Definition: Locke, John from Philip's Encyclopedia

English philosopher and exponent of empiricism. In 1679 his friendship with the Earl of Shaftesbury, accused of conspiracy against Charles II, made him a target of suspicion and he went into exile in the Netherlands (1683-89). He returned to England only after the Glorious Revolution. He rejected the concept of 'innate ideas', arguing that all ideas are placed in the mind by experience. In 1690, he published Two Treatises on Civil Government, in which he advocated the social contract, the right to freedom of conscience and the right to property.

Summary Article: Locke, John from Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought

The belief that governments should be democratic, tolerant, and uphold human rights is now almost universally acknowledged. Among the most influential writers to have promoted this agenda in opposition to patriarchal, aristocratic, and narrowly religious principles was the liberal philosopher John Locke (1632–1704).

Locke’s three most significant works were published in the space of two years. The Letter Concerning Toleration appeared in 1689. This was followed in 1690 with the Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Also published in 1690 was Two Treatises of Government, including Locke’s most celebrated political work, the Second Treatise “Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government.”

Locke was born in the village of Wrington, in the county of Somerset in England. He attended Westminster School and went on to become a don at Christchurch College, Oxford. In 1666, Locke met Anthony Ashley Cooper, later the first Earl of Shaftesbury. He became Shaftesbury’s secretary and shared in his political ventures, although he still formally retained his position at Christchurch. The reigning monarch, Charles II, had no legitimate children and there was a question over who should succeed him. Locke and Shaftesbury were among those opposed to Charles’s brother James acceding to the throne because he was a Catholic. Quite how far they were prepared to go to prevent him from becoming king is unclear, although it was alleged that there was a plot to assassinate both Charles and James. Early in 1683, Locke thought it prudent to quit England for Holland. Shortly thereafter, several of his political allies were charged with treason and executed. The government ordered that Locke be dismissed from his position at Christchurch and attempted, unsuccessfully, to have him extradited. James went on to become King James II in 1685, but he was ousted by the Protestant William of Orange in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. In 1689, Locke returned to England in high favor and published his famous works, although he cautiously withheld his name from both the Letter and Two Treatises. He obtained a position on the Board of Trade and contributed to the government's financial policy. Locke never married. He died at Oates, a country house in Essex, and was buried at the church in nearby High Laver.

Toleration

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Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* advocates religious tolerance, although the argument it contains can readily be extended to toleration more generally. Locke contends that the purpose of the state is to enable its members to pursue life, freedom, health, leisure, and wealth. In fulfilling this function, the state can legitimately punish people but only if they violate the rights of others to enjoy these advantages; it should not punish those who are harmlessly engaged in a voluntary activity. A religious group is a form of voluntary organization joined by people who believe that its doctrine will lead them to salvation. Their activities do not violate the rights of any other member of the state. One’s doctrinal views on, for example, transubstantiation, are of no matter to anyone else. The state should, therefore, tolerate religion.

The argument thus far is an elaboration of the idea found in Thomas More’s *Utopia* that we have the right to do anything that is not injurious to other people. But Locke has to go further than this to counter the claim that intolerance is justified to promote true religion. Locke agrees that there is “but one truth, one way to heaven” but argues that this does not justify repression because one cannot know that the religion that happens to be favored by the state, while others are suppressed, will guide people along the true path. The logic of this view is evident, argues Locke, when one considers that many different religions have found favor with those in power in different states over time: These religions contradict each other, and so they cannot all be right and in fact they must nearly all be wrong. Later liberal theorists, including John Stuart Mill and Karl Popper, extended this line of argument, contending that tolerance should be practiced with respect to all opinions, whether religious or not. This is not because all opinions are equally valid but because one can never be finally sure that one’s own opinion is in the right. It is by allowing the free interplay of rival ideas to work themselves through and test themselves out that the truth is most likely to emerge.

Locke acknowledges the potential danger posed to the state by religions that aspire to power. To counteract this danger, Locke argues that the adherents of a religion should operate strictly within the bounds of society. Just as the state should not interfere in the actions of a voluntary religious association, so this association should not attempt to arrogate to itself any powers reserved to the state. In particular, if a religion enjoins its members to obey the head of another state, then it oversteps these bounds and should not be tolerated. This argument is usually read as being directed against Catholicism, although the example given by Locke is of a Muslim living in a Christian state but maintaining an allegiance to the authorities in Turkey. Locke also contends that a religious association should not punish its members. Tolerance of religion is premised on the assumption that religious practices do not threaten people’s rights and should not, therefore, be punished by the state. It follows that disputes within a religious denomination do not give any legitimate reason for bishops or others with religious authority to punish dissenting members, although they can be expelled.

Rights and Duties

In Locke's view, the state, like a religious organization, can be compared with a voluntary association, albeit one that has the power to punish by death. However, the state is formed not to punish its members but to protect them. To explain this protective theory of the state, Locke loosely follows the contract theory found in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651). Like Hobbes, Locke imagines people living in a state of nature where there is no law. The state of nature is transformed into a governed state or commonwealth when its inhabitants make a contract with each other to designate a ruling body. This is done to ensure mutual protection against the threat of one another. However, where Hobbes had the state of nature as a calamitous war of all against all, Locke

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contends that a state of nature and state of war are not synonymous. People in Locke’s state of nature certainly have reason to be afraid of each other, but enmity is no invariable rule and at least they do not have to deal with a tyrannical ruler. In this relatively pacific state of nature, there is sufficient trust and cooperation to establish the right to life, health, liberty, and property.

The right to liberty is intrinsic to the state of nature as there are no government constraints on people’s actions. The only laws are the laws of nature, which enjoin everyone to treat others equally and respect their rights. The right to property is conferred by working on nature in some way. When a man's horse bites the grass, it becomes his. When his servant digs the turf, and when he mines ore from the ground, then these things too become his property. The extent of a person’s property acquired in this way has a natural limit in what can be used before it spoils. However, Locke goes on to explain that money lasts indefinitely, which allows us to accumulate property beyond this limit.

The tendency in liberal thought—indeed all modern Western political thought—has been to move away from any theological basis and Locke generally fits this pattern. For example, one might easily conclude that the implicit message of his Letter Concerning Toleration is that none of the vying religions are true. However, Locke appears to have been sincere in his religious beliefs and, in one important respect, retains religion in his philosophy. Locke justifies the right to life by redefining it as a duty that we owe to God. Our lives, Locke explains, are the property of God, so we should neither kill ourselves nor anyone else.

According to Locke, the rights that we have from birth are not conditional on fulfilling a duty or acting reciprocally. Locke framed the Treatises as a response to Robert Filmer’s Patriarcha (1680). Filmer had argued that the relationship of a king to his subjects was akin to that of a father and a child. Using examples drawn from Patriarcha, Locke interprets this to mean that a father, if he so chooses, has the right to sell or castrate his child. Locke counters that parents have no such horrific rights over their children but rather duties toward them. Parents can exercise their judgment on behalf of the child but only to promote their physical and mental development and enjoyment. It is children, therefore, who have rights over their parents, who have a duty to care for them. These rights are, initially at least, unconditional: One cannot impose conditions on a baby.

Democracy and Revolution

Hobbes’s state is formed by an irrevocable transfer of power to a sovereign ruler. By contrast, the power handed to the government in Locke’s version of contract theory is provisional. The commonwealth that is formed out of the state of nature has as its purpose upholding the rights of its citizens and, in particular, their right to life, liberty, and property. The people that have agreed to establish the state retain the right to get rid of it if fails to maintain these rights.

Locke’s preferred form of government is an elected legislature that meets periodically to create new laws. It is not a professional body and does no more than is necessary before the legislators return to their occupations in society. The laws are upheld by an impartial judiciary, and a permanent executive undertakes the business of government. If the legislature fails to protect the interests of the people, it can be replaced. If the executive branch of the state usurps power, becoming unaccountable and taking over the functions of the legislature, then it can be legitimately overthrown in a revolution. By exceeding its authority, the executive turns to the use of force. This places it in a state of war against the citizens of the state, and under these circumstances, the citizens have a right to respond with force.

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In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Locke's political influence extended beyond liberal philosophers to include revolutionaries. He was directly involved in the opposition to James II, which culminated in the Glorious Revolution and his writings influenced the American revolutionaries, particularly Thomas Jefferson. Locke's ideas are seen in the 1776 Declaration of Independence, with its right to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” as well as in the separation between church and state, and division of power between executive and legislature in the U.S. Constitution.

Today, a broadly Lockean vision of democracy is either realized or aspired to the world over. Nonetheless, Locke can be criticized from both right and left. On the right, Edmund Burke’s conservative condemnation of those who speculate on abstract universal rights in a way that is divorced from nationality, culture, and tradition might well have been urged with Locke in mind. On the left, Karl Marx saw Locke as a bourgeois ideologue. As Marx wrote in The Eighteenth Brumaire (1852), a rising capitalist class in seventeenth-century England clothed its intentions in religion. But “when the real goal had been achieved and the bourgeois transformation of English society had been accomplished, Locke supplanted Habakkuk.” C. B. Macpherson provides a similar analysis, one that focuses on Locke’s defense of property rights and implicit endorsement of wage labor (why does the turf that is dug up in the state of nature not belong to the servant?). These arguments suggest that Locke is, at least, a more complex figure than the saintly champion of freedom that is sometimes portrayed by his admirers. That there is another side to Locke is evident from some of his lesser-known works. The violently punitive recommendations in his Essay on the Poor Law and Working Schools (1697) can only be described as inhumane. His insistence on the right to liberty sits somewhat awkwardly with his role in drawing up The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina (1669), which grants slaves the right to choose their religion but to be, in all other respects, slaves. Perhaps such things are mere lapses, but it is also possible that they betoken more general problems both in Locke’s thought and in the modern democratic societies that he has helped to forge.

See also Capitalism; Citizenship; Contract Theory; Democratic Theory; Eighteenth-Century Political Thought; Equality and Egalitarianism; Justice; Legitimacy; Liberalism; Natural Law; Obedience, Political; Property, Theories of; Religion and Western Political Thought; Rights, Natural and Human; State of Nature; Toleration

Further Readings


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