

History of Philosophy

43 Locke on Religion, Ethics, and Politics

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Abstract:

In this overview of John Locke's philosophy, Dr. Arthur Holmes explains how **evidentialism** serves as the bridge between Locke's theory of knowledge and his views on religion, ethics, and politics. Locke maintains that **religious faith** is a rational assent to propositions, provided they do not contradict reason, while rejecting "enthusiasm" or private spiritual experiences. His ethical framework dismisses innate ideas, suggesting instead that **moral knowledge** is gained through logical deduction, sensory experience, and biblical revelation. Furthermore, Locke's political theory centers on **natural rights**—specifically life, liberty, and property—which exist prior to any government. He argues that civil society is a **contractual arrangement** designed to protect these inherent freedoms through the rule of reason and constitutional checks. Ultimately, Locke's emphasis on rational evidence and human rights profoundly shaped both **Enlightenment deism** and modern democratic governance.

Briefing Document:

Analysis of John Locke's Philosophy: Religion, Ethics, and Politics

Executive Summary

This document provides a comprehensive analysis of John Locke's philosophical applications to religion, ethics, and politics, as synthesized from the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. The central pillar of Locke's thought is **evidentialism**: the principle that beliefs must be proportioned to the available evidence. This epistemological foundation dictates his approach to divine revelation, which he views as a series of propositions that must be adjudged by reason.

In the realm of ethics, Locke rejects innate moral ideas, arguing instead that moral knowledge is acquired through demonstration, experience (utility), and biblical revelation. His political philosophy is built upon a theory of **natural rights**—life, liberty, and property—derived from the status of humans as rational beings. Locke posits that civil society is a contractual arrangement designed not to diminish these rights, but to preserve and enhance them through the rule of reason and constitutional governance.

I. Religion: The Relationship Between Reason and Revelation

Locke's religious philosophy is deeply rooted in his epistemology, specifically the view that all knowledge consists of propositions.

1. Propositional Revelation

Locke defines revelation as the addition of further propositions to those already known by reason.

- **The Rational Criterion:** Locke asserts that while revelation can go beyond reason, it cannot contradict it. Since God is the author of both natural reason and special revelation, He cannot contradict Himself.
- **Types of Propositions:**
 - **In Accordance with Reason:** Propositions that can be known via natural faculties.
 - **Beyond Reason:** Propositions that are not discoverable by reason alone but do not violate rational principles.
 - **Contrary to Reason:** Propositions that contradict natural knowledge; these are rejected as legitimate candidates for revelation.

2. Faith vs. Reason

Locke maintains a sharp distinction between the two: | Category | Definition | | :---
| :--- | | **Reason** | The discovery of the certainty or probability of propositions deduced from ideas acquired via natural faculties (sensation and reflection).
| | **Faith** | Assent to propositions based on the credit or testimony of the proposer (God) rather than via deduction of reason. |

3. Rejection of "Enthusiasm"

Locke was staunchly opposed to "religious enthusiasm"—the belief in private, inner-light revelations (common in Quaker and Pietist traditions). He argued these private intuitions were "not checkable" by public, rational standards and therefore could not be validly assented to.

II. Moral Knowledge and Ethics

Locke's empiricism dictates that there are no innate moral ideas. Instead, moral knowledge must be derived from simple ideas of sensation and reflection.

1. The Three Means of Acquiring Moral Knowledge

- **Demonstration:** Deducing moral truths from the knowledge of God and the nature of the self as a rational being. Locke argues that rights are deducible from the fact that humans are thinking, rational entities.
- **Sensation and Reflection (Experience):** Locke observes that God has conjoined morality with happiness. Consequently, pleasure and pain act as moral teachers, leading to a "practical utility" that foreshadows later Utilitarianism.
- **Biblical Revelation:** Divine moral laws found in Scripture serve as the "supreme criterion" for what is morally right.

2. Human Freedom

Locke distinguishes between the **freedom to act** and the **freedom of the will**.

- **Freedom of Action:** The power to do or not do according to one's desires or preferences.
 - **The Will:** Locke views "freedom of the will" as a meaningless concept because preferences and thoughts may be caused by external sensations. However, as long as a person can act according to those preferences, they are free.
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III. Political Philosophy and Civil Government

Locke's political theory transitions from the individual's natural state to a structured social contract.

1. The State of Nature

In the state of nature, individuals exist as equal beings with God-given natural rights.

- **Natural Rights:** Locke identifies three core rights: **Life, Liberty, and Property.**
- **The Stewardship Mandate:** Property rights are not "unbounded." Drawing from his Puritan heritage, Locke argues that one is entitled to the fruit of their labor (e.g., tilling land) provided they take only what is necessary and "leave enough for others."
- **Self-Defense:** In the state of nature, individuals have the right to resist violent attacks on their life, liberty, or property.

2. The Social Contract and Civil Society

Civil society is a contractual arrangement intended to bring human life under the "rule of reason."

- **Purpose:** To provide justice and ensure the preservation of natural rights that are difficult to defend individually in the state of nature.
- **Nature of Government:** Unlike Thomas Hobbes, who proposed surrendering rights to a monarch out of fear, Locke argues for a government with **constitutional checks and a division of powers.** The sovereign is morally limited in the use of force.
- **Contractarian Basis:** All social relationships, including marriage and employment (master-servant), are viewed as contractual agreements governed by reason.

IV. Historical Context and Intellectual Legacy

1. Religious Toleration

Living through the religious and political conflicts of 17th-century England (including the Catholic-Protestant tensions and the "Five Mile Act" which restricted

dissenters), Locke authored the *Letter on Toleration*. He advocated for freedom of belief as a requirement of reason, viewing it as an alternative to "power politics."

2. Influence on Future Thought

- **Deism:** Locke's emphasis on reason as a guide to religion unwittingly paved the way for 18th-century Deism, which attempted to establish religion entirely independent of revelation.
- **Utilitarianism:** His focus on pleasure and pain as moral teachers influenced the development of utilitarian ethics.
- **Apologetics:** Locke's evidentialism led to a 19th-century trend in British and American apologetics (e.g., B.B. Warfield), focusing on historical evidence and the rational consistency of Scripture.
- **Science:** Locke's objective, empirical approach aligns with the "Baconian ideal" and scientific realism, which later created a framework for the 19th-century tensions between scientific and religious truth claims.

V. Critical Insights and Quotes

- **On Evidentialism:** Locke's "crucial point of connection" across his works is the insistence that we "proportion our beliefs to the evidence."
- **On Reason:** "Reason is the discovery of the certainty or probability of propositions... Faith is assent to any proposition... upon the credit of the proposer as coming from God."
- **On Human Nature:** Locke follows the Cartesian premise: "What am I? I'm a thinking being, a rational being." This rationality is the foundation of all human rights.
- **On Revelation:** "What we know of what God has made by natural reason cannot be contradicted by what God has said by special revelation. God does not contradict himself."

Study Guide:

John Locke: Religion, Ethics, and Politics Study Guide

This study guide explores the application of John Locke's epistemology to the spheres of religion, ethics, and political philosophy. It highlights his commitment to evidentialism, his rejection of innate moral ideas, and his influential theories regarding natural rights and the social contract.

Review Quiz

1. What is the principle of evidentialism in Locke's philosophy? Evidentialism is the insistence that individuals should proportion their beliefs to the available evidence. This serves as the crucial point of connection between Locke's epistemology and his applications to religion, ethics, and politics.

2. How does Locke define the relationship between revelation and reason? Locke views revelation as the addition of further propositions to those already known by reason alone. While revelation can go beyond reason, it can never contradict it, as the natural reason God gave humans cannot be in opposition to what God reveals through special communication.

3. Why did Locke oppose "religious enthusiasm"? Locke opposed enthusiasm—the claim of private, inner-light revelation—because it lacked rational checks and public evidence. He believed all knowledge must be propositional and that private intuitions in traditions like Quakerism or Pietism were not checkable by reason.

4. In what way did Locke's epistemology contribute to the rise of Deism? Locke's suggestion that much could be known through reason alone opened the door for Deism, which seeks to develop a religious view independent of revelation. By establishing reason as a guide for evaluating purported revelations, he unwittingly spurred the 18th-century development of natural religion.

5. What is Locke's stance on innate moral ideas? Locke's empiricism leads him to argue that there are no innate moral ideas or knowledge. He contends that all moral

knowledge must be derived from simple ideas of sensation and reflection, just like any other form of knowledge.

6. What are the three means by which humans acquire moral knowledge according to Locke? Moral knowledge is acquired through demonstration (deducing rights from the nature of rational beings), sensation and reflection (learning from the utility of pleasure and pain), and biblical revelation. Locke considers the divine moral laws found in scripture to be the supreme criterion for rightness.

7. How does Locke distinguish between the "freedom of the will" and the "freedom of action"? Locke regards the debate over the freedom of the will as meaningless because it confuses the power to think with the power to act. He defines human freedom specifically as the freedom to act in accordance with one's choices and desires, rather than the internal causes of those desires.

8. What are the three natural rights identified by Locke in the "state of nature"? Locke identifies the rights to life, liberty, and property as inherent natural rights given by God. He argues that these rights are not granted by a constitution but are possessed by individuals by virtue of being rational beings.

9. What is the "stewardship mandate" in Locke's theory of property? Drawing from his Puritan heritage, Locke argues that while individuals have a right to the fruits of their labor, this right is not unbounded. One is entitled to take what is necessary for themselves and their dependents, provided they leave enough and as good for others.

10. How does Locke's "contractarian" view of government differ from that of Thomas Hobbes? Unlike Hobbes, who suggested individuals surrender all rights to a monarch out of fear, Locke proposed a social contract where the government exists to preserve and enhance natural rights. Locke's model includes constitutional checks, division of powers, and moral limitations on the sovereign's power.

Answer Key

1. **Evidentialism:** The practice of proportioning beliefs to the evidence available.

2. **Revelation and Reason:** Revelation adds propositions to reason; it may go beyond reason but cannot contradict the natural knowledge God provided through reason.
3. **Enthusiasm:** It is rejected because it relies on private, uncheckable intuitions rather than public, propositional, and rational evidence.
4. **Deism:** Locke's focus on the "reasonableness" of religious claims allowed for the development of a religious framework based purely on natural knowledge.
5. **Innate Moral Ideas:** Locke denies them entirely; all moral concepts come from experience (sensation/reflection).
6. **Sources of Moral Knowledge:** 1) Demonstration/Reason, 2) Experience (Pleasure/Pain/Utility), and 3) Scripture (The supreme criterion).
7. **Freedom:** Freedom is the ability to do or not do what one desires (action); the internal preference or will is often caused by external sensations and is not the focus of his theory of freedom.
8. **Natural Rights:** Life, Liberty, and Property.
9. **Stewardship:** The right to property is limited by the responsibility to subdue the earth while ensuring sufficient resources remain for others.
10. **Contractarianism:** Society is a contractual arrangement under the rule of reason to ensure justice and the protection of God-given natural rights.

Essay Questions

1. **The Interdependence of Epistemology and Politics:** Analyze how Locke's rejection of innate ideas and his commitment to evidentialism directly inform his "Letter on Toleration" and his arguments for a constitutional government.
2. **Locke vs. Realism:** Compare and contrast Locke's conceptualism with the medieval realism of Thomas Aquinas. How do their different views on "universals" and "essences" change the way they derive natural law?

3. **The Role of Utility in Lockean Ethics:** Discuss Locke's suggestion that God conjoined morality to happiness. To what extent does this view lay the groundwork for the later development of Utilitarianism?
4. **The Limits of Property and the American Frontier:** Examine Locke's theory of property in the context of the "creation mandate." How does his requirement to "leave enough for others" challenge or support modern interpretations of free enterprise?
5. **Faith and Rationality:** Evaluate Locke's definition of faith as "assent to propositions on the credit of the proposer." Does this purely cognitive definition of faith adequately account for the "interpersonal immediacy" of religious experience, or does it leave a gap in his religious philosophy?

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Conceptualism	The view that universals or essences are not real metaphysical entities but abstract general ideas or concepts formed by the mind to categorize commonalities.
Contractarianism	A political and social theory asserting that society and government are based on mutual agreements (contracts) to bring life under the rule of reason.
Deism	An 18th-century religious movement that sought to establish a religious view based on reason alone, independent of special revelation.
Enthusiasm	A term used by Locke to describe the belief in private, direct religious revelations or "inner light" that cannot be checked by rational or public evidence.
Evidentialism	The epistemological requirement that one should proportion the strength of their belief to the strength of the evidence supporting it.

Five Mile Act	A historical English law that forbade religious dissenters from worshipping within five miles of a town, a context that spurred Locke's arguments for toleration.
Natural Law	Moral principles deducible by reason from the nature of God and the nature of humans as rational beings.
Natural Rights	Rights that are inherently possessed by individuals in the state of nature (life, liberty, property) rather than being granted by a government.
Propositional Revelation	The view that divine revelation consists of specific truths or statements (propositions) communicated by God to human beings.
State of Nature	A theoretical condition in which humans exist as individuals with equal freedom and rights prior to the formation of a civil society.