



Study Guide on John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding:* Book II, Chapters I–XIII, XXI–XXIII, XXVII

What is the “true history of the first beginnings of human knowledge” (36)? What are its principal parts? Has he touched on all the major themes, or has he left crucial points out? Evaluate Locke’s history—is it sufficiently argued? Is it convincing?

Explain Locke’s design and method, as described on pages 7–8. What exactly does he intend to investigate, and what means will he employ in doing so?

- Why does Locke lay aside “the physical consideration of the mind” and the examination of “wherein its essence consists. . .” (7)? Is this warranted by an appropriate division of sciences, or is it an erroneous starting point for the subject? Depending on your answer, what kind of errors could follow from this error in method, or what kind of errors does it avoid?
- What does Locke mean in calling this investigation “historical” (8)? What sense of history does Locke have in mind, and why does he think his essay on human understanding falls under it?

What kinds of ideas does Locke identify? What reasons does he give for each being a distinct category? Does this division make sense?

- Explain Locke’s formal definition of idea: “whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking” (9). What does Locke understand by phantasm, notion, and species, and why does he use the term idea to describe them all?
- Is Locke right to presume that “it will be easily granted me, that there are such ideas in men’s minds . . .” (9)? Or is he assuming too much, and not questioning deeply enough? What might Descartes say about Locke’s presumption, and how might Locke respond?
- What are “simple ideas,” and what categories do they fall into (Chapter III, p.17 ff.)?
- What are “complex ideas”? Do they correspond with true unions of qualities in things, or are they mental figments?

How does Locke argue that all our ideas come either from sense or reflection (11)? Is this argument sufficient to support his claim? Could any other type of argument be made?

¹ John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, abridged by Richard Taylor, in *The Empiricists*, 7-133. New York: Doubleday, 1961.



What is the distinction between primary and secondary qualities (24 ff.)?

- What does Locke mean in saying that “the ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves, but the ideas produced in us by these secondary qualities have no resemblance of them at all” (26)?
- Given that Locke does not think secondary qualities have correspondence, why does he think that primary qualities do?
 - Evaluate his comparison between warmth and pain (27). Is the argument valid, or flawed? How might an opponent respond to this argument?
 - Does he argue from common consensus (27)? Does he offer sufficient grounds to save primary qualities as truly corresponding to reality?

What is substance, according to Locke? What kind of idea do we have of substance, and how does that idea arise?

- What sorts of simple ideas go into our complex ideas of substances (57)?
- How do our ideas of spiritual substances differ from those of bodily substances (59–60)?
- In what sense does Locke think we know that substances exist?
- What role does knowledge of substance play in Locke’s scheme of human knowledge? Is it a part of true understanding? Are there real substances in the world which we can know and investigate?

How does Locke understand “abstraction” (36)? What exactly is abstracted, and what is this taken from? What does he mean by “universals,” and their being “made” (36)? For Locke, is a universal something possessed in common in reality, in thought, or in language? How does his account compare with an Aristotelian understanding of the universal as that real nature common to many individuals of the same kind?

What is a power (Ch. XI, p.40 ff.)? How do we know that powers exist? How are active and passive powers distinguished?

How does Locke define person (67)? What is the basis for personal identity in man (66)? What role does consciousness play in personality (72–3)? Consider whom this definition of person includes, and whom it excludes. For example, are the following persons, by Locke’s definition: adults, children, infants, the unborn, the mentally handicapped?

What is the relation between freedom or liberty and the will (43 ff.)? Is the will free (46– 7)? Do Locke’s distinctions give a satisfactory solution to that “altogether improper” question (46)?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.