

John Locke (1632-1704)

Locke could conceivably be considered the greatest English philosopher; he was certainly one of the most influential. He made major contributions to philosophy in the areas of consciousness and politics, and his writings on the latter subject proved very influential in many countries that revolted against unjust rule.

Background

John Locke was born to Puritan parents in Somerset, England, in 1632. His parents were Puritans, and his father, a lawyer and clerk, later served on the side of the Parliamentarians in the English Civil War (1642-49). He attended the prestigious Westminster School before being accepted at Oxford, where he chafed at the classical material taught in philosophy, preferring more contemporary ideologies. He received a bachelor's in 1656, a master's in 1658, and a bachelor's in medicine in 1674.

Personal connections shaped Locke's life extensively. His stay at the Westminster School, for instance, was sponsored by Alexander Popham, who was a member of Parliament and had commanded Locke's father in the Parliamentarian army. While in Oxford, Locke met Antony Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury. Locke impressed Cooper and became part of his retinue, later moving into Shaftesbury's home in London. Locke further impressed his patron when he removed a cyst from Shaftesbury's liver. At the time, this was a life-threatening operation, and Shaftesbury credited Locke with saving his life.

Locke's connections to Shaftesbury, who was the founder of the Whig party, shaped much of the rest of his life. Shaftesbury's rise in politics from 1661-73 allowed Locke to get involved in politics. When Shaftesbury fell from grace, however, first by losing the Chancellorship in a quarrel with King Charles II in 1673-74, and then by his reputed involvement in a plot to kill Charles in 1683, Locke fell from grace with him. On the former occasion, Locke travelled in France and acted as a tutor and physician; on the latter, he went to the Netherlands, which was a haven for exiled philosophers.

Locke eventually returned to England with Mary, the wife of William of Orange, after the Glorious Revolution in 1688. He spent the remaining years of his life in England, where he was revered for his contributions to many subjects, especially in his two major works, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises of Government*.

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

This was Locke's main contribution to epistemology, or the study of knowledge and how it is acquired. Epistemology had been one of the philosophes' main concerns in the beginnings of the Enlightenment. Like other Enlightenment writers, Locke composed his theories in opposition to Aristotle's theories. (Though Catholic theologians, beginning with Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, had modified Aristotle's philosophy somewhat, Aristotle's ideas remained central to European philosophical discussions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.) Locke also

composed his theories in opposition to the ideas put forward by his contemporaries, particularly the Cartesians (followers of René Descartes).

The basic idea for which Locke's *Essay* is known is a restatement of the theory that the mind is a *tabula rasa*, or clean slate, at birth. In this way, all of our knowledge and ideas come from sensory experience and from our reflections on what we experience. Locke's *tabula rasa* thesis contradicted Descartes and most other philosophers to that point; they had argued that humans have an innate understanding of the world and of human interaction. Locke's arguments in favor of *tabula rasa*, therefore, drew much criticism from his contemporaries. Other philosophers of the period found fault with Locke because, they argued, God had given all humans some basic principles of morality – essentially, a conscience. Locke specifically refuted this kind of “innatist” claim. Though he too was a Christian, he argued that humans discerned morality through reading the Christian scriptures and applying reason to questions of morality. Further, Locke believed that the ability to reason or to theorize developed in response to one's observations. Once one had developed this ability, one could better understand the world and the observations made from birth. This supposition differed from innatist epistemologies because they believed that with a conscience, humans possessed the ability to theorize from birth.

As evidence for his thesis, Locke relied in some instances on reports from European explorers and colonists. They had encountered humans with entirely different codes of morality and customs; Locke concluded that morality could not be innate if it could have so many different expressions. He also argued that children usually take years until they are able to reason out complex problems. If they were endowed with an innate sense of the basic principles of human knowledge, he contended, they would not need so much time to learn how to reason. Having refuted the idea of innate knowledge, Locke moved on to catalog all the ways in which we learn – essentially, through our senses and observation. His ideas on epistemology became fundamental for later philosophers, especially Emanuel Kant and Scottish thinker David Hume.

Two Treatises of Government

The two treatises on government that Locke wrote have recently become important for political theory, but it is in the history of politics that they have had a particularly strong influence. Locke's treatises provided the philosophical justification for the Glorious Revolution; and later, many others, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Founding Fathers of the United States, drew heavily on Locke's theories to justify their political thinking.

Locke's treatises on government, as with his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, were written to oppose ideas that were widely accepted at the time. In general, Locke argued against the Divine Right of Kings, which was the foundational philosophical understanding for the royal right to rule. The Divine Right was no mere philosophical idea, however, but had important practical implications, as Europe's absolute monarchs used the doctrine of the Divine Right to justify their rule.

Specifically, Locke composed his treatises to respond to Sir Robert Filmer's 1680 book *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings*. Filmer argued in favor of the Divine

Right, asserting that royal lineage could be traced back to Adam. Adam, Filmer asserted, as the first man, was the only man born without original sin and was also the father of humanity. Since kings traced their lineage back to Adam, this gave them the divine right to rule their people; they were descended from the only man without original sin and were, therefore, best suited to rule over a people born into original sin. Moreover, Filmer argued, just as fathers had the right to rule over their families, kings had the right to rule the people, who were their children and, hence, their property.

Locke devoted his *First Treatise* to refuting Filmer's arguments and those in favor of the Divine Right. First, he pointed out the many difficulties in tracing the lineage of royalty all the way back to Adam through the male line. (Doing so had been a royal tradition for centuries; after William the Conqueror took the English throne, for instance, he ordered the creation of a massive family tree that traced his family line through the English royalty, thus proving his fitness to rule.) Second, Locke disputed Filmer's premise that kings ruled by parental privilege, arguing against the claim that children were the property of parents. Though he did not deny that parents had authority over their children, he argued that such authority did not extend so far as to make the children property. Moreover, parents were not permitted to abuse or destroy their children in the way that kings did their subjects. Finally, Locke argued, parental authority was vested in both the father and the mother.

While Locke's *First Treatise* is important for how it refuted political ideology in his time, Locke's *Second Treatise* has contributed a great deal to political discourse in our time. In it, Locke developed his own vision for society, which again implicitly refuted Filmer and other philosophers, including Thomas Hobbes. The *Second Treatise* contains three particularly important ideas: that all men (though Locke argued for limits on patriarchal privilege in his *Essay*, he still considered women subordinate to men) were equal, that all men had the natural right to private property, and that men had the right to overthrow any regime that did not respect the rights of its citizens.

In defending the first idea, Locke described an idealized "state of nature" into which all men are born: individuals have complete freedom to act and to dispose of their possessions, and no other man has any power over him. Locke's assertion of man's innate freedom once again took aim at Filmer's argument that man is fundamentally unfree because of original sin. Further, if man was free, then yet another of the pillars of the theory of Divine Right was removed because one need not be born a king to rule the people. Locke continued his argument asserting that it is rational to create some kind of body – a government – that can protect a free man better than he can protect himself and can prevent a man from seeking revenge upon others in a way that is disproportionate to the original injury. Locke considered all humans to be God's property, and a responsible body would be best able to protect God's property rights.

Locke's outline of property rights used similar logic as his understanding of individual freedom. God had granted humans dominion over the earth, and so any land, products, or minerals were part of man's natural possessions. Therefore, any property a man possessed was an intrinsic part of his natural state and could not be arbitrarily infringed upon by the authorities. (Locke did, however, approve of penalties for crimes that would waive the rights of individual freedom and of property.)

His final major assertion, which proved to be very crucial in the ensuing centuries, was simple: any government that tyrannizes its citizens and acts in its own interest and not in theirs forfeits its right to exist. Citizens have the right to use force to overthrow the government if necessary. While this last proved to be a convenient justification for the Glorious Revolution, in time it was also used to justify numerous revolts around the world.

Influence

Most philosophers consider Locke to be one of the greatest, if not the greatest, philosophers of all time. His legacy to later philosophers is enormous. His works heavily influenced both British and French philosophy throughout the critical eighteenth century. Philosophers relied heavily on Locke's understanding of epistemology to form their own theories. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, based his highly influential philosophy of education partially on Locke's *tabula rasa* thesis.

Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* were equally influential. Initially written to justify the Glorious Revolution in England in 1688, in which the tyrannical King James II was ousted in favor of William of Orange and his English wife Mary, the treatises were additionally used by later leaders to justify other revolutions, especially those in the Atlantic world in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

During the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson relied heavily on Locke's works, basing the Constitutional phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" on Locke's formulation that the purpose of government was the maintenance of "life, liberty, and private property." (Jefferson changed the last part because he believed that including "private property" would enshrine slavery in the Constitution.)

In addition, and beginning with the Haitian Revolution, which lasted from 1790 to 1804, leaders of later anticolonial rebellions in the Americas used Locke's words to defend their actions. Recent historians have pointed out, however, that these Atlantic Revolutions rarely resulted in democratic, responsible regimes as Locke would have wished. Only the American Revolution did so, and initially the American concept of democracy excluded all people from citizenship except propertied white men. This pattern has led some historians to argue that Locke's principles were unimportant and the revolutionaries merely picked those that suited them. What is more likely is that the revolutionaries did not live up to Locke's lofty principles.

Locke's *Treatises* also proved crucial in the works of Voltaire, Rousseau, and other philosophes whose critiques against the ancient regime helped to fuel the French Revolution. Voltaire praised Locke in his *English Letters*, while Rousseau's ideas of a social contract borrowed heavily from Locke's formulation, as you will read in the next section on Rousseau.

Summary

- Locke's connection to Lord Shaftesbury, founder of the Whig Party, helped him to gain exposure and experience in England.

- Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* established a new basis of epistemological theory on which later philosophers relied heavily. The central concept in Locke's theory was that the mind was a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, at birth, and all knowledge is learned from observation and experience.
- Locke's *First Treatise of Government* refuted longstanding ideas that monarchs were descended from Adam and therefore had a natural right to rule. Rather, he argued, all men were born completely free into a "state of nature"; no one else has rights over them.
- Locke's "state of nature" premise allowed him to articulate, in his *Second Treatise of Government*, ideas for a society based on individual freedom and private property. Together, his *Two Treatises of Government* constitute a major underpinning of many democratic societies today.