

Modern Philosophy – Lecture 3 Study Guide

Title: The Promise of Individual Empiricism (John Locke)

Key Themes

- **The individual at the center:** Each person must use their own senses and reason to build knowledge.
 - **Intellectual independence:** Think for yourself, not through the eyes of tradition or authority.
 - **Empiricism as method:** Knowledge comes from experience and observation, not innate ideas or speculative metaphysics.
 - **Religion and science harmonized:** God gave humans senses and reason to explore creation; to reject them is a betrayal of faith.
 - **Tolerance and separation:** Locke's arguments for religious toleration and the clear division between church and state.
 - **Political liberalism:** Rights to life, liberty, and property as foundations of civil society.
 - **Right of revolution:** Citizens retain original liberty and may overthrow unjust rulers.
-

Historical & Cultural Context

- **Exile & Amsterdam:** Locke joins a cosmopolitan circle of free-thinkers in tolerant Holland before returning to England in 1688.
- **The Glorious Revolution (1688):** Bloodless transition of power; Parliament ascends; Act of Toleration (1689) broadens religious freedom.
- **Scientific ferment:** Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1687) inspires a new model of knowledge.
- **Religious & political turmoil:** English civil wars, Cromwell, censorship, execution of Charles I – Locke grows up in an age of instability.
- **Henry VIII & succession politics:** Mix of soap opera and serious statecraft

leads to break with Rome, foreshadowing later church–state tensions.

Main Concepts & Contributions

1. Epistemology – Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690)

- Knowledge begins with **experience**, not innate ideas.
- “Men must think and know for themselves.”
- Rejects reliance on authority or tradition; parroting truths is not true knowledge.
- Sarcasm at mere repetition: “The floating of other men’s opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing.”
- Stresses humility: sometimes the right answer is “**I don’t know.**”

2. Metaphysics of Mind–Body

- Refuses dogmatic dualism vs. materialism.
- Possibility: God could make matter think.
- Emphasis: suspend judgment where evidence is lacking.

3. Letter Concerning Toleration (1689)

- **True church’s mark:** toleration.
- **Religion:** an inward matter of conscience; cannot be compelled by force.
- **Magistrate’s role:** protect civil interests (life, liberty, health, property), not salvation of souls.
- **Church as voluntary society:** entry and exit must be free; religion is individual choice, not inherited.
- **Separation of church and state:** politics deals in outward force; religion deals in inward conviction. Mixing them corrupts both.

4. Political Theory – Two Treatises of Government

- Government exists only to protect **civil interests:** life, liberty, property.
 - Authority derives from **individual consent**, not divine right.
 - **Equal laws** apply impartially to all.
 - Citizens retain original liberty; rulers who betray trust may be overthrown.
-

Important Quotes

*“For I think we may as rationally hope to see with other men’s eyes, as to know by other men’s understandings.” – Locke, **Essay Concerning Human Understanding***

“The floating of other men’s opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing.” – Locke

*“I esteem that toleration to be the chief characteristic mark of the true church.” – Locke, **Letter Concerning Toleration***

“The whole jurisdiction of the magistrate reaches only to these civil concernments... and it neither can nor ought in any manner to be extended to the salvation of souls.” – Locke

“God himself will not save men against their wills.” – Locke

Examples & Applications

- **Galileo:** Insisted God gave humans senses and reason to explore creation; faith should not contradict science.
- **Milton:** Condemned censorship; argued that free citizens guided by reason resist tyranny.
- **Newton:** Modeled the modern attitude by refusing to speculate beyond evidence – “I frame no hypotheses.”
- **Locke on tolerance:** Excludes Catholics (allegiance to Pope seen as political threat) and atheists (viewed as unreliable in contracts), showing early limits of liberal tolerance.
- **American Revolution:** Locke’s ideas directly influence the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

Summary

Locke represents the **promise of empiricism** anchored in the dignity and responsibility of the individual. Born into England's civil and religious turmoil, educated in medicine and philosophy, and shaped by exile in tolerant Amsterdam, he combined Bacon's inductive spirit with Descartes' insistence on independent reason. Locke's *Essay* denies innate ideas and insists each mind must build knowledge from experience. His *Letter Concerning Toleration* articulates a principled separation of church and state: government protects life, liberty, and property, while religion belongs to individual conscience. In politics, Locke grounds authority in consent, equality, and rights, and defends the people's right to revolution. His philosophy marks a decisive step toward modern liberal democracy and remains foundational for both epistemology and political theory.

Questions for Review

1. How does Locke combine Bacon's empiricism with Descartes' call for independent reason?
 2. Why does Locke reject innate ideas? What does he mean by "thinking for yourself"?
 3. How does Locke reconcile empiricism with the possibility of matter thinking?
 4. Summarize Locke's main arguments for separating church and state.
 5. Why does Locke claim that force is irrelevant to genuine religion?
 6. In what sense is a church a "voluntary society"? How does this challenge inherited religion?
 7. What are Locke's "civil interests," and why are they the sole concern of government?
 8. How does Locke justify the right of revolution?
 9. Why does Locke exclude Catholics and atheists from toleration, and what does this reveal about early modern liberalism?
 10. How did Locke's ideas influence the American founding?
-

Key Terms (Quick Reference)

- **Empiricism** – Knowledge derives from experience and observation.
 - **Innate ideas (rejected)** – The claim that humans are born with built-in knowledge.
 - **Civil interests** – Life, liberty, health, property.
 - **Letter Concerning Toleration** – Locke's defense of religious freedom and separation of church and state.
 - **Voluntary society** – Church membership based on free individual choice.
 - **Two Treatises of Government** – Work defending individual rights, consent of the governed, and right to revolution.
 - **Separation of church and state** – Distinct spheres: government enforces rights; religion concerns conscience.
 - **Right of revolution** – People may overthrow rulers who violate trust.
-