

A-level English Literature Summer Task

Task 1: Read the article and write four bullet points of information under each of the sub-headings:

1. John Locke's Social Contract Theory
2. Locke on Property
3. The Tabula Rasa
4. Locke on Religion
5. Locke on Toleration

John Locke's Philosophy: Five Key Ideas

John Locke was one of the most important proponents of liberal ideology as well as modern state functionality. Read on to learn some of Locke's most ground-breaking philosophical ideas.



John Locke's political philosophy is **synonymous** with liberal thought in its **classical** sense. It is noteworthy to consider that classical liberalism is both similar yet rather different from liberalism today. In Locke's era, the political norm was a **feudal** social hierarchy dominated by an overarching political entity in which all power was vested in one individual: a monarch. The contrast to the massive political **Leviathan** that was a monarchy, then, was a modest governmental structure of limited size and scope. It was this idea that was upheld by Locke

and the **Whig thinkers** in Britain in his time. What follows are some important ideas credited to the **Father of Liberalism**.

Synonymous = identical meaning

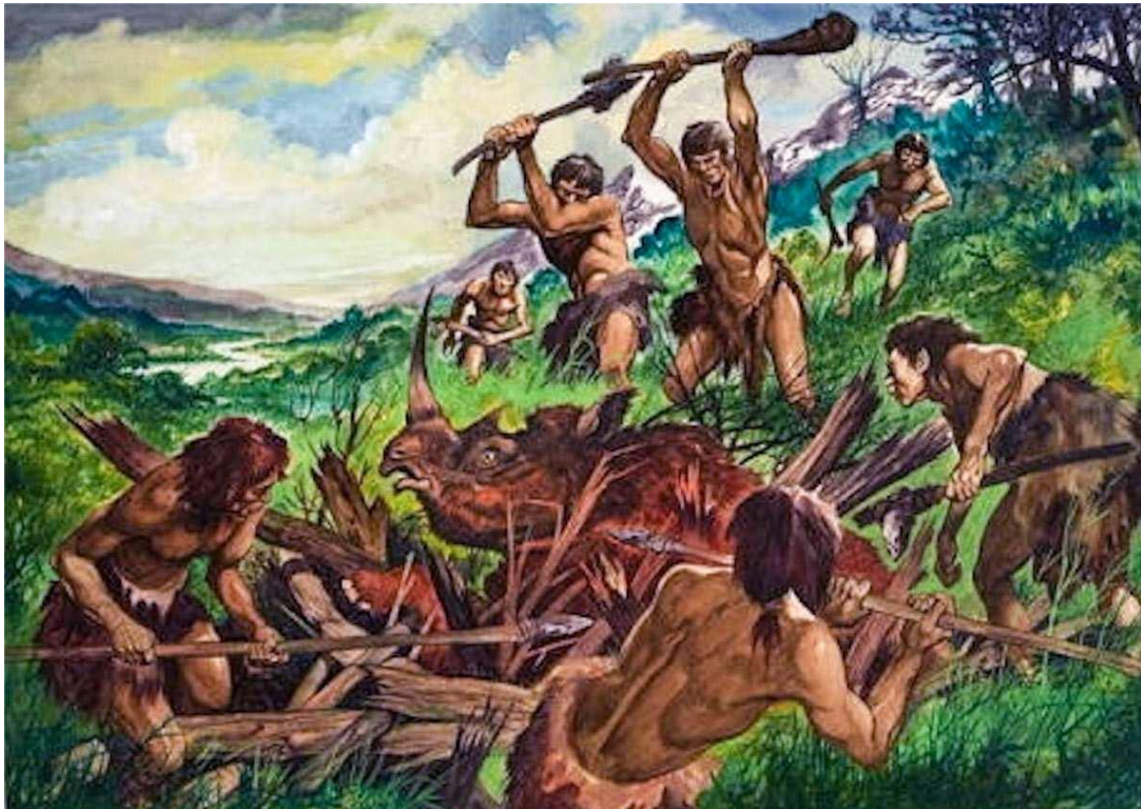
Classical = traditional

Leviathan = monster

Feudal = medieval system of hierarchy

Whig = liberal, politically centre-left person

1. John Locke's Social Contract Theory



John Locke's View on Human in Nature, artist unknown, via Londonhua

In early modern philosophy, the *State of Nature* is a **hypothetical** world **devoid** of any law, order, and political structure. It has become the canvas on which philosophers project their views of human nature; how we would behave if there was no political establishment, law, or language to **civilize** us.

Philosophers widely agree that it is human nature to band together and form what is called a state, **reminiscent** of the ancient point made by **Aristotle** that “man is a political animal.” For John Locke, individuals within this so-called *state* have a moral **obligation** not to harm one another in any form, be it life or property.

Hypothetical = imagined

Devoid = empty

Civilize = educate, advance, refine

Reminiscent = reminding of

Obligation = duty



[John Locke](#), by Herman Verelst, c. 1689, via National Portrait Gallery

Locke argues that *without* a governmental body of some form, these states would **devolve** into violence rooted in fear and lack of confidence in their protection. The [Social Contract](#), therefore, becomes a **mutual** agreement that the people of a state surrender *some* (not all) of their rights to government, in exchange for the protection and peaceful social existence that the law provides.

But it stops there. As a **sceptic** of endowing a government with too much authority, Locke believed in the notions of individual **governance** and liberties: this is the “classical liberal” sense of Lockean thought, as it directly **counters** monarchic authority. For Locke, the government must be a “neutral judge” of law with no right to interfere in the lives of the individual.

Devolve = power given over to a lower level

Mutual = shared

Sceptic = doubter

Governance = control

Counters = against, opposed

The most **radical** idea to come from Locke's pen was the idea of **governmental legitimacy**. Locke believed that a government should be beholden to the people rather than **vice-versa**. He became the first person in history to suggest that if a people disapprove of their government, they should possess the power to change it as they see fit. This idea came to be known as *the right to revolution*.

Radical = extreme

Legitimacy = legality, rightfulness

Vice versa = the other way round

2. Locke on Property



[Vertumnus](#), by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, 1590, via Skokloster Castle, Sweden

John Locke was first to suggest that human beings, as human beings, have a set of **inalienable** rights. These rights, paraphrased in the [American Constitution](#), are “[life, liberty, and property](#).”

Fundamentally, Locke observed that the human right to property is rooted in that one's property begins with oneself. A person has the right to govern themselves; their essence is their property, and nothing and nobody can take that away. This is the **introspective** right of an individual; their ownership over their soul. Externally, an individual's right to property is concerned with the world around them. The Earth provides humankind with **bounty**, shared throughout the world. This bounty is a gift to humankind, according to Locke, from God: we all have *access in common* to God's bounty.

If this bounty is commonly accessible, it is therefore ripe for the taking by any individual who sees fit. For Locke, mixing one's labour with God's bounty provided to us results in that bounty becoming one's property.

Imagine for a moment walking through the woods and finding an apple tree. By climbing the tree and plucking an apple, you are mixing your efforts and labour with the bounty of God, therefore justifying that the apple you've picked is now your property.

Additionally, John Locke **postulated** that simply building a fence around a field was an effective means of claiming property.

Inalienable = unchallengeable, absolute

Introspective = thoughtful, reflective

Bounty = reward, plenty

Postulate = claim, hypothesise

3. The Tabula Rasa



[School of Athens](#), by Raphael, 1511, via Vatican Museum

Early Modern Philosophy divided itself into two schools: [rationalism and empiricism](#). Much like philosophical reasoning itself, the divide stems from the minds of the ancient Greeks.

[Plato](#), pictured above on the left pointing upward, was a rationalist idealist philosopher: he believed ideas to be the sources of our knowledge. [Aristotle](#), pictured on the right with his hand outstretched in front of him, is the father of practical empiricism: he believed that sense experience was the source of our knowledge.

John Locke was, like Aristotle, an empiricist. A central idea of Lockean thought was his notion of the [Tabula Rasa](#): the “Blank Slate.” John Locke believed that all human beings are born with a barren, empty, **malleable** mind; every facet of one’s character is something observed, perceived, and learned via the senses.

Biologically, the *Tabula Rasa* favours *nurture* in the “[nature versus nurture](#)” debate. Philosophically, it allows for the concept of [free will](#). Later thinkers would interpret the idea into their own works—[Freud](#), for example, **ferverently** believed in the *Tabula Rasa* and would further the point by citing the importance of observed behaviour from our parental **dynamics**.

This idea of Locke’s corresponds with his ideas of natural rights. Though we are not born with any **innate** ideas, learned behaviour can be applied to our natural rights in order to obtain **optimal** outcomes for oneself.

Malleable = changeable	Ferverently = passionately
Dynamics = relationships	Innate = inborn
	Optimal = best

4. Locke on Religion



[Portrait of Louis XIV](#), by Hyacinthe Rigaud, c. 1700, via Louvre

Robert Filmer, a **contemporary** of John Locke, justified monarchy by **advocating** the **divine right** to rule, represented here by the famous French Sun King, Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715), and the King being the earthly representation of God. Locke wrote a detailed **critique** of Filmer's theory.

Contemporary = existing at the same time period, current

Advocating = promoting

Divine right = right given directly from God

Critique = analysis and evaluation

John Locke was born a [Puritan](#), converted to a [Socinian](#), and grew up through the religiously ambiguous English Civil War. As a result, he firmly believed that no political authority had the right to decide the religion of their people. For evidence, he cited the messy ambiguity of religion from the reign of Henry VIII (r. 1509-47) to his daughter Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603) which yielded much death and destruction in England.

The religious views offered by John Locke came from the context he lived in. Though he believed that one's essence (or soul) is one's own property, over which the self is the only governor, his idea of the body was different. To Locke, our bodies are the property of God. It is therefore a natural right and a natural law not to kill—murder was to be considered as directly harming the property of God.

According to this view, a human being has the right to govern themselves in whichever way they see fit, and through doing so simultaneously sustaining the right to life, these two rights being two natural laws for John Locke. This is a notion of Lockean classical liberalism that [resonates](#) to this day, mainly thanks to the extensive study of John Locke by the [American Founding Fathers](#).

Puritanism = wanting to move away from the extravagance of the Catholic church

Socinianism = movement believing in God and Christian scriptures but denies the divinity of Jesus

American Founding Fathers = group of American revolutionaries who united the thirteen colonies and led the War of Independence against Britain.

5. Locke on Toleration



[*A Scene of the Thirty Years War*](#), 1884, by Ernest Crofts, via Leeds Art Gallery

John Locke wrote extensively on the subject of **toleration**. It is likely that this was a lesson taught to him — or an idea that dawned on him — during his experience observing the English Civil War in his youth.

In the conflict, Catholics and Protestants **decimated** one another. This was not unique to England, which saw the importation of Protestantism when [King Henry VIII was denied a divorce](#) by the Catholic Pope in 1534.

Invoking the *Tabula Rasa*, his experiences, perceptions, and observations in his youth evidently formulated his opinions on toleration. John Locke defined toleration as a fundamental and **axiomatic** disagreement with something, be it another faith, race, sexual orientation, or favourite soccer team, while still allowing it to exist. Seeing as Locke offered that the soul is the property of the individual, and nobody has the right to govern it except that same individual, everybody has the right to choose their own path.

Locke did not dismiss the act of being strongly opposed to something; one can still disagree and take issue with something, but true toleration simply allows it to exist. The bookend of the religious violence in England happened when Queen Elizabeth I decreed an official toleration of Catholics within the **realm** despite the state being Protestant, with herself being its supreme head.

Toleration = acceptance, open-mindedness

Decimated = destroying one in every ten

Axiomatic = self-evident, obvious

Realm = kingdom, territory

The Legacy of John Locke



[Liberty Leading the People](#), by Eugene Delacroix, c. 1830, via Louvre

Locke made a significant impact on the [revolutionary generation](#) of the final quarter of the eighteenth century in the United States and France. In his time, Locke's *right to revolution* was one of the most radical political statements ever made, changing the world in its wake.

In many ways, Locke's classical liberalism parallels liberalism as we know it today. In many other ways, still, it is dramatically different. The Lockean ideal consists of a small government with limited scope and limited power, acting as a mere support beam for the people. Though many tenets have not changed, modern liberalism predominantly advocates for a large government and scope, and it was the First and Second World Wars that created this ideological shift.

President [Thomas Jefferson](#) (1743-1826), principal author of the *Declaration of Independence* and considered progressive in his time, dreamt of a United States knitted with small-scale farmers living by their own means, off of their own land, and with no interference. Today, this view is dubbed [Jeffersonian Republicanism](#), an ideology considered essentially [Libertarian](#) (a right-wing political stance).

Wake = to emerge Tenets = beliefs, principles Ideological shift = change in thought or ideas

Progressive = open to reform Dubbed = named Libertarian = seeks political freedom

President [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#) (a liberal by modern standards) dramatically expanded the scope of government in his [New Deal](#) policy in 1933 to bail his state out of the [Great Depression](#). In this view, a larger and more powerful government would [facilitate](#) the liberties of its people.

John Locke did not live to see the fruits of his philosophical labour. His new political philosophy of liberalism would evidently split into many different avenues as it was re-interpreted by [subsequent](#) generations. Regardless of how liberalism is applied, the ideas offered by John Locke proved [pivotal](#) in the development of modern Western Civilization.

New Deal = improved the lives of people suffering from the Great Depression but set a precedent for the government playing a key role in the economic and social affairs of the nation.

The Great Depression = worldwide economic downturn

Liberalism = political and moral philosophy based on the rights of the individual, liberty, consent before the governed and equality before the law.

Facilitate = enable

Subsequent = later

Pivotal = important, key

Task 2: Research John Locke's influence on the novel 'Frankenstein' by Mary Shelley and add an additional four bullet points under the sub-heading of:

The Legacy of John Locke.

Task 3: Read the novel of 'Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus' by Mary Shelley (1831)

Challenge: Finished? Look at the supplementary reading lists for the Year 12 A-level English Literature course. Could you read one of the texts over the summer?