

# Empiricism Encyclopedia Article

## Empiricism

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# Empiricism

*The theory that all knowledge is acquired through experience.*

Empiricism is the theory proposed by philosophers and psychologists that all knowledge and behavior are acquired through experience, and are not at all attributable to inborn or innate characteristics or traits. The English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) developed the early ideas of empiricism, publishing in 1690 his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He believed that infants are born with no innate moral sense, attitudes, or knowledge in any form. Locke envisioned the human mind at birth as a blank slate (*tabula rasa*), on which experience will record knowledge.

The psychologist **John Broadus Watson** expanded on the ideas of Locke when he formed his theory of **behaviorism**. Watson believed that a healthy infant could be taught to do anything. He did not acknowledge the existence of any inborn talents or abilities that would influence such learning.

Since the 1970s, there has been considerable research into the contribution of a child's **temperament** to his or her development, and most modern experts disagree with Locke and Watson. They believe instead that temperament is a source of individual differences in emotions that are innate to the individual. Temperament is a predisposition that allows two individuals to experience the same objective event very differently within the range of normal behavior and development.

**Nativism** is the theory that expresses the point of view opposite to empiricism.

## For Further Study

### Books

Buckley, K.W. *Mechanical Man. John Broadus Watson and the Beginnings of Behaviorism*. New York: Guilford Press, 1989.

Carruthers, Peter. *Human Knowledge and Human Nature: A New Introduction to an Ancient Debate*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume 's Theory of Human Nature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Slater, John G., ed. *Bertrand Russell, 1927-42: A Fresh Look at Empiricism*. New York: Routledge, 1996.