



LOCKE

A Guide for the Perplexed

Patricia Sheridan

**LOCKE:
A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED**

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INTRODUCTION

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1690, is a *tour de force*—it is an ambitious work, devoted to constructing a foundational theory of knowledge, of language, and of the nature and origin of ideas. But the expansiveness of its subject matter, combined with the sometimes painstaking detail of its discussions, can make it a challenging work to read. The diverse and sometimes sprawling discussions of the *Essay* can tend to obscure the thematic coherence of the project as a whole. It is therefore useful, at the outset, to try to identify the general theme of the work, and Locke gave us some clues to that effect in his introductory *Epistle to the Reader*. Unfortunately, Locke does not straightforwardly state what his primary concern is, and he manages to offer us two somewhat different versions of his motivation for writing the *Essay*. Despite this, there is a general point of view regarding knowledge that is prominent in both accounts, and which brings all the pieces of Locke's work into focus.

In an oft-quoted section of the *Epistle*, Locke describes the ambition of his work as the modest one of serving natural science. He describes himself as privileged to be “*employed as an Under-Labourer in clearing the Ground a little, and removing some of the Rubbish, that lies in the way to Knowledge*” (*Epistle*, 10). The frequent appeal to various principles of natural science throughout the text, combined with Locke's self-characterization as “underlabourer” to the sciences, has led some readers to presume that the primary goal of the *Essay* is to construct a theory of ideas that supports and defends modern scientific methods. There is no doubt that much of the *Essay* is intended as a means of accomplishing this end; however, we risk misunderstanding the intent of the *Essay* if we read Locke's work solely in this light. Though Locke's work is clearly motivated by his interests in modern science, the *Essay* also devotes significant space to questions of moral and religious

knowledge. Unless we wish to dismiss these topics as being only tangential to Locke's natural scientific commitments—and there is little reason to do so—we need to understand the scope of the *Essay* in somewhat broader terms.

In the course of the *Epistle*, Locke famously recounts another source of inspiration for writing the *Essay*. He explains that his interest in writing the *Essay* was stirred by a discussion one evening with several of his friends, on subjects that Locke identifies only as being “very remote” from the topic of the *Essay* (though James Tyrell, one of the friends in attendance that evening, later identified their topics of discussion as morality and religion). After a lengthy debate, Locke recounts, their discourse came to a standstill when they realized they were dealing with issues so dense and complicated that no resolution was forthcoming. As Locke recalls,

it came into my Thoughts, that we took a wrong course; and that, before we set our selves upon Enquiries of that Nature, it was necessary to examine our own Abilities, and see, what Objects our Understandings were, or were not fitted to deal with. (*Epistle*, 7)

Morality and religion also have a place beside natural science as subjects explored at significant length in the *Essay*, yet the inspiration for the *Essay* should not be sought in one specific subject. Locke's motivating concern can be discerned by paying close attention to the more general question Locke raises in the quote above. Locke's overriding interest in the *Essay* is not to lay foundations for any specific discipline; Locke aims to examine the nature of inquiry, its foundations, its standards for truth, and the means we have for improving systematic investigations of all kinds. For Locke, success in any intellectual undertaking, be it natural science, morality, or religion, depends upon having a fundamental grasp of the origin and nature of knowledge itself. Locke thus calls for a proper accounting of our ideas and the relations that can reasonably be drawn between them. In this way, we may avoid the pitfalls of aiming at certainty where there is only probability, or claiming knowledge where there is none to be had. As Locke puts this in Book I of the *Essay*, “It is therefore worth while, to search out the *Bounds* between Opinion and Knowledge; and examine by what Measures, in things, whereof we have no certain Knowledge, we ought to regulate our Assent, and moderate our Perswasions”

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(1.1.3). The enterprise of examining the origin and content of our ideas is ultimately aimed at establishing what our minds are capable of knowing and setting appropriate standards for truth. As Locke sees it, the problems that inhibit real learning arise from a failure to appreciate this; assertions that exceed the boundaries of human ideas and reason lead us into irresolvable debate as well as pernicious overconfidence.

Locke frequently refers to the fittedness or suitableness of our minds to certain kinds of inquiry; he thinks our minds are fashioned such that we may gain knowledge in degrees appropriate to our human needs. He does not, therefore, think we ought to hold all of our inquiries to the same standard of knowledge; for Locke, the relative potential for knowledge in our scientific, moral, and religious pursuits depends on the ideas we have and what these ideas are taken to represent. For Locke, the contents of thought, our ideas, originate in experience. As a result, whatever we can conclude about the world is limited to our experiences; for Locke, most of these ideas are necessarily incomplete—we can have no ideas of the world as it exists beyond our perceptual experience. Locke offers us a humbled conception of scientific knowledge. This might seem to be an odd conclusion for a thinker who seeks to provide an epistemological foundation for science. However, Locke's task is not to undermine science, but to instill an appropriate modesty in our approach to scientific theory, consistent with the Baconian program. Modern science, as Bacon conceived it, is predicated on limits—hypotheses need constant testing, and hopefully, perfecting, with the goal not of absolute truths, but of useful and practical outcomes for human life. In this same spirit, Locke explores the limits of scientific understanding, and sets out to establish appropriate standards for the justification of our scientific beliefs. As we will see, Locke also seeks to mark out relatively appropriate standards for moral and religious knowledge.

Locke spends a great deal of time pointing out the gaps in, and inadequacies of, experiential ideas. However, Locke's view is not a call for skepticism. In defining the limits of knowledge, Locke emphasizes the proper appreciation of what we *need* to know to live well. Locke's epistemology is pragmatic; though many things cannot be known with certainty, we do, he thinks, have the tools necessary for achieving a level of assurance, with regard to the truth or falsity of our beliefs, that is adequate to living well and happily. As

Locke sees it, then, inquiry does not have to aim at absolute truths and certainties, but at providing the greatest possible knowledge that will serve the requirements of life, whether in natural science, religion, or morality. In the *Epistle*, Locke states that despite the critical response his work will generate, he will “*always have the satisfaction to have aimed at Truth and Usefulness*” (*Epistle*, 9). To this end, Locke sets out to examine knowledge itself—not only its limits and extent, but also its origin in experience. With its emphasis on the perils of dogmatism and superstition, the *Essay* sought to lay the groundwork for a kind of intellectual accountability that would not only free rational individuals from religious, political, and intellectual oppression, but also encourage them to embrace their responsibilities as rational agents to use reason in guiding them to the best possible life. As Locke explains, humans have been given “Whatsoever is necessary for the Conveniences of Life, and Information of Virtue; and [God] has put within the reach of their Discovery the comfortable provision for this Life and the Way that leads to a better” (1.1.5). Certainty with regard to many things will elude us. But to disdain our limits and cast doubt on whatever cannot be known with certainty is to misunderstand the practical function of knowledge and to extol only that kind of knowledge that reaches to the lofty heights of abstraction and absolute truth.

Locke’s early experiences at Oxford and the acquaintances he made there had a formative influence on his work. It is, therefore, useful, by way of introduction, to understand something of Locke’s life and career.

BIOGRAPHY

Locke was born in Somerset, England, on August 28, 1632. His father, John Locke senior, was a landowner, attorney, and minor Government administrator. During the English Civil War, Locke’s father fought on the side of Parliament under Alexander Popham, a member of the Somerset gentry who became a member of parliament after the war. Locke senior maintained his connection with Popham, whose influence allowed him to recommend young John Locke to Westminster School, one of the leading schools in England at that time. Here Locke gained a first-class education and was eventually elected to Christ Church, Oxford in 1652.

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Oxford at this time was dominated by the Aristotelianism of the Middle Ages, and students followed a standard curriculum of logic, metaphysics, and classical languages leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree. Like his predecessor the famed philosopher Thomas Hobbes, Locke found the curriculum of Oxford tremendously outdated, and, in the words of Hobbes years earlier, the philosophy taught was “Aristotelity,” with no emphasis on original thought but “rigide truth.”¹ Though Oxford may not have been quite so dogmatically devoted to Aristotelianism as Hobbes suggests, there seems to have been some intellectual divide in this period between the Aristotelians and those embracing the new wave of ideas emerging at this time. Locke himself was no doubt recalling his days at Oxford in his numerous characterizations of “the Schools” as institutions of pointless disputation over befuddling terminology. As he charges in Book III, the Schoolmen dispute obscure terminology rather than aiming at discovering new or useful knowledge for humankind. Locke describes them in the following glowing terms:

aiming at Glory and Esteem, for their great and universal Knowledge, easier a great deal to be pretended to, than really acquired, found this a good Expedient to cover their Ignorance, with a curious and inexplicable Web of perplexed Words, and procure to themselves the admiration of others, by unintelligible Terms, the apter to produce wonder, because they could not be understood, whilst it appears in all History that these profound Doctors were no wiser, nor more useful than their Neighbours; and brought but small advantage to humane Life, or the Societies wherein they lived. (3.10.8)

This “learned ignorance” (3.10.10), as Locke calls it, was, if not the only intellectual activity at Oxford, at least predominant enough to have concerned modern thinkers such as Locke and Hobbes.

The intellectual environment of Oxford was changing in the seventeenth century. The English Royal Society was founded at Oxford by John Wilkins. Wilkins gathered a group of intellectuals dedicated to the principles of a burgeoning new science devoted to the Baconian enterprise of founding science in the “historical” method of experimentation and hypothesis. Locke was introduced to the ideas of this society through his friend Richard Lower, and his interest in new approaches to medicine and natural science

grew. Robert Boyle eventually took over as the leading voice of the society. Locke was closely associated with Boyle, and was thereby exposed to Boyle's groundbreaking theoretical work on atomistic mechanism. Throughout his life, Locke was devoted to the work of the great names in modern science, working closely with Boyle and developing friendships with Sydenham, Huygens, and Newton.

During his earlier days at Oxford, Locke explored the possibility of pursuing the law, ordination into the ministry, and medicine. His detailed notes indicate he was reading a great number of medical works through the 1650s, most notably Harvey's groundbreaking work on the circulation of the blood. In the 1660s, Locke was appointed to several college offices, eventually becoming a college tutor. Throughout this period, Locke was engaging in informal studies in medicine, having decided to become a physician. Locke even set up a laboratory at Oxford to study medicine and anatomy. At this time Locke was also busy developing his political views, penning early tracts on the authority of the state vis-à-vis the individual and on religious toleration. In the early 1660s, Locke wrote what is now known as the *Two Tracts on Government*. His interest in moral philosophy was also developing at this time, and he penned a then-unpublished work which has come to be known as the *Essays on the Law of Nature*.

It was at this time that Locke established his friendship with Anthony Ashley Cooper, one of the wealthiest men in England, and an important politician, who would be enormously influential in Locke's life. Cooper was unwell and arrived at Oxford to take the medicinal waters there. In 1667, Cooper invited Locke to live with him as his personal physician, secretary, and researcher. Locke left Oxford and lived with Lord Ashley for the next eight years, firmly establishing himself as Lord Ashley's friend. In 1668, he diagnosed an abscess on Lord Ashley's liver and recommended life-saving surgery.

During his years in Lord Ashley's residence, Locke was not only devoted to the study of modern science, but also continued his work on political theory. In 1667, he wrote the *Essay Concerning Toleration*. At this time, Locke was chiefly involved in helping Lord Ashley in establishing trade with the colonies, particularly with regard to founding colonies in the Carolinas. Locke was deeply involved in drafting the constitution of the Carolinas, and writing documents regarding other public policy issues such as the monetary situation

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in England. Lord Ashley was eventually forced to flee England for the more politically tolerant Holland, after terms of imprisonment in the Tower of London. Ashley had been strongly opposed to the succession to the throne of the Catholic brother of Charles II. He had been active in supporting the exclusion bill that would have prevented this succession. The rising tensions between Protestant and Catholic parties made the situation in England sufficiently threatening that Locke followed Lord Ashley to Holland in 1683.

It was in Holland that Locke finished his work *An Essay on Toleration*, along with the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. By this time, Locke had also befriended a number of English revolutionaries in exile. The English Government attempted to extradite a number of them back to England, including Locke. Charles II was eventually succeeded by his Catholic brother, James II, who was forced to flee to France in the face of mounting opposition, culminating in the arrival, in 1688, of a revolutionary force led by the Protestant William of Orange. This was known as the Glorious Revolution. This event marked the change in power from king to Parliament, and had enormous implications for the political climate of England.

Locke returned to England in 1688, and soon after published the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *The Two Treatises of Government*. For the remaining years of his life, Locke lived with his long-time friend, and one-time romantic interest, Damarais Masham and her husband Sir Francis Masham. Here Locke enjoyed a lively intellectual friendship with Lady Masham, as well as entertaining many of the luminaries of his day. Locke died on October 28, 1704.

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