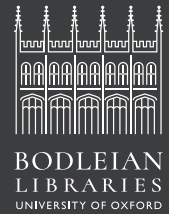


# Locke UNLOCKED

A Look at John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

ABSTRACT  
IDEAS



## Modelling the Idea Peter and Paul / Man



Photo: Cliff Landesman



### The Philosophical Idea

“...let anyone reflect and then tell me wherein does his *idea of man* differ from that of *Peter and Paul* ...but in the leaving out something that is peculiar to each individual...”

Bk III, Ch III, 9

We interact with individual people. We live in a flat or a house. We are familiar with the city where we live. These are all particular things: this person, this building, this city. But we also know and talk about general things. We say that “people don’t live forever”, “buildings need maintenance”, and “cities have streets”. Almost every noun is a general term. These general terms (“person”, “house”, “city”) are the basic building blocks of many of our thoughts. What are these general terms and how do we acquire them?

Locke offered us a theory about general concepts (or “abstract ideas” as he called them). Locke’s theory is that we start with particular concepts (such as the individuals Peter and Paul) and we subtract what is unique to each of them. What remains are the properties they share in common. The general concept of a “human being” (a “man” as Locke put it) is set by these core properties. Both Peter and Paul have two legs. Both have faces. Both speak a language. Whatever properties all humans share, that is the meaning of “human being”.

For Locke, we arrive at abstraction by subtraction.

## Explore the idea



Listen to the podcast

<https://visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/event/locke-unlocked#collapse3386591>



Create a game to explore Locke's theory of abstract ideas.

A group is divided into two teams. The game is played in rounds. During a round, one team takes on the role of choosing an abstract idea and the other team takes on the role of trying to guess the idea. During the next round, the teams switch roles. The team in the role of choosing writes one or two properties on a single card. For example, an abstract idea could be a red triangle or it could be any figure that is large.

The team in the role of guessing draws a figure on a test card and the other team reveals whether that figure is an example of the idea or not. The team that identifies the idea by presenting the fewest test cards wins.

Figures are drawn using the following features:

**Shape:** triangle, square, circle

**Colour:** red, blue, green

**Size:** small, large

**Pattern:** striped or solid

To make it easier to identify common features, cards that are positive examples of an idea should be placed together so the players can view all of the positive examples at once.



Watch this podcast by Peter Millican – Professor of Philosophy, Hertford College, University of Oxford:

<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/63-abstraction-and-idealism>

## Take it further

Ask students to consider if there any gaps in society's/human understanding on this topic. If they could gain all knowledge to everything in nature and beyond, what 3 questions would they like to know the answer to and why? Could there be any downsides to possessing 'the answers' to their selected questions?



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