

# LOCKE, JOHN (1632-1704)

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## JOHN LOCKE (1632-1704)

**Born:** 1632 | **Died:** 1704

**Nationality:** English

**Primary Field(s):** Philosophy, Empiricism, Political Theory, Psychology

### 1. Summary

**John Locke** was a profoundly influential English philosopher, recognized globally as the founder of philosophical **empiricism** and a pioneer in associationist psychology. Born in Somerset, England, Locke pursued comprehensive studies in medicine and science at Oxford University, preparing him for a career blending scientific observation with philosophical inquiry. His professional life took a pivotal turn when he became the personal physician and trusted advisor to the Earl of Shaftesbury, a prominent political figure. This relationship immersed Locke in contemporary political and civil debates, leading to his early controversial writings, such as *Essay on a Law of Nature*, which culminated in a period of self-imposed exile in Amsterdam for several years.

The core of Locke's philosophical project crystallized following a pivotal discussion in 1671, where he recognized the necessity of understanding the limits of human cognition before attempting to resolve complex issues. This realization prompted an intensive, eighteen-year investigation into the nature of the mind. The results of this profound inquiry were published shortly after his return to England and his appointment as Commissioner of Appeals in excise cases, culminating in his most famous and foundational work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). This work systematically established the groundwork for modern epistemology and psychological inquiry.

### 2. Key Contributions

**Founding of Empiricism:** Locke established the doctrine that all knowledge derives exclusively from sensory experience and introspection, directly challenging the prevailing Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas.

**Theory of Association:** He developed and formalized the theory of the association of ideas, positing that complex mental constructs are formed through the habitual combination ("custom") of simple ideas received via experience.

**Political Liberalism:** Through works like *Two Treatises on Government*, Locke provided the theoretical justification for individual rights and limited constitutional government, profoundly influencing the principles embedded in the American Constitution.

**Distinction of Qualities:** He introduced the critical separation between **primary qualities** (inherent properties of objects, such as shape) and **secondary qualities** (powers of objects to produce subjective sensations, such as color or taste).

### 3. Intellectual Context and Impact

Locke's philosophy was fundamentally developed in opposition to the rationalist tradition championed by Descartes, who maintained that the mind arrived already equipped with certain "clear and distinct" innate ideas. Following the path previously marked by Thomas Hobbes, Locke argued forcefully against the concept of pre-existing knowledge. Instead, he proposed that the mind at birth is a **tabula rasa**--a blank sheet of paper--upon which all knowledge must be inscribed solely by experience. This doctrine of **empiricism** was a decisive moment in intellectual history, setting the trajectory for subsequent British philosophy and the development of modern psychology.

In addition to his epistemological breakthrough, Locke made indispensable contributions to political philosophy. His influential works, particularly *Two Treatises on Government* and *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, articulated crucial concepts regarding individual liberty, natural rights, and the necessity of governmental consent. These writings were highly influential among Enlightenment thinkers and provided the intellectual framework for various revolutions, having a direct and lasting effect on the drafting of documents foundational to the American political system.

### 4. Major Works

*Essay on a Law of Nature*

*Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)

*Two Treatises on Government* (1689)

*A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689)

*Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693)

*Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695)

### 5. Core Psychological Doctrines: The Theory of Ideas

The conceptual foundation of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* rests on the term "idea," which he defined as the basic unit of the mind or the fundamental "object of thinking." According to Locke's analysis, conscious behavior and accumulated knowledge could be analyzed at any moment into these constituent units, whether they represent concrete objects (e.g., man, dog) or abstract qualities (e.g., hardness, sweetness). Given the mind starts as a **tabula rasa**, every single one of these ideas--and thus all human knowledge--must derive entirely from experience, making experience the ultimate source of understanding.

Recognizing that mental life involves the combination of these elements, Locke proposed the doctrine of the **association of ideas** to explain how units are held together. This theory maintains that associations are primarily established by **custom**--that is, the habitual or frequent perception

of ideas occurring simultaneously or sequentially. For example, the repeated co-occurrence of specific colors, shapes, and odors becomes mentally linked to form the complex idea of a "dog," while abstract concepts combine to form notions like "autocracy."

Locke further differentiated between two types of ideas: **simple ideas**, which are unanalyzable (such as the specific color russet), and **complex ideas**, which can be broken down into their simpler components (such as the concept of government). Although he did not provide a definitive model for this compounding process, or "mental chemistry," he categorized complex ideas into three main types: **modes** (representing variations, such as different kinds of triangles), **substances** (representing things, such as dog or house), and **relations** (arising when we compare one idea with another, such as "larger" or "brighter"). These mechanisms became central concepts for subsequent associationist psychologists.

## 6. Sources of Knowledge: Sensation and Reflection

Locke traced all ideas to two primary and distinct sources: **sensation** and **reflection**. Sensation accounts for all knowledge derived from the external world. In this process, external bodies impinge upon the sense organs, which then send messages to the mind, resulting in perceptions like color, sound, and texture. This mechanism furnishes the mind with ideas about external reality.

In contrast, **reflection** is the mind's internal source of knowledge, often described as an "inner sense." Through reflection, the mind gains awareness of its own operations, such as perceiving, doubting, willing, and reasoning. In this process, which is similar to **introspection**, we gain ideas about our own mental processes and the manner of their occurrence. This distinction was highly significant for the future development of psychology, serving as a conceptual forerunner for **act psychology**, which subsequently emphasized the mental operations themselves rather than merely the contents of consciousness.

## 7. Primary and Secondary Qualities

Locke's differentiation between **primary and secondary qualities** represented a major shift in the understanding of perception. **Primary qualities** are perceived singly by the senses--including properties like shape, extent, solidity, and motion--and are viewed as inherent properties stemming directly from objects in the external world. Locke argued that our perception of these qualities is a true representation of the object; the shape we perceive corresponds directly to the actual shape of the object itself.

**Secondary qualities**, however, do not exist in the objects in the specific form in which they are perceived. Instead, they are defined by the power of the object to produce specific ideas or sensations in the mind of the observer. Examples include colors, sounds, tastes, and smells. These perceptions are generated by the object but do not resemble the physical properties that

cause them. This distinction led to the realization that the mind is not simply a passive "mirror of the external world" but actively interprets reality, gaining much of its knowledge indirectly. Locke's framework is widely regarded as having foreshadowed critical later theories in sensory science, including the doctrine of **specific nerve energies** and the concept of **isomorphism** utilized in Gestalt theory.

## 8. Further Reading

[John Locke \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[An Essay Concerning Human Understanding](#)

[John Locke \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Tabula Rasa](#)

[Primary and Secondary Qualities](#)

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