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- Abstract:** The article profiles John Locke, English philosopher. Locke was a leading intellectual in late seventeenth-century England whose work in philosophy, political theory, education, and theology played a major role in shaping eighteenth-century thought. Born in Somerset, England, Locke was educated at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford, where he earned his BA degree in 1656. Although educated in a traditional arts curriculum, he became interested in medicine and science and received a medical degree from Oxford in 1675. Locke was active in public affairs through his involvement with one of the most powerful leaders of the day, Lord Ashley, later the first earl of Shaftsbury. Locke's political fortunes waxed and waned with Ashley's from 1667 to 1683. Serving as secretary to the newly established Board of Trade and Plantations from 1673 to 1675, Locke was involved in a variety of policy debates on commercial affairs. Like his philosophical and political ideas, Locke's educational and theological writings were grounded in a respect for the individual and the power of reason to order human affairs.
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Locke, John**(1632-1704) ENGLISH PHILOSOPHER**

John Locke was a leading intellectual in late seventeenth-century England whose work in philosophy, political theory, education, and theology played a major role in shaping eighteenth-century thought.

Born in Somerset, England, Locke was educated at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford, where he earned his BA degree in 1656. Although educated in a traditional arts curriculum, he became interested in medicine and science and received a medical degree from Oxford in 1675. His association with people such as the physician Thomas Sydenham and the physicist Robert Boyle brought him into contact with some of the leading scientific ideas of the day. Locke became a fellow of the newly founded Royal Society in 1668.

Locke was active in public affairs through his involvement with one of the most powerful leaders of the day, Lord Ashley, later the first earl of Shaftsbury. Locke's political fortunes waxed and waned with Ashley's from 1667 to 1683. Serving as secretary to the newly established Board of Trade and Plantations from 1673 to 1675, Locke was involved in a variety of policy debates on commercial affairs. He lived abroad for health reasons from

late 1675 to spring 1679, returning to the Shaftesbury household during the Exclusion Crisis, when Protestant nobles led by Shaftesbury sought to exclude James, the Catholic brother of King Charles II, from succeeding to the throne. After Shaftesbury's fall from power in 1681, Locke remained in England until the Rye House Plot (to assassinate King Charles II and his brother James) was discovered, and he fled to Holland in 1683. Locke lived in exile in Holland until William and Mary assumed the throne in 1688.

Returning to England when William and Mary assumed the throne, Locke published books in a wide range of fields that had occupied him during the 1680s. A Letter Concerning Toleration and Two Treatises of Government were published anonymously in 1689. These were followed by four editions of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690,1694,1695,1700), two additional letters on toleration (1690,1692), selected papers on interest and money (1692,1695), Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693), The Reasonableness of Christianity (1695), and two Vindications of the Reasonableness (1695,1697).

From 1696 to 1700 he was a commissioner on the Board of Trade and Plantations. Retiring for health reasons, Locke spent his last few years revising the Essay and writing commentaries on the letters of Saint Paul. Along with the philosophical essay, "The Conduct of the Understanding," these theological writings were published posthumously.

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding is one of the seminal contributions to British empiricism (a theory that all knowledge originates in experience). His primary goal was to grasp the limits of human understanding. He criticized the notion that people possess innate ideas about the world. People acquire knowledge about the world through simple and complex ideas that originate in sensation and reflection. Locke also explored the role of language in human knowledge and tried to mark out the relationship between reason and faith. Locke's theory of ideas and his analysis of substance, primary and secondary qualities, personal identity, and the problem of free will set the terms of debate for the philosophical work of Francis Hutcheson, George Berkeley, and David Hume.

Although written initially during the Exclusion Crisis of the early 1680s, Locke's Two Treatises was published as a defense of the ascension of William and Mary to the English throne. Rejecting the English political writer Robert Filmer's theory of the divine right of kings, Locke argued that political power flows directly from the people. In the hypothetical state of nature regulated by God's natural law, people are free and equal beings possessing certain inalienable rights. In order to protect their lives, liberties, and properties people join into political communities. Political power thus arises to accomplish limited goals. If political leaders extend their power too far, the people reserve the right to revolt against them. Locke's social contract theory became the hallmark of Whig ideology in Britain throughout the eighteenth century and played a major role in the founding of the United States.

Like his philosophical and political ideas, Locke's educational and theological writings were grounded in a respect for the individual and the power of reason to order human affairs. He was sensitive to the role that experience plays in the education of youth and the development of one's moral character. He viewed a church as a voluntary association of people who come to worship together in matters of faith. He argued for toleration among Protestant sects who were potentially willing to tolerate the religious opinions of the other sects. His goal was to convince Protestant groups that they had an interest in tolerating one another. Significantly, this toleration did not extend to Roman Catholics, who, Locke believed, were committed to the secular authority of the pope. Much of the British,

French, and U.S. versions of the Enlightenment (a philosophic movement of the eighteenth century marked by a rejection of traditional social, religious, and political ideas and an emphasis on rationalism) can be seen as working out many of the ideas initially developed by Locke.

See also Political Thought



Political philosopher John Locke.

Further Reading

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