

Philosophers in Perspective

There is an abundance now of books of 'readings' from the major philosophers, in which the selections are so often too brief and snippety to be of any great value to the student. There are also many collections of essays and articles about the major philosophers on the market. These too are unsatisfactory from the student's point of view in that they suffer severely from the defect of discontinuity and are unable to trace the scope and articulation of a man's work, as each contributor writes from the standpoint of his own interpretation.

There is a great need for books that are devoted to a single philosopher and that are written by a single author who is allowed the room to develop both his exposition and his examination of his subject in sufficient detail. *Philosophers in Perspective* satisfies this demand and makes available to students studies of all the major philosophers, and some of the undeservedly minor ones as well, which will afford them for the first time the opportunity of understanding the philosopher, of coming to grips with his thought, and of seeing him in his place in the development of philosophy, or of his special area of it.

Each book in the series fits into this framework, but the authors are given the freedom to adapt it to their own requirements. Main emphasis will be placed on exposition and examination of the philosopher's thought, but enough will be written about the influences on him and about his own influence on subsequent thought, to show where he stands in the perspective of his subject. Wherever relevant, particular emphasis will be placed on the philosopher's contributions to moral and political thought, which have often in the past been treated cursorily as tailpieces to his writings on metaphysics and epistemology. This aspect of the series will prove most useful to students of politics, history and sociology.

Philosophers in Perspective

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JOHN LOCKE

J. D. Mabbott

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Preface

The aim of this book, suggested by the title of the series to which it belongs – ‘Philosophers in Perspective’ – is to look again at Locke’s arguments, to consider their validity in their own context, and to ask how they stand in view of recent contributions to the study of the problems with which Locke was concerned.

In recent years Locke has been well served by scholars. The accession to the Bodleian Library of the Lovelace papers helped to reawaken interest in him. With M. Cranston as a biographer, W. von Leyden as a researcher, P. Abrams, J. W. Gough, R. Klibansky and P. Laslett as editors of particular works, his sources and development have been well covered. R. I. Aaron’s *John Locke* remains an indispensable general guide to Locke’s philosophy and in particular to the way in which the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was written.

I have therefore excluded from this study any consideration of influences on Locke, of textual matters including the development of his thought, except where this was necessary to clarify his final position on any issue. I am much indebted to all the experts mentioned above. I have made liberal use of quotations to allow Locke to speak for himself and to save readers from having to check my references in order to find whether Locke really said what I attribute to him.

The attempt to consider how Locke’s views would look in the light of recent philosophical developments met with some difficulty, resulting mainly from the influence of Wittgenstein. Thirty years ago there would have been no problem. Most philosophers in Britain and America were in the direct line of English empiricism from Locke and were obviously discussing the same problems and in

many cases by the same methods and arguments. This would apply to Russell, Whitehead, Moore, Alexander, Price and Broad, as well as to the various schools of 'realism' in the United States. The idealist tradition deriving from Kant and Hegel had practically died out. But much of this tradition had arisen from reaction against the empirical tradition and therefore provided alternative answers to the same problems. But the development of the analytic and linguistic movements changed all this. Locke himself had argued that much philosophical debate was due to linguistic confusions. But little of his actual argument proceeds by identifying and resolving these confusions. Indeed some extremists might say that in view of recent developments Locke's work has no modern relevance at all. As speculative ontology it is meaningless; as epistemology it should be taken over by the psychologists; as moral and political theory it is an interesting commentary on the English political social and religious scene at the end of the seventeenth century; but as *argument* claiming truth or validity it has no status and no modern counterparts. But the extremist tide has ebbed and some of Locke's problems reappear, though in new ways. One which has received considerable attention in the new vein is that of 'ideas of sensation', to which I refer below.

On the suggestion of my editor I have paid more attention than is usual in general books on Locke to his moral and political views. This is partly to redress the balance, but also because the Lovelace papers have much more bearing on these aspects of his philosophy than on his epistemology.

I close the writing of this study (since the Preface is always the last word) with a renewed sense of Locke's shrewdness and candour. His inconsistencies are frequent and his verbosity (especially in controversy) immense. But this does nothing to deny his claim to be the founder of philosophy in English.

I am greatly indebted to Professor Gilbert Ryle for his help in reading the manuscript, clarifying its argument, and improving its presentation.

Biographical Note

John Locke was born on 29 August 1632. His father was a Justice of the Peace, and Locke was brought up in the Puritan tradition and the Parliamentary faith in the sovereignty of the people. He went to Westminster School in 1647 under its great headmaster, Richard Busby. The Royalist traditions of the school must have tempered his previous upbringing. The education there in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic he later criticised as over-linguistic.

In 1652 he became a Junior Student (or Scholar) of Christ Church, Oxford, where he read the usual course of rhetoric, logic and grammar. After his BA (1655) he went on to history, astronomy, natural philosophy, Hebrew and Arabic. The tradition of his College and especially his friendship with Pocock, the Oriental scholar, swung him further towards the Royalist cause, and he welcomed the restoration of Charles II in 1660. On taking his MA in 1658 he became a Senior Student (or Fellow) of Christ Church and later Reader in Greek (1660) and in Rhetoric (1662) and finally Censor of Moral Philosophy (1664).

He thought little of the traditional Oxford curriculum, and from 1657 onwards his intellectual development owed most to his association with Sir Robert Boyle, the great pioneer of experimental science, and with Sydenham, the leading physician in the country. For even the scientific subjects in the University curriculum – natural philosophy, astronomy, medicine – were taught as textbook subjects with no experimental or laboratory element.

Between 1660 and 1663 Locke also began to put on paper his first philosophical views: essays on the powers of the magistrate and on natural law in morals and theology. His interests did not

as yet include epistemology. His ambition outside moral and political philosophy was to be a scientist himself.

In 1665 he had his first taste of political life when he went to Brandenburg as Secretary to Sir Walter Vane's mission. The mission failed but Locke was much impressed by the religious peace and tolerance of the Dutch in contrast with the English scene.

Back in Oxford in 1666 he had to decide on his future. A Studentship at Christ Church was normally a life appointment, vacated only on marriage. Certain intellectual flirtations with the young ladies of Black Hall in Oxford in 1659 did not shake Locke's lifelong bachelor status. Students normally took orders in the Church of England; but Locke like Boyle decided against this course and proposed instead to qualify in medicine. The King urged the Dean of Christ Church to permit Locke to remain a Student on these terms. He became a very well-informed physician and worked with Sydenham on simples (or herbal medicines).

In 1667 the whole course of his life was changed by his appointment as personal physician to Anthony Ashley Cooper, Baron Ashley. Created Lord Shaftesbury by Charles II in 1666, he soon promoted Locke to be his confidential secretary and political adviser. Shaftesbury championed religious toleration against the Clarendon Code of compulsory conformity. In this he had the support of the king, whose official religion was Church of England, but who was in secret 'a good atheist and a bad Papist'. Shaftesbury defended toleration (with the Dutch example in mind) on the grounds that it made for good trade, while intolerance led to internal dissension and the emigration of valuable citizens. Locke moved from Oxford to Exeter House, Shaftesbury's London mansion, where his patron provided him with a library and a laboratory. Shaftesbury shared Locke's interest in science and was a Fellow and Councillor of the Royal Society. Under his influence Locke wrote, during 1667, several drafts of a paper on toleration. In 1668 Locke himself became a Fellow of the Royal Society.

In 1671 there occurred the famous discussion which set Locke on the task of examining the extent and limitations of human knowledge and during that year he wrote two drafts of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

In 1672 Shaftesbury was made President of the Council for Trade and Plantations and then Lord High Chancellor. Locke was appointed his Secretary for (Ecclesiastical) Presentations and

then Secretary of the Council for Trade and Plantations, an office he held until 1675, when illness drove him to France.

There he made direct contact with the continental tradition in philosophy in meetings and discussions of Gassendi's criticism of Descartes with Bernier, Gassendi's leading disciple.

In 1679 he returned to England. Meantime his patron, Shaftesbury, had twice been in and out of favour at court. Though acquitted at his trial in 1681, he aroused very justifiable suspicions of his loyalty. He had changed sides twice in the Civil War and was now again plotting treachery. He fled to Holland in 1683, and Locke soon followed him into exile.

In 1681 Locke completed his *Two Treatises of Civil Government*, but did not publish them. In 1684 Charles II forced Dr Fell, the Dean of Christ Church, to deprive Locke of his Studentship.

Locke assumed in Holland the name of 'Dr van Linden'. There he made friends with Limborch to whom and to the sect of Remonstrants he owed much of his thought on religion and theology. In 1685 he wrote a third draft of his great *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and by the next year it was completed.

It is a sign of the dangerous times in which Locke lived that his first publication, at the age of 54, was a note in a French periodical of 1686 on how to arrange entries in a Commonplace Book. This was followed by a French summary of the *Essay* published anonymously in 1688.

In that year William of Orange, who had been advised by Locke, was installed on the English throne, and the Revolution enabled Locke to return to England and give the world the fruits of his thinking spread over thirty years and up to then concealed in notebooks, manuscript drafts, and correspondence.

In the next six years all his major works were published. From 1689 onwards he lived quietly, suffering from frequent illness. The *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1691, was meant to be read not by theologians and clerics nor by academic philosophers (such a breed did not then exist) but by ordinary educated men. It had an immediate success and aroused great interest, not only in England but also on the Continent, where it elicited a commentary by the most brilliant European philosopher, Leibniz.

From 1691 Locke was cared for by the Mashams at their house at Oates in Essex, and was there free to write, in addition to his published works, letters in defence of them to his critics. Leisure

induced length. (The *Third Letter for Toleration* runs to 175 folio pages and the letters to Stillingfleet to 232 folio pages. His last major work, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), is not itself notable for succinctness, but the second *Vindication* of it, against Mr Edwards, is over double its length.)

Locke died on 28 October 1704 aged 72 years.