Course Summary:
This course will offer a close reading of some of John Locke's most important philosophical writings, such as *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), and the *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689). The course will introduce students to the historical context of his work and its legacy, particularly the *Essay’s* role as the most influential statement of empiricism in the early modern period. Students will also be exposed to contemporary secondary literature.

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Course Structure: This course will be delivered as a two-hour seminar, held weekly. However, we will use a “flipped classroom” approach, which means that students will be expected to do the reading and watch pre-recorded lectures in advance of the seminar. The seminar itself, then, will be devoted to discussion of these materials. Philosophical learning is very much a matter of engaging and thinking together with others, rather than the achievement of a state of possessing information. This is why it is extremely important that you read through the assigned texts and view the pre-recorded materials in advance so as to be prepared to actively take part in discussion.

The seminar time and location, as well as office hours, will be announced on the Learn page of the course.

Assessment: There are three pieces of assessment for this course:
- Mid-term essay (approx. 1500 words) (40%):
  o Due Thursday, 21st October, by 12pm
- Final essay (approx. 2500 words) (55%):
  o Due Thursday 9th December, by 12pm [Coursework dissertations are due 14th December, 12pm]
- Participation (5%)

The Mid-term essay will require an explanation of a central argument, distinction, or problem from the material covered in the first five weeks of the semester. The Final essay will afford an opportunity for a broader critical engagement with some topic covered during the semester. Questions and guidance for each essay will be posted at least 4 weeks before the deadline on
Learn. The assessment of participation will be based on presence and engagement in tutorial.

Citations: The Mid-term and Final essays should refer to Locke’s works in the standard scholarly format, which is as follows. References to Locke’s works are cited parenthetically in the text, employing an abbreviation for the title, followed by the book, chapter, paragraph and page number referenced. For example, a reference to Book 1, Chapter 2, Paragraph 3, which appears on page 49, in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding should look like this:

“[quoted text here]” (E 1.2.3 49).

References to secondary literature and other primary sources may employ any standardized reference system.

Marking Schemes
For Philosophy-specific marking guidelines go here:
Grade-related marking guidelines for Philosophy
For the University’s general marking scheme go here:
Common Marking Scheme

Main Texts
These are the main texts that we will be studying. The books are available in electronic format, but you may prefer to have a physical copy.


The standard edition of this work is edited by Peter Nidditch, published by Oxford University Press, 1975. We will spend the most time on this work, so if you prefer to buy only one physical book, I would recommend this one. An electronic copy is available on Oxford Scholarly Editions Online, which you can find through discovered.ed.ac.uk.

- Two Treatises of Government. 1689.


- A Letter Concerning Toleration. 1689.
There is a Hackett Classics edition that can be found fairly cheaply. This is also sometimes published together with the Two Treatises of Government. The online edition of the Two Treatises by Shapiro also includes the Letter.

All optional secondary readings are available in electronic format through the University library at discovered.ed.ac.uk.

Learning Resources
You should regularly check your university email and check for announcements on the course Learn page. Sometimes, there will also be announcements and discussion on MS Teams.

The course Learn page will provide information concerning:
- General information and announcement about the course
- Lecture notes and slides
- Tutorial arrangements
- Information about assessment arrangements

University of Edinburgh Library
The library’s hard-copy and online resources can be searched online via DiscoverEd.

Schedule of Readings

Week 1: Introduction to Locke’s Project

This week will introduce Locke’s life and work, especially his project in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.


Week 2: Locke’s Anti-Nativism

This week we will examine Locke’s arguments against the existence of innate ideas and innate knowledge, their validity, and their motivation.

Reading: Locke, Essay, Book 1, Chapters 2-4

Week 3: Ideas
This week we will look at Locke’s taxonomy of ideas, including the distinction between simple and complex ideas, the distinction between ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection, and the distinction between ideas of primary and of secondary qualities.

**Reading:** Locke, *Essay*, Book 2, Chapter 1 (up to about §12), Chapters 2-8. Please read Ch. 8 “Other Considerations concerning simple Ideas” especially carefully.


**Week 4:** Power, Free Will, and Action

This week we will look at one of the longest and most difficult chapters in Locke’s Essay, “On Power.” Locke begins with the origin of the idea of power, but quickly changes subject to discuss his views about liberty and freedom of the will, and the nature of action and motivation.

**Reading:** Locke, *Essay*, Book 2, Chapter 21, “Of Power.” [Warning: this is only one chapter but it is just over 50 pages long and very difficult!]


**Week 5:** Substance and Sorts of Substances

This week we will look at Locke’s views concerning our ideas of substances, including the idea of substance in general and our ideas of sorts of substances, like the ideas of gold, horses, and cornflowers. We will also look at Locke’s views about the meaning of names of sorts of substances.

**Reading:** Locke, *Essay*, Book 2, Chapter 23 “Of our Complex Ideas of Substances” and Book 3, Chapter 6 “Names of Substances.”


**Week 6:** Personal Identity

This week we will look at Locke’s extremely influential account of personal identity.

**Reading:** Locke, *Essay*, Book 2, Chapter 27 “Identity and Diversity.”

**Week 7: Knowledge**

This week we turn to the core of Locke’s epistemological project: his account of what knowledge is, what we know, and how. We’ll examine the four types of knowledge, the three degrees of knowledge, and how the nature of our ideas bears on what we know.

**Reading:** Locke, *Essay*, Book 4, Chapters 1-4, also please go back to Book 2, Chapters 31-32.


**Week 8: Sensitive Knowledge and Scepticism**

This week we will look at Locke’s account of our perceptual knowledge of the world, which he calls “sensitive knowledge.” We will also consider his response to the external world sceptic.

**Reading:** Locke, *Essay*, Book 4, Chapter 11. Also please reread the relevant portions of last week’s reading, especially Book 2, chapters 31-32 and parts of Book 4, Chapter 4.


**Week 9: Political Philosophy**

This week we leave behind Locke’s *Essay* and look at his political philosophy. We will discuss his conception of natural law and his version of social contract theory.

**Reading:** Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Second Treatise [i.e. Book 2], Chapters 1-11.

Week 10: Locke, Slavery, and Race

This week we will grapple with Locke’s difficult and contradictory engagement with slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. While we will spend some time on primary reading, our focus will be on understanding Locke’s involvement in and influence on the slave trade, both through his own personal investments and his role in drafting the constitution for the Carolinas.


Week 11: Religious Toleration

In our final week of class, we will examine Locke’s arguments in support of religious toleration and on the limits of a government to impose religion upon its subjects. We’ll also consider Locke’s puzzling claims about the proper extent of religious toleration, in particular his claim that atheists are never to be tolerated.

Reading: Locke, A Letter Concerning Toleration [sometimes this is referred to as the first of the four letters concerning toleration], pp. 5-47 (through the discussion of atheism).


Learning Outcomes

On completion of this course, the student will be able to:
1. Interpret, analyse, and evaluate arguments in historical philosophical texts.

2. Understand Locke’s project in An Essay concerning Human Understanding and its philosophical legacy.

3. Critically assess competing positions in the secondary literature on Locke.

4. Develop an original interpretation of some topic or issue in Locke’s philosophical works.