

# John locke essay examples

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## **Introduction**

One of the greatest English philosophers of the late 17th and 18th century, John Locke was the founding father of the school of empiricism. He inspired generations of people with his ideas of natural rights, government, knowledge and language. His argument against the rationalist views of innate ideas is one of the most discussed topics even today. The US president Thomas Jefferson was so profoundly influenced by Locke's ideas that he employed the theory of natural rights and government in the Declaration of Independence. Besides being a philosopher Locke was a physician who treated Lord Ashley, the Earl of Shaftesbury for a liver infection. To know more about Locke and his genius, this paper will delve deep into Locke's life and accomplishment.

## **Locke's Life**

Widely known as the father of Classical Liberalism, John Locke was born on 29th August in 1632 in a small village in Somerset, England to Puritan parents of middle class status. During three and half years of his graduation in Christ Church College, Oxford, he focused mainly on learning logic, metaphysics and the classical languages. He completed his graduation in 1656 followed by a Master degree in 1658. He then became a lecturer in Christ Church College, Oxford in Greek, rhetoric and philosophy. Afterwards he studied medicine and one of his research batch mates was Sydenham who was one of the most famous English physicians in the 17th century. Locke was profoundly influenced by Robert Boyle who was the leader of the Oxford scientific group and took atomism or the corpuscular hypothesis to his learning. It was Boyle's book 'The Origin of Forms and Qualities' that

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Locke borrowed the words of primary and secondary qualities from.

Impressed by reading Newton's 'Principia Mathematica Philosophiae

Naturalis' Locke befriended him. He was fonder of reading Descartes than

Aristotle and his association with Oxford scientists led him to develop a

critical outlook towards the work of Descartes.

The groundbreaking change in his career came after he met Lord Ashley who

later became the Earl of Shaftesbury in 1666. Before long he turned into Lord

Ashley's friend, physician, secretary, researcher and advisor. His friendship

with Lord Ashley opened the door for him to English politics. Locke attained

his bachelor degree in medicine in 1674 and after Shaftesbury lost his title,

Locke left for France to practice medicine where he stayed for 15 months

meeting leaders of science and philosophy.

Suspected to be one of the prime conspirators of the Rye House Plot, which

involved killing Charles II of England and his brother James, Duke of York who

was next in line of throne, John Locke went into exile in Holland. During the

exile, Locke finished his work on 'An Essay Concerning Human

Understanding', and published *Epistola de Tolerantia* in Latin. (William, 2012)

The English government employed various means to get Locke and some of

his English revolutionary peers extradited to England. He was stripped of his

studentship in Oxford in 1684. In 1685 Charles II passed away and James

who took the throne for a brief period was eventually overthrown and forced

to exile by the rebels in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This marked an

important event in the English history. This is when the power dominated by

kings passed down to the Parliament. Locke making use of the opportunity

returned to England. Upon his return from exile, his two major works got

published back to back; one was 'An Essay Concerning Human

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Understanding' and another was 'The Two Treatises of Government'. Additionally, a translated version of Locke's 'A Letter Concerning Toleration' was also published. He died on 28th October in 1704. He never married nor did he have any children.

## **Locke's Accomplishments**

- An Essay Concerning Human Understanding
- His Argument against Innate Ideas

John Locke is known for his ideas. His major accomplishments include his ideas expressed into his two successful books considered to be philosophical jewels; one is 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' and another is 'The Two Treatises of Government'. One of Locke's most successful yet debatable thought was the refutation of the age old innate ideas postulated by the Rationalists like Plato and Descartes according to whom we human beings are born with some innate ideas including the belief of God, mathematics, the concept of time, casualty and other such principles which help us understand the essence of the world. They emphasize that not all our knowledge derive from experience. But Locke, in his book 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding', totally denying this concept adds that human mind remains a blank state at birth and it gets its shape through experience. That is why the universe is diverse with a variety of cultures, languages and religious practices. He rejects the concept of universal assent and castigates the characteristic explanation of innate principles. Locke argues if innate ideas are what we are born with, then children should be aware of them. But the very fact that they need to be taught the maxims of God, color and mathematics prove that these ideas are not innate.

Rationalists state that reason is the source of knowledge. Locke argues that if reason is used to attain knowledge then knowledge is not innate.

#### - Distinction between Primary and Secondary Qualities

Locke differentiated between the primary qualities and secondary qualities of an object. The primary qualities of an object refer to the properties that are not related to us such as solidity, texture, number and extension. The secondary qualities are the sensations produced within us through our five senses such as color, taste, smell and vision. Locke also identifies tertiary properties that are the powers of one substance affecting another, for example, the power of fire to melt a piece of wax. (William, 2012)

#### - Locke's Theory on Language

Locke dedicates an entire book of 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' to language since he views language as crucial to human social interaction for the success of which we are blessed with three requirements; 1) We are all endowed with functional physical organs to help us form articulate sounds, 2) we nurture the ability to use these signs as "Signs of internal Conceptions" for sharing our thoughts to each other and 3) We attach words as general terms to particular things in order to avoid the trouble of giving unique names to everything. According to Locke, human beings depend on language to convey their feelings. Language like thought has been designed to fulfill our practical needs.

#### - Theory on Knowledge

According to Locke, there are three kinds of knowledge; intuitive, demonstrative, and sensitive all of which are based on ideas. Knowledge is a perception about the agreement and disagreements between ideas which are some objects of our mind that help us think. He identifies four ways to

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understand ideas - identity or diversity, relation, co-existence and real existence.

- The Two Treatises of Government

- Theory of Natural Rights

Locke believes that human beings are born with natural rights to life, liberty and property. Since human beings are rational, they should have the liberty to act the way they want without harming others. A governing body, according to Locke, limits individual freedom and hence if a man is wronged, instead of the government punishing the perpetrator, the man himself, since all are equal in the state of nature, can take the action of inflicting punishment on his wrongdoer. According to Locke, each of us holds right to our own body and actions. Therefore, any production that is the fruit of one's labor will be one's own. But as God wants everyone to be happy, no man should possess more than he can make use of. Each of us should have the same right to reap benefits out of our property and land, as long as it doesn't infringe on the rights of others.

- Theory on Government

Locke emphasizes upon the need of building a secure society through the formation of a government made by the support of majority of people concurring in the agreement to surrender their political rights into the hands of a designated body. He believed that the legislative body should be accountable for deciding upon the laws and its proper implementation to keep order in the society. The legislative power of the government would be handed over to a representative assembly which would speak for everyone in the society. It would be the sole responsibility of the government to look

after the needs of the people who are to be governed, failing which people have the right to rebel and overthrow the government.

## **Conclusion**

John Locke, one of the finest physicians and greatest philosophers of the late 17th and 18th Century was known for his ideas. He established the school of empiricism with his ideas of experience being the source of knowledge opposing the innate ideas of the rationalists. In his life he played multifaceted roles of a lecturer, physician, secretary, revolutionary and a friend. His two greatest accomplishments include his two books namely 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' and 'The Two Treatises of Government' both of which were published after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. His ideas of natural rights and government are what the Declaration of Independence of the US Constitution is based upon. John Locke, in one word, is truly a legendary whose legacy of empiricism traces all aspect of our lives.

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