

John Locke

Biographical Sketch

Encyclopedia Britannica

Born: August 29, 1632, Wrington, Somerset, England

Died: October 28, 1704, High Laver, Essex (aged 72)

Notable Works: “A Letter Concerning Toleration” “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” “Essays on the Law of Nature” “Some Thoughts Concerning Education” “The Reasonableness of Christianity” “Two Tracts on Government” “Two Treatises of Government”

John Locke (born August 29, 1632, Wrington, Somerset, England—died October 28, 1704, High Laver, Essex) was an English philosopher whose works lie at the foundation of modern philosophical empiricism and political liberalism, *classical* liberalism in particular. He was an inspirer of both the European Enlightenment and the Constitution of the United States. His philosophical thinking was close to that of the founders of modern science, especially Robert Boyle, Sir Isaac Newton, and other members of the Royal Society. His political thought was grounded in the notion of a social contract between citizens and in the importance of toleration, especially in matters of religion. Much of what he advocated in the realm of politics was accepted in England after the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89 and in the United States after the country’s declaration of independence in 1776.

Early years

Locke’s family was sympathetic to Puritanism but remained within the Church of England, a situation that coloured Locke’s later life and thinking. Raised in Pensford, near Bristol, Locke was 10 years old at the start of the English Civil Wars between the monarchy of Charles I and parliamentary forces under the eventual leadership of Oliver Cromwell. Locke’s father, a lawyer, served as a captain in the cavalry of the parliamentarians and saw some limited action. From an early age, one may thus assume, Locke rejected any claim by the king to have a divine right to rule.

After the first Civil War ended in 1646, Locke’s father was able to obtain for his son, who had evidently shown academic ability, a place at Westminster School in distant London. It was to this already famous institution that Locke went in 1647, at age 14. Although the school had been taken over by the new republican government, its headmaster, Richard Busby (himself a distinguished scholar), was a royalist. For four years Locke remained under Busby’s instruction and control (Busby was a strong disciplinarian who much favoured the birch). In January 1649, just half a mile away from Westminster School, Charles was beheaded on the order of Cromwell. The boys were not allowed to attend the execution, though they were undoubtedly well aware of the events taking place nearby.

The curriculum of Westminster centred on Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, mathematics, and geography. In 1650 Locke was elected a King’s Scholar, an academic honour and financial benefit that enabled him to buy several books, primarily classic texts in Greek and Latin. Although Locke was evidently a good student, he did not enjoy his schooling; in later life he attacked boarding schools for their overemphasis on corporal punishment and for the uncivil

behaviour of pupils. In his enormously influential work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), he would argue for the superiority of private tutoring for the education of young gentlemen (see below *Other works*).

Oxford

In the autumn of 1652 Locke, at the comparatively late age of 20, entered Christ Church, the largest of the colleges of the University of Oxford and the seat of the court of Charles I during the Civil Wars. But the royalist days of Oxford were now behind it, and Cromwell's Puritan followers filled most of the positions. Cromwell himself was chancellor, and John Owen, Cromwell's former chaplain, was vice-chancellor and dean. Owen and Cromwell were, however, concerned to restore the university to normality as soon as possible, and this they largely succeeded in doing.

Locke later reported that he found the undergraduate curriculum at Oxford dull and unstimulating. It was still largely that of the medieval university, focusing on Aristotle (especially his logic) and largely ignoring important new ideas about the nature and origins of knowledge that had been developed in writings by Francis Bacon (1561–1626), René Descartes (1596–1650), and other natural philosophers. Although their works were not on the official syllabus, Locke was soon reading them. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1656 and a master's two years later, about which time he was elected a student (the equivalent of fellow) of Christ Church. At Oxford Locke made contact with some advocates of the new science, including Bishop John Wilkins, the astronomer and architect Christopher Wren, the physicians Thomas Willis and Richard Lower, the physicist Robert Hooke, and, most important of all, the eminent natural philosopher and theologian Robert Boyle. Locke attended classes in iatrochemistry (the early application of chemistry to medicine), and before long he was collaborating with Boyle on important medical research on human blood. Medicine from now on was to play a central role in his life.

The restoration of the English monarchy in 1660 was a mixed blessing for Locke. It led many of his scientific collaborators to return to London, where they soon founded the Royal Society, which provided the stimulus for much scientific research. But in Oxford the new freedom from Puritan control encouraged unruly behaviour and religious enthusiasms among the undergraduates. These excesses led Locke to be wary of rapid social change, an attitude that no doubt partly reflected his own childhood during the Civil Wars.

In his first substantial political work, *Two Tracts on Government* (composed in 1660 but first published three centuries later, in 1967), Locke defended a very conservative position: in the interest of political stability, a government is justified in legislating on any matter of religion that is not directly relevant to the essential beliefs of Christianity. This view, a response to the perceived threat of anarchy posed by sectarian differences, was diametrically opposed to the doctrine that he would later expound in *Two Treatises of Government* (1689).

In 1663 Locke was appointed senior censor in Christ Church, a post that required him to supervise the studies and discipline of undergraduates and to give a series of lectures. The resulting *Essays on the Law of Nature* (first published in 1954) constitutes an early statement of his philosophical views, many of which he retained more or less unchanged for the rest of his life. Of these probably the two most important were, first, his commitment to a law of

nature, a natural moral law that underpins the rightness or wrongness of all human conduct, and, second, his subscription to the empiricist principle that all knowledge, including moral knowledge, is derived from experience and therefore not innate. These claims were to be central to his mature philosophy, both with regard to political theory and epistemology.

Association with Shaftesbury

In 1666 Locke was introduced to Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, later 1st earl of Shaftesbury, by a mutual acquaintance. As a member and eventually the leader of a group of opposition politicians known as the Whigs, Ashley was one of the most powerful figures in England in the first two decades after the Restoration. Ashley was so impressed with Locke at their first meeting that in the following year he asked him to join his London household in Exeter House in the Strand as his aide and personal physician, though Locke did not then have a degree in medicine. Politically, Ashley stood for constitutional monarchy, a Protestant succession, civil liberty, toleration in religion, the rule of Parliament, and the economic expansion of England. Locke either shared or soon came to share all these objectives with him, and it was not long before a deep—and for each an important—mutual understanding existed between them. Locke drafted papers on toleration, possibly for Ashley to use in parliamentary speeches. In his capacity as a physician, Locke was involved in a remarkable operation to insert a silver tube into a tumour on Ashley's liver, which allowed it to be drained on a regular basis and relieved him of much pain. It remained in place for the remainder of Ashley's life. Locke also found a suitable bride for Ashley's son.

By 1668 Locke had become a fellow of the Royal Society and was conducting medical research with his friend Thomas Sydenham, the most distinguished physician of the period. Although Locke was undoubtedly the junior partner in their collaboration, they worked together to produce important research based on careful observation and a minimum of speculation. The method that Locke acquired and helped to develop in this work reinforced his commitment to philosophical empiricism. But it was not only medicine that kept Locke busy, for he was appointed by Ashley as secretary to the lords proprietors of Carolina, whose function was to promote the establishment of the North American colony. In that role Locke helped to draft *The Fundamental Constitutions for the Government of Carolina* (1669), which, among other provisions, guaranteed freedom of religion for all save atheists.

Throughout his time in Exeter House, Locke kept in close contact with his friends. Indeed, the long gestation of his most important philosophical work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), began at a meeting with friends in his rooms, probably in Feb. 1671. The group had gathered to consider questions of morality and revealed religion (knowledge of God derived through revelation). Locke pointed out that, before they could make progress, they would need to consider the prior question of what the human mind is (and is not) capable of comprehending. It was agreed that Locke should prepare a paper on the topic for their next meeting, and it was this paper that became the first draft of his great work.

Exile in France

In 1672 Ashley was raised to the peerage as the 1st earl of Shaftesbury, and at the end of that year he was appointed lord chancellor of England. He was soon dismissed, however, having lost favour with Charles II. For a time Shaftesbury and Locke were in real danger, and it was

partly for this reason that Locke traveled to France in 1675. By this time he had received his degree of bachelor of medicine from Oxford and been appointed to a medical studentship at Christ Church.

Locke remained in France for nearly four years (1675–79), spending much time in Paris and Montpellier; the latter possessed a large Protestant minority and the most important medical school in Europe, both of which were strong attractions for Locke. He made many friends in the Protestant community, including some leading intellectuals. His reading, on the other hand, was dominated by the works of French Catholic philosophers. But it was his medical interests that were the major theme of the journals he kept from this period. He was struck by the poverty of the local population and contrasted this unfavourably with conditions in England and with the vast amounts that the French king (Louis XIV) was spending on the Palace of Versailles. From time to time Locke turned to philosophical questions and added notes to his journal, some of which eventually found a place in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Back in England, Shaftesbury had been imprisoned for a year in the Tower of London but was released in February 1678. By the time Locke returned to England in 1679, Shaftesbury had been restored to favour as lord president of the Privy Council. The country, however, was torn by dissension over the exclusion controversy—the debate over whether a law could be passed to forbid (exclude) the succession of Charles II's brother James, a Roman Catholic, to the English throne. Shaftesbury and Locke strongly supported exclusion. The controversy reached its apex in the hysteria of the so-called *Popish Plot*, a supposed Catholic conspiracy to assassinate Charles and replace him with James. The existence of the plot was widely accepted and resulted in the execution of many innocent people before its fabricator, the Anglican priest Titus Oates, was discredited.