

# John Locke\*

By Michael Oakeshott

[Note: The pipe character | indicates a page break in the original text]

[p. 72] In spite of other titles to fame, John Locke must, I think, be remembered and considered first as a philosopher. For, although the philosophical work for which he is justly famous was the product of the leisure hours of a life spent for the most part in political activity, and was neither published nor completed until he had turned 58, Locke's philosophy is so characteristic of the man and has exercised so great an influence upon subsequent thought that it must take a place in history which it never took in his life. The *Essay concerning Human Understanding* is a work hindered by many weaknesses both of conception and composition. It springs, in the first place, not from any radical doubt, any purging scepticism, but from curiosity and a mild perplexity. Locke's insatiable curiosity is written all over his *Journals*, and his biographer says that he "knew something of almost everything that can be useful to mankind." Indeed, the view that it is equally unwarrantable either to doubt everything or to make extravagant claims on behalf of the human mind, which may be said to be the message of Locke's philosophy, was as much a prejudice and a compromise with which he began as the conclusion with which he finished. Locke is a cautious, patient thinker, not given to paradox and as little controversial as may be: there is nothing audacious about his speculations, and nothing dazzling or even brilliant about his writing. The *Essay* has perhaps less of the character of a *tour de force* than any other philosophical work ever published. And these, it seems to me, are in the nature of defects in a philosophy. Mere 'soundness' is a vulnerable quality in a philosophy; it is more at the mercy of time than audacity and brilliance. For in philosophy what is daring is provocative and will always retain its power to awaken, while what is cautious and sound is after a while forgotten, having about it a soporific effect. And it is always more difficult to doubt radically and intelligently than to believe. And again, it was not for the man who refused the opportunity of a career and preferment in the church for fear he might fail to make his mark there, when he turned to philosophy, to set before himself any but a modest task. For the *Essay* is no system of philosophy, but a cautious attempt to determine the limits of our knowledge by enquiring into the character of the mind. It is a view of the limits of human understanding. And this attitude, also, more sensible to divisions, distinctions and separations than to agreements and unities, is responsible for many of the defects of Locke's philosophy. From its very plan his work was destined to be inconclusive and to result in a compromise. And it is the quality of compromise which is at once the distinction and

---

\* Originally published in *The Cambridge Review* (November 4, 1932) pp. 72-3. It is intended that this essay also will be reprinted in Vol. 3 of Michael Oakeshott's Selected Works, Imprint Academic, forthcoming.

the weakness of this philosophy. In virtue of this quality Locke was said (by Horace Walpole) to be the first philosopher who introduced common-sense into his writings. But it is a dangerous mixture. Common-sense and philosophy are not apt to agree; and when common-sense is represented as the criterion of philosophic truth the result can be nothing but error.

But what is characteristic and important in a philosophical thinker is not so much the conclusions he reaches as the way he sets about it. And it is here that Locke shews himself to be a genuine, perhaps great philosopher. Apart from “a mind covetous of truth,” which is of course elementary, Locke stands out by reason of the independence of his thought. His thinking is his own; he does not make the foolish attempt to be a scholar and a philosopher at the same time. He was not ill-read in philosophy; but he knew that the philosopher’s business is to think rather than to read, to know his own mind rather than that of others. “This,” he says, “I am certain, I have not made it my business either to quit or follow any authority in the ensuing discourse: truth has been my only aim, and wherever that has appeared to lead, my thoughts have impartially followed, without minding whether the footsteps of any other lay that way or not. Not that I want a due respect to other men’s opinions; but after all, the greatest reverence is due to truth: and I hope it will not be thought arrogance to say, that perhaps we should make greater progress in the discovery of rational and contemplative knowledge, if we sought it in the fountain, in the consideration of things themselves and made use rather of our own thoughts than other men’s to find it. The floating of other men’s opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true.” Locke’s independence and his modesty are remarkable in that they are, perhaps, the only uncompromising traits in a character otherwise given over to moderation. And further, Locke was not only an independent thinker and a candid thinker, but he chose a style of writing in agreement with his cast of mind—a colloquial style. He was as unwilling to use the language of the schools as merely to rehash the ideas of his predecessors. But in this matter of style he cannot be said to have been altogether successful. For, whatever the merits of saying what you mean in the language of social intercourse, it leads sometimes to misunderstanding which might otherwise have been avoided. And, for example, Locke’s colloquial use of the word ‘experience’ resulted in an ambiguity which rends his philosophy from end to end. He was not a great enough writer to follow the track which avoids at once jargon and ambiguity—that is *nur für die Schwindelfreie*. Nevertheless, Locke’s instincts were those of a philosopher; and his great achievement is to have thought systematically and to have escaped making a system.

A philosophy of this kind, something constructed to satisfy the thinker’s own mind, without the attraction of brilliance or the provocation of audacity, is not one for which we should predict a long and influential career in the world. And the fact that for a century Locke’s *Essay* was a centre of philosophical interest, not only in England (where commonplace philosophy has more chance than elsewhere) but also and particularly in France (where compromise is viewed with suspicion and modesty mistaken for weakness) seems to call for explanation. The fact of Locke’s influence upon XVIIIth century French thought is undeniable. The *Essay* was translated in 1700, and it was adopted as the official philosophy of the Encyclopedists until they could provide one of their own; and even then, what they provided was very much

after Locke. Voltaire leads the chorus of acclamation in the *Lettres Anglaises*. A multitude of writers, he says, have written the romance of the soul; Locke has written its history. D'Alembert says in the *Encyclopédie*: "ce que Newton n'avait osé ou n'aurait peut-être pu faire, Locke l'entreprit et l'exécuta avec succès." Diderot admits himself a disciple. And Helvétius and Condillac recommend Locke by appropriating the greater part of his philosophy. Nevertheless, it was not, I think, merely on account of its merits that Locke's philosophy exercised so great an influence. What was influential was not so much Locke as a perversion of Locke; for the French thinkers saw in this Christian, English, Puritan, cautious thinker the founder of Deism and the apostle of Materialism. They made a system of what was never, in Locke's view, more than a methodical attempt to think clearly about the limits of knowledge, and in the name of that system they upset the world, for a little while. It was, however, in England itself that Locke's influence was most direct and genuine. Hobbes was infected with materialism, Berkeley and Hume (both of whom owed much to Locke) with paradox, and Locke, in spite of criticism and opposition, took, and for a while held, the supreme place in English philosophy.

But, for the Englishman, what is interesting and memorable is not so much the author of the *Essay*, the father of the so-called 'philosophy of experience' or the foundation member of the Royal Society, but rather the Locke who was in at the birth of the Whig party and who provided liberalism with its gospel and creed. It is the "friends of freedom" who Locke's earliest biographer thinks will welcome his biography. Liberalism was not, of course, the invention of Locke; but, standing between two ages, he served as the filter by means of which Puritanism was drained of its immoderation and its 'enthusiasm' and was converted into what the XVIIIth century knew as Whigism and the XIXth as Liberalism. Liberalism is Puritanism made respectable, and nobody contributed more than Locke to this piece of 'rescue-work.' Locke's doctrines of toleration (a limited toleration), of liberty (a reasonable liberty), of individualism (not a fanatical individualism), of the sovereignty of the people (to be exercised sometimes) and of property, are the seeds from which modern liberalism sprang. And perhaps 'the rights of nationality' and 'the perfectability of the human race' are the only ideas of importance which have since been added to liberalism. Locke believed in science, in freedom, in progress, in property and the pride of ownership, in stability, in moderation, in compromise, and he believed that truth (liberal truth) is great and will prevail; and it is because of his formulation of a view of life no less than of politics governed by these beliefs that he is counted the father of liberalism. Others, no doubt, before him had been liberals, others have done more than he in the practical application of these ideas, but no one has possessed a more comprehensive grasp of this least comprehensive of views. Locke was the apostle of the liberalism which is more conservative than conservatism itself, the liberalism characterised, not by insensitiveness, but by a sinister and destructive sensitiveness to the influx of the new, the liberalism which is sure of its limits, which has a horror of extremes, which lays its paralysing hand of respectability upon whatever is dangerous or revolutionary. And liberalism was for Locke as much a part of his temperament—Locke "who never said anything which could shock or injure anybody"—as a thought-out view of life and politics.

Now, whether or not we should remember this side of Locke's character and work with gratitude must, I suppose, be a matter of opinion. But it is at least remarkable that at the present time the gospel of Locke is less able to secure adherents than any other whatever. At one time it seemed that liberalism, under the stimulus of the romantic movement, might be transformed into something less boring and upholstered; but the spirit of Locke prevailed. And it appears likely that the fate now of this liberalism is to die of neglect. The moderate individualism of Locke has no attraction for those who have embraced a radical, an Epicurean individualism. Locke's "steady love of liberty" appears worse than slavery to anyone who, like Montaigne, is "besotted with liberty." Democracy, parliamentary government, progress, discussion, and "the plausible ethics of productivity" are notions—all of them inseparable from the Lockian liberalism—which fail now to arouse even opposition; they are not merely absurd and exploded, they are uninteresting. Not a little, indeed, of the revolt against so-called Victorianism is in fact a revolt rather against Locke and his legacy of liberalism. This liberalism may have given us our liberties (though that is doubtful), it may be a view of things which will come again, but just now it is not one which commands attention or indeed respect. I am not, of course, referring merely to liberalism in politics and liberalism as a social gospel. The liberalism of Locke has invaded other interests than these; but everywhere it is equally dead. The liberalism, for example, which made a revolution in theology respectable and determined its limits is no less dead than that which sponsored the respectability of democracy. And everywhere what has been fatal to liberalism is its boundless but capricious moderation.

Locke's life and character, like his philosophy and like his liberalism, are full of instructive contrasts. His influence upon the politics of his time was immense, but always indirect; he could never be persuaded to take the stage. He was a successful politician, but a man without guile or ambition. He was a bachelor who kept accounts; a *bourgeois* who never had a home of his own; a man of property without any property. His life was spent in a great variety of places, in England and on the Continent, and in a great variety of occupations; but there is nothing of the cosmopolitan in his character. He was a busy man of affairs who appeared always to be at leisure. It was, however, fitting that he should live the full span of a man's life and should die, in the XVIIIth century, without an epigram on his lips. He was moderate in everything except his love of moderation. There is nothing at all of pretension in his character; he was meek, and until recently he inherited the earth.