Outside Medicine

John Locke

M. V. C. JEFFREYS

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"It is well worthy of remark that the triumph of toleration and the triumph of civil liberty should both have been definitely effected in England at the same time, and should both have found their champions in the same man."¹

Born in 1632, ten years before the Civil War broke out, a young man during the Commonwealth, exiled in Holland during the reign of the restored King Charles II—returning to England with William III—John Locke lived through a turbulent period of history, not only politically but also intellectually.

In our own technological age we are anxiously aware of the bewildering fragmentation of knowledge, and of the specialist's increasingly narrowed vision.² In contrast, Locke lived at a time when it was still possible for a well-educated man to master many branches of knowledge. The polymath was still a reality: John Locke, though primarily a philosopher, was a qualified doctor, and wrote on theology, political theory, and education. His herbarium (a collection of 3,000 flowers) preserved between sheets of his pupils' exercises, and now housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford) is possibly the oldest surviving collection of English wild flowers. There was nothing in which he was not interested; and he wrote on subjects as remote as metaphysics and winemaking.

It was not without difficulty that Locke obtained his medical qualification. His first attempt at the M.D. failed because (possibly influenced by his brilliant but unscrupulous friend Lord Shaftesbury) he tried to make use of Lord Clarendon's influence as Chancellor of the University of Oxford. The second attempt also failed. Eventually he achieved his M.B. He seems to have practised little; but in 1667 he won Shaftesbury's lasting gratitude by draining an internal abscess and fitting a drainage tube which Shaftesbury wore for the rest of his life.

Locke was a close friend of Thomas Sydenham, that down-to-earth physician who believed that an ounce of practice was worth a pound of theory. In words worthy of Dr. Johnson Sydenham disposed of the bearer of an introduction: "Anatomy! Botany! Nonsense! Sir, I know an old woman in Covent Garden who understands botany better, and as for anatomy, my butcher can dissect a joint full as well; no, young man, all this is stuff: you must go to the bedside, it is there alone you can learn disease." The "young man" referred to was in fact the young Sir Hans Sloane. An unfulfilled intention of Locke's was to write jointly with Sydenham a treatise on medicine. But they remained friends; and Locke fully endorsed Sydenham's belief in the practical approach.

John Locke (1632-1704). (Painting by M. Dahl. Reproduced by courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.)

His Friends

Among Locke's friends, as well as Sydenham, was Robert Boyle, that untidy genius Isaac Newton, and others in the Royal Society. But he was no academic recluse. Left alone in the world at the age of 31, through the death of his parents and his only surviving brother, he had to make his own way. Fortunately he had sufficient means (his father had been a lawyer and small landowner, and his grandfather a clothier) to avoid the servile role of a wealthy patron's lackey. He had, however, one important and influential friend—Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury—a picturesque, diminutive, highly intelligent, and unscrupulous political adventurer. Though Shaftesbury came into prominence as a member of Charles II's Cabal ministry, and later as Lord Chancellor, he moved politically leftwards, became the founder of the Whig party, and carried John Locke with him in his political career.

Locke took an active part in pamphleteering controversy, and held some minor public offices. When Shaftesbury was forced to leave the country and seek refuge in the Netherlands, Locke was not long in following him into exile. He found Holland far more congenial than England. Not only were the streets cleaner, but he could breathe the fresh air of religious toleration—in contrast to the hated Clarendon Code which oppressed English nonconformists. After five years in the Netherlands Locke returned to England with William III. Though much of his writing had been taking shape in Holland,

Lyndhurst, Hants
M. V. C. JEFFREYS, C.B.E., M.A., Emeritus Professor of Education,
Birmingham University

he published little before he was 60, and his books have the virtue of communicating his mature thought.

Before attempting an assessment of Locke's contribution to the thought of his age, it would be as well to look briefly at the main contemporary issues. Basic to seventeenth-century thinking was the tension between the old authoritarian tradition (if Aristotle had said something it was true because he said so) and the newly emerging empirical approach, represented by Francis Bacon, the Royal Society, and—in particular—by the most distinguished philosopher of his age, Descartes.

The new empirical approach to truth was reflected in all the main areas of life and thought. Its implications for philosophy were the most obvious and direct. Truth was not something handed down, but something discovered and rediscovered by examining experience. The empirical approach revolutionized men's attitude to science and scientific discovery, and made possible the enormous development of natural science in succeeding centuries. We must not forget that in Locke's time there was no division between philosophy and science. If Locke had been told that his friends Boyle and Sydenham were scientists, not philosophers, he would not have understood: to him they were philosophers. In matters of religion the new spirit opened the way to toleration, and the legitimacy of rational examination of religious truth. That does not mean what a later generation knew as Rationalism. It did not mean a rejection of divine inspiration. But it did mean that the human mind was entitled to examine traditional doctrine, and also that this or that interpretation might prove to be mistaken. In this new atmosphere it was impossible to justify persecution. Though the Revolution of 1688 relieved Protestants from their disabilities, Roman Catholics remained legally disfranchised until 1829.

The New Spirit

It was Milton above all who gave powerful expression to the new spirit. "The light which we gained was given us, not to be always staring on, but by it to discover onwards things more remote from our knowledge." And again: "he who thinks we are to pitch our tent here, and have attained the utmost prospect that the mortal glass wherein we contemplate can shew us, till we come to beatific vision, that man by this very opinion declares that he is yet far short of truth."³

The political and economic bearings of the new spirit are not so directly obvious, but are none the less real. The growth of trade, and the beginnings of overseas empire, churned up the traditional social system based on land tenure, and gradually substituted a social order based on success rather than on tradition. Locke saw clearly that religious persecution was bound to hamper industrial and commercial expansion. The historical fact that the Industrial Revolution happened in Britain a century before it happened in other European countries explains the pre-eminence of Britain in the nineteenth century—a pre-eminence purchased at the price of becoming dependent for our existence on imports, not only of food, but, in our own time, of oil.

The new fluid social order was incompatible with authoritarian government, whether of crown or aristocracy, or both together. The broadening basis of political power, through oligarchy to democracy (and possibly from democracy to a new tyranny of trade unions), had become inevitable, and with it came the social services and the welfare state.

It is now possible to evaluate Lockes' response to the challenge of his age. His dominant interest was in philosophy and science, and his basic principle was the empirical approach to truth.

Locke had too much common sense, however, to be an academic pedant. He held that knowledge comes through experience, ordered by reason, and he rejected Plato's distrust of the senses and faith in innate ideas. (The Platonic tradition prevailed at Oxford, where Locke encountered it and fought against it.) His attack on the doctrine of innate ideas is a brilliant piece of debating. His emphasis on the value of experience is very

clear in his book on education; and his image of the child's mind as a *tabula rasa*, on which experience is imprinted, is well known. But, in justice to Locke, it should be pointed out that this famous metaphor was one of Locke's overstatements for the sake of emphasis. He never went to the extreme of Hume, who refused to accept any knowledge as valid for which no previous sense-impression could be found; a view revived by the earlier work of the logical positivists. Nor would he have gone all the way with Helvetius, who held that "l'education peut tout." Locke, though he rejected Plato's doctrine of innate ideas, recognized an innate power to interpret experience. And, while insisting on the role of reason and its necessity as an instrument of understanding, he also recognized the fallibility of reason.

Beliefs and Sympathies

Locke was thus against obscurantism in religion and was theologically a liberal. Economically his sympathies were with the new commercial middle class and the growth of overseas trade. Politically he believed in constitutional government and the rule of law, the sovereignty of King in Parliament. As a man of affairs, as distinct from his role as a pure philosopher, Locke played as important a part as anyone in forming the state of mind which guaranteed the establishment of toleration and civil liberty under the law—the main principles of the Revolution of 1688.

His theory of education was rooted in a belief in the value of experience. Though he did not see the full implications of his own ideas, he is entitled to be numbered among the originators of child-centred education. His writings influenced Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel. Locke himself owed much to Comenius. Locke's most important work was the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which he sets out his philosophical position. The book has the advantage that it represents his mature thought. But it also has the disadvantage that, having been worked over for many years, it is not always clear or consistent.

Undoubtedly, however—with Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton—Locke believed in Natural Law, which could be discovered and formulated by human reason on a basis of empirical observation, and which was ordained by a god who was not capricious but whose operations man was equipped to understand. Locke, in his *Commonplace Book*, set down clearly his position, that men should not believe any proposition that is contrary to reason, on the authority either of inspiration or of miracle, for the reality of the inspiration or of the miracle can only be established by reason.

Of Locke's importance Professor R. I. Aaron wrote: "Locke's work dominated the English mind in the first half of the eighteenth century, and his influence was almost as great in America and in France."⁴ As a summary of his contribution it is worth quoting Maurice Cranston: "The *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is a very English book, both in its merits and its faults. Its tone is at once moral and pragmatic, its style is homely rather than elegant, its idioms are often commercial. The pursuit of truth, Locke said, 'is a duty we owe to God . . . and a duty also we owe to our own selves,' utility, for him, was at one with piety. He described Truth as the 'proper riches and furniture of the mind,' and has indeed been mocked for doing so; but he did not claim to have added to that 'stock'; he tried to show the conditions, or some of the conditions, under which the mind could acquire its proper riches and furniture. In this at any rate he abundantly succeeded."⁴

References

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- ⁵ Cranston, M., *John Locke*. London, Longmans, 1957.