regarding the origin of moral knowledge and the role of innate ideas.
4. **Primary vs. Secondary Qualities:** Discuss Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities and explain how this distinction reflects the influence of Newtonian science on his epistemology.

5. **From Locke to Hume:** Trace the philosophical progression from Locke's "thinking thing" to David Hume's skepticism, explaining how Locke's theory of ideas "set the stage" for the later rejection of metaphysical knowledge.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Atomism	The model, borrowed from Newtonian physics, that views complex systems (the universe, the mind, or society) as being composed of indivisible, simple units.
Cambridge Platonists	A 17th-century group of Anglican thinkers (e.g., Richard Cudworth) who opposed mechanistic science and argued for innate ideas and the power of reason to know God.
Complex Idea	A mental construct formed by the association or conjoining of multiple simple ideas.
Enlightenment	An intellectual movement emphasizing the "light of reason," scientific objectivity, and skepticism toward traditional authority and dogmatic systems.
Primary Qualities	Objective properties of matter, such as size, shape, weight, and density, which exist in physical things regardless of a perceiver.
Rule of Reason	The principle that human life and society should be governed by rational detachment and law rather than emotional impulse or compulsion.
Secondary Qualities	Subjective qualities produced in the perceiver by primary qualities, such as color, sound, taste, and smell; they have no objective reality in the objects themselves.
Sensus Deitatis	A term (associated with John Calvin) referring to a vague, undefined sense of a deity that arises in all people through reflection on creation.

Simple Idea	An indivisible, atomistic mental unit representing a single property, such as a specific color or texture.
Tabula Rasa	The "blank tablet" or "blank piece of paper" model of the human mind at birth, suggesting all knowledge originates from experience rather than innate traits.