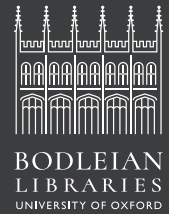


Locke UNLOCKED

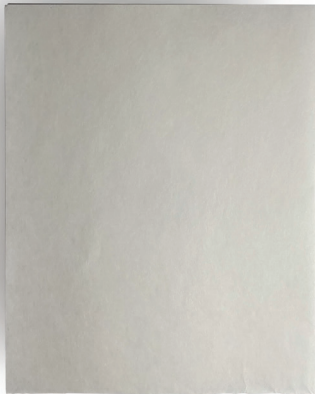
A Look at John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

NO INNATE
IDEAS



Modelling The Idea White Paper

Photo: Cliff Landesman



The Philosophical Idea

“Let us suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience”

Bk II, Ch I, 2

How does knowledge begin? Locke offered us a vivid metaphor: a blank white page. Our minds start out as a blank white page with no preconceived notions, no prior ideas; nothing is yet inscribed on the white page. What starts the process of acquiring knowledge? Locke answered with one word: experience.

We are certainly born with appetites and capacities (such as the capacity

to perceive, to learn, or to acquire a language). Locke did not deny these sorts of inherited capacities. Rather, he rejected the stronger claims of previous thinkers, such as Plato and Descartes. They argued that we start out with certain concepts or principles, either implanted in us by God, or remembered from a previous life. For Locke, all that we know is grounded in experience. As he put it, “no ideas are innate”.

Explore the idea



Listen to the podcast

<https://visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/event/locke-unlocked#collapse3386546>



Look at the resource ‘Do we stay the same from birth?’

https://oxplore.org/question-detail/do_we_stay_the_same_from_birth#2641



Draw a stick person. Around the drawing, write down the factors that shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, for example our family or school.

Compare your drawing with a partner. What is the same and what is different? Share your findings with the class.



Discuss these questions:


- 1 Pick an object (or a scene) that you think best represents our minds at birth. Explain what features of the object (or scene) make it a fitting representation of how you think you started to learn.
- 2 Find online an example of the nature/nurture debate. How does that discussion relate to Locke's metaphor of a white sheet? What would be an alternative metaphor to represent those views?
- 3 Consider machine learning and Artificial Intelligence (AI). How would you describe contrasting approaches to AI, using the notion of innate or no innate ideas?

Take it further



Watch the film of Jean Paul Sartre

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpXNRrtuo38>.

- 4 How would John Locke have responded to this?
 - 5 Explore the question 'Can we ever have nothing?'
https://explore.org/question-detail/can_you_ever_have_nothing#3054
-  Search online for psychology research into innate versus learned abilities in babies:
- Fantz, R. L. (1961)
"The Origin of Form Perception". *Scientific American*, 204 (5), 66-73
 - Gibson, E. J., & Walk, R. D. (1960).
The "visual cliff". *Scientific American*, 202(4), 64-71.
- 6 How do the findings from these experiments challenge Locke's view?

