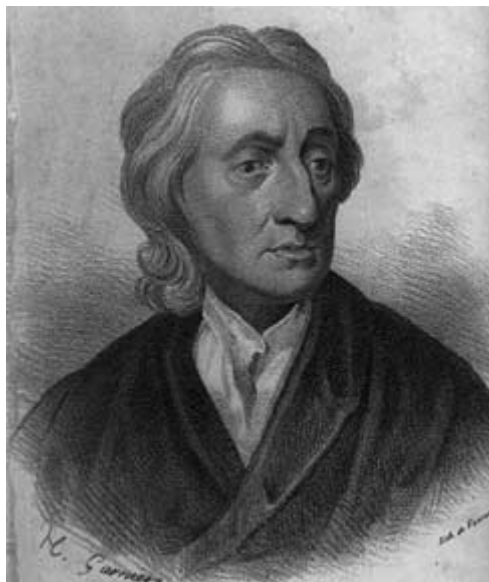




2005 Shaping the World: Conversation on Democracy Thomas Jefferson Talks With George Washington

John Locke

1632–1704



John Locke 1632–1704, English philosopher, founder of British empiricism. Locke summed up the Enlightenment in his belief in the middle class and its right to freedom of conscience and right to property, in his faith in science, and in his confidence in the goodness of humanity. His influence upon philosophy and political theory has been incalculable.

Life and Work

Educated at Christ Church College, Oxford, he became (1660) a lecturer there in Greek, rhetoric, and philosophy. He studied medicine, and his acquaintance with scientific practice had a strong influence upon his philosophical thought and method. In 1666, Locke met Anthony Ashley Cooper, the future 1st earl of Shaftesbury, and soon became his friend, physician, and adviser. After 1667, Locke had minor diplomatic and civil posts, most of them through Shaftesbury. In 1675, after Shaftesbury had lost his offices, Locke left England for France, where he met French leaders in science and philosophy.

Returning to England in 1679, he soon retired to Oxford, where he stayed quietly until, suspected of radicalism by the government, he went to Holland and remained there several years (1683–89). In Holland he completed the famous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which was published in complete form after his return to England at the accession of William and Mary to the English throne. In the same year he published his *Two Treatises on Civil Government*; part of this work justifies the Glorious Revolution of 1688, but much of it was written earlier. His fame increased, and he became known in England and on the Continent as the leading philosopher of freedom.

Philosophy

In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke examines the nature of the human mind and the process by which it knows the world. Repudiating the traditional doctrine of innate ideas, Locke believed that the mind is born blank, a *tabula rasa* upon which the world describes itself through the experience of the five senses. Knowledge arising from sensation is perfected by reflection, thus enabling humans to arrive at such ideas as space, time, and infinity.

Locke distinguished the primary qualities of things (e.g., solidity, extension, number) from their secondary qualities (e.g., color, sound). These latter qualities he held to be produced by the impact of the world on the sense organs. Behind this curtain of sensation the world itself is colorless and silent. Science is possible, Locke maintained, because the primary world affects the sense organs mechanically, thus producing ideas that faithfully represent reality. The clear, common-sense style of the *Essay* concealed many unexplored assumptions that the later empiricists George Berkeley and David Hume would contest, but the problems that Locke set forth have occupied philosophy in one way or another ever since.

Political Theory

Locke is most renowned for his political theory. Contradicting Thomas Hobbes, Locke believed that the original state of nature was happy and characterized by reason and tolerance. In that state all people were

equal and independent, and none had a right to harm another's "life, health, liberty, or possessions." The state was formed by social contract because in the state of nature each was his own judge, and there was no protection against those who lived outside the law of nature. The state should be guided by natural law.

Rights of property are very important, because each person has a right to the product of his or her labor. Locke forecast the labor theory of value. The policy of governmental checks and balances, as delineated in the Constitution of the United States, was set down by Locke, as was the doctrine that revolution in some circumstances is not only a right but an obligation. At Shaftesbury's behest, he contributed to the Fundamental Constitutions for the Carolinas; the colony's proprietors, however, never implemented the document.

Ethical Theory

Locke based his ethical theories upon belief in the natural goodness of humanity. The inevitable pursuit of happiness and pleasure, when conducted rationally, leads to cooperation, and in the long run private happiness and the general welfare coincide. Immediate pleasures must give way to a prudent regard for ultimate good, including reward in the afterlife. He argued for broad religious freedom in three separate essays on toleration but excepted atheism and Roman Catholicism, which he felt should be legislated against as inimical to religion and the state. In his essay *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), he emphasized the ethical aspect of Christianity against dogma.

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