

Chapter One

The Quintessential Modern Philosopher

Locke's significance

Of all modern philosophers, John Locke has had the profoundest influence on the world we live in, and most embodies its guiding principles. Other modern philosophers might have been *greater* philosophers, by whatever standards we are to judge philosophical greatness. Perhaps a Descartes, Hume, or Kant excelled Locke in originality, in depth and breadth of philosophical vision, or even in just getting things right. One could certainly make that case. But no other thinker has been more representative of paradigmatically modern attitudes toward science, politics, and religion, or more directly responsible for shaping those attitudes. Descartes is usually called the father of modern philosophy, and with good reason, but Locke, more than any other philosopher, has a claim to being the father of modernity in general. If we want to understand ourselves, we need to understand him, for our world is to a very great extent a Lockean world.

Modern Westerners do not put much stock in authority or tradition as a source of moral or theoretical guidance, tending instead to regard empirical science as the paradigm of knowledge and rationality. Yet they are, at

LOCKE

the same time, inclined to be doubtful that very much in the way of strict knowledge (if that entails certainty) is really possible, even in science. All of these attitudes have their roots in Locke, and find their classic philosophical expression in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Modern Westerners also tend to combine a very high regard for the freedom of all human beings to practice whatever religion they see fit with a deep skepticism about the objective defensibility of most particular religious dogmas. These too are very Lockean attitudes, and Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* did more to propagate them than perhaps any other book.

In no other country are these attitudes more prevalent than in that most Lockean of nations, the United States of America. There too the rhetoric of liberty, whether political, economic, or religious, rings loudest, as does (in some quarters anyway) the theme that a free society rests on the recognition of a divine Lawgiver to whom all people and governments are ultimately answerable. Here perhaps is where Locke's influence on the modern world has been most profound. For the defense of the rights of the individual against the power of the state was the great theme of Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*; and whatever his ambivalence about the theological details on which various religious traditions disagree, he was adamant about the general proposition that those rights have a theological foundation – albeit in a distinctly modern, Enlightenment-style theology with which his medieval predecessors would not have been entirely comfortable. For Locke, whether or not reason can settle disputes between various sects over fine points of doctrine, it can at least reveal to us that there is a God, that that God has granted us certain rights, and that these rights put severe constraints on the ambitions and power of human governments. Prominent among these rights in Locke's account are the rights to private property and, more generally, to the fruits of one's labor, so that the Lockean understanding of rights has always been associated as much with the defense of the modern free market economy as it has with limited government and religious liberty. Through the English political tradition and the impact it has had on the former colonies of the British Empire,

The Quintessential Modern Philosopher

and especially through the American founding fathers and the nation they created, all of these ideas were to have a profound impact on the history of the last three centuries.

That this impact is as great today as it ever was is evident from the history of the post-9/11 world. In defending recent American foreign policy, and in particular his administration's commitment to spreading political, religious, and economic freedom around the globe, U. S. president George W. Bush has said repeatedly that "freedom is the almighty God's gift to each man and woman in this world." Some commentators have been prone to dismiss such sentiments as either an unsophisticated throwback to less Enlightened pre-modern times or mere political boilerplate. This is a mistake, and not a small one. In fact, the president's words reflect (whether knowingly or not) the Lockeanism that has frequently underlain American thinking about political matters, and for that very reason they reflect the most influential and sophisticated political theory of the Enlightenment era. Many today, including many intellectuals of a religious bent, still sympathize with this Lockean view of the relationship between politics and theology. Of course, many others find it troubling; certainly the president's rhetoric has been controversial. But whatever one's opinion of these ideas, it is crucial that one properly understand them, and thus that one understand Locke's rationale for approaching questions of political philosophy in the manner he did.

I have said that that rationale is a sophisticated one, but that does not mean that it is unproblematic. Probably the majority of contemporary philosophers would no longer endorse its theological basis, though there are still some who would. Even aside from the question of religious foundations, though, there are significant tensions in the Lockean political project, and they are, by no means coincidentally, some of the very same ones that beset us in contemporary political life: tensions between a modern scientific vision of mankind and a recognition of human dignity and human rights; between a minimalist and empirically-oriented theory of knowledge and ambitious and controversial moral and metaphysical claims about the nature of persons; and between individual liberty of thought and action and the prerequisites of a

LOCKE

stable, free, and just society. Whether these tensions can be resolved is not just a question of interest to scholars of Locke's philosophy; it is of great consequence to all of us.

There are well-known problems too with the more technical aspects of Locke's philosophy, namely the epistemological and metaphysical theses with which he sought to provide a philosophical foundation for modern science. Those who value modern science or, more generally, sympathize with the general spirit of Locke's theory of knowledge – empiricist, individualist, anti-authoritarian – need to consider whether something like his way of grounding these things can ultimately be defended. In the intellectual realm as much as in the political realm, Locke's theme was freedom, but a freedom exercised within definite moral and rational constraints. It is important to determine whether Locke's conception of freedom, in either the intellectual or the political sense, ultimately coheres with the constraints he wanted to put on it – and if not, then which element, the freedom or the constraints, ought to be abandoned.

As we will see in the chapters to follow, many of the difficult questions raised by Locke's project derive from his peculiar position in the history of thought. Locke straddles the medieval and post-modern worlds, the age of faith and the age of skepticism and secularism. Locke and his fellow early modern philosophers rejected many elements of the medieval worldview, but maintained others, even if sometimes in an altered form. What we have inherited from these philosophers includes both their rejection of some of these elements and their retention of others, though contemporary thinkers are inclined to reject even more aspects of the medieval inheritance than the early modern ones did. Some crucial questions we will need to consider are whether Locke can consistently reject those aspects of the medieval worldview that he does reject while maintaining the positive claims he wants to defend – and also whether we contemporary Westerners can consistently keep those aspects of our Lockean and medieval inheritances that we like while rejecting those we would rather do without.

Properly to understand Locke's philosophy will in any event require understanding the medieval Scholastic tradition he was

The Quintessential Modern Philosopher

reacting against, as well as the philosophical and scientific context of the early modern period that formed the milieu in which he thought and wrote. The next chapter will sketch out this intellectual background, and succeeding chapters will explore the development of Locke's thought in his three most important works, namely the *Essay*, the *Second Treatise*, and the *Letter Concerning Toleration* already mentioned. The final chapter will assess Locke's ultimate significance and continuing relevance for the contemporary world.

Locke's life and character

First, though, a brief look at Locke's life is in order, for the events of that life are by no means irrelevant to an understanding of his work. He was born to Puritan parents of modest means, near Bristol in England, in 1632, the year Galileo published his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. In 1652 he began study at Christ Church, Oxford, where he quickly grew dissatisfied with the still-reigning medieval Aristotelianism he was taught; he would later become acquainted with the works of contemporary thinkers like Rene Descartes (1596–1650) and Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655). After graduating, he pursued what was to become a lifelong interest in modern medicine, and also began a friendship with the chemist Robert Boyle (1627–91), one of the great scientists of the age. The Puritan influence, and especially the influence of modern philosophy and modern science, would dramatically shape the philosophical positions Locke was to develop through the course of his life.

In 1666, Locke met Anthony Ashley Cooper, who was later to become the first Earl of Shaftesbury, and began what would be perhaps the most important association of his career. Locke would join Shaftesbury's household in London as his advisor and personal physician, and directed a medical operation which saved Shaftesbury's life. Their friendship was to bring Locke into the center of the political controversies of the day, especially after Shaftesbury began actively opposing the policies of Charles II. The trouble this caused Shaftesbury may have contributed to Locke's

LOCKE

decision in 1675 to leave England for France, where for three and a half years he consorted with some of the leading intellectuals of the day.

Not long after Locke's return to England, Shaftesbury was again embroiled in controversy related to his opposition to Charles, who had dissolved Parliament after it attempted to pass a law blocking Charles' Catholic brother James from succeeding him on the throne and reestablishing Catholic control over England. Shaftesbury was involved in a movement to put the Protestant Duke of Monmouth on the throne instead, and his activities led to imprisonment in the Tower of London and, eventually, exile to Holland, where he died in 1683. Associated as he was with Shaftesbury, Locke's position in England soon became precarious, and he fled to Holland himself soon after Shaftesbury did. These events clearly had an impact on the development of Locke's political philosophy, not only where his opposition to absolute power and defense of individual rights and resistance to tyranny were concerned, but also on his conception of religious toleration, which granted a very wide range of latitude for religious dissent but is also generally understood to have excluded Catholics from the right to toleration.

Locke again returned to England in 1689, after the Glorious Revolution succeeded in enthroning the Protestant monarchs William and Mary. It was not long before the three major works – the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *Two Treatises of Government*, and *A Letter Concerning Toleration* – were published, though Locke had been working on them for years. Only with the *Essay* did Locke publicly acknowledge authorship, however, reluctant as he apparently was in the still delicate political climate of the immediate post-revolutionary period to be too blatantly associated with ideas as radical as those expressed in the *Letter* and *Two Treatises*. Nevertheless, he was active in politics for most of the remainder of his life, and was made Commissioner for Appeals and a Commissioner for Trade, the latter position involving him in the affairs of England's colonies.

In 1691 Locke moved to Essex and spent many years thereafter in the household of Sir Francis and Lady Masham, the latter of

The Quintessential Modern Philosopher

whom had long been a friend of Locke's, and was the daughter of the eminent Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1617–88). He published several further works, including a *Second* and *Third Letter for Toleration* (in 1691 and 1692 respectively), *Some Thoughts on Education* (1693), and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). The last of these works evinces Locke's tendency toward a minimalist theology, advocating as it does a simplified conception of the essence of Christianity. The *Essay* too had evinced unconventional theological views, and their soundness was challenged by Edward Stillingfleet, the Bishop of Worcester, with whom Locke engaged in an ongoing public dispute. But there were more friendly intellectual exchanges too in his later years, for instance with the likes of the scientist William Molyneux, as well as with Isaac Newton, with whom Locke shared interests not only in science but also theology and biblical studies. Indeed, Locke's final years were devoted to writing a commentary on the epistles of St. Paul.

Locke died in 1704. He never married, nor, as far as we know, did he father any children. He was also, as we have seen, frequently on the move. He did, however, have many lasting friendships, and as has been mentioned, he found in some of them a means of supporting himself. All of this enabled him to live fairly comfortably and in a manner that provided him much leisure to think and write. His religious convictions were deep, idiosyncratic, unsentimental, decidedly Protestant, and staunchly anti-Catholic. He was somewhat introverted and of a highly sensitive temperament, but not given to excessive emotion or frivolity. He was extremely careful with his money, and known to be generous to poor people who were simply down on their luck, but contemptuous of those who were shiftless and dissolute. "To live," he once said, "is to be where and with whom one likes." It seems fair to say that the kind of independence which Locke defended so vigorously in the intellectual and political realms found a parallel in the independence with which he preferred to live his own life – an autonomy in thought and action exercised with a sober religiosity, moderation, and reasonableness.

LOCKE

FURTHER READING

General introductions to Locke's philosophy include John W. Yolton, *Locke: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), Nicholas Jolley, *Locke: his Philosophical Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Garrett Thomson, *On Locke* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001), John Dunn, *Locke: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and E. J. Lowe, *Locke* (London: Routledge, 2005). Vere Chappell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) is a useful collection of essays introducing various aspects of Locke's thought. John W. Yolton, *A Locke Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) contains short articles on all the main concepts in Locke's philosophy. C. B. Martin and D. M. Armstrong, eds., *Locke and Berkeley: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1968) is an older anthology, but still useful. Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (London: Longman, 1957) is the standard work on Locke's life. The statement from Locke cited above is quoted on p. 10 of Thomson's book.