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JOHN
LOCKE

1632 - 1704

The famous English philosopher John Locke was the first writer to put together in coherent form the basic ideas of constitutional democracy. His ideas strongly influenced the founding fathers of the United States, as well as many leading philosophers of the French Enlightenment.

Locke was born in 1632, in Wrington, England. He was educated at Oxford University, where he received a bachelor's degree in 1656 and a master's degree in 1658. As a young man, he was very much interested in science, and at thirty-six was elected to the Royal Society. He became good friends with the famous chemist Robert Boyle, and later in his life became friends with Isaac Newton. He was also interested in medicine, and received a bachelor's degree in that field, though he only practiced occasionally.

A turning point in Locke's life was his acquaintance with the Earl of Shaftesbury, to whom he became secretary and family physician. Shaftesbury was an important spokesman for liberal political ideas, and for a while was imprisoned by King Charles II because of his political activities. In 1682, Shaftesbury fled to Holland, where he died the following year. Locke, who because of his close association with Shaftesbury was likewise under suspicion, fled to Holland in 1683. He remained there until after Charles's successor, King James II, had been removed by the successful revolution of 1688. Locke returned home in 1689; thereafter, he lived in England. Locke, who never married, died in 1704.

The book that first made Locke famous was *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in which he discussed the origin, nature, and limits of human knowledge. Locke's views were basically empiricist, and the influence of Francis Bacon and René Descartes upon his thought is obvious. Locke's ideas, in turn, influenced philosophers such as Bishop George Berkeley, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. Although the *Essay* is Locke's most original work, and is one of the famous classics of philosophy, it has had less influence upon historical developments than his political writings.

In *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (first published anonymously, in 1689), Locke maintained that the state should not interfere with the free exercise of religion. Locke was not the first Englishman to suggest religious toleration of all Protestant sects; however, the strong arguments he presented in favor of toleration were a factor in the growth of public support for this policy. Furthermore, Locke extended the principle of toleration to non-Christians: "...neither Pagan, nor Mahometan, nor Jew, ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth because of his religion." However, Locke believed that this toleration should not be extended to Catholics, because he believed that they owed their allegiance to a foreign potentate, nor to atheists. By today's standards, he would therefore be considered very intolerant, but it is reasonable to judge him in relation to the

ideas of his own times. In fact, the arguments he presented in favor of religious toleration were more convincing to his readers than the exceptions he made. Today, thanks in part to Locke's writings, religious toleration is extended even to those groups that he would have excluded.

Of still greater importance was Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), in which he presented the basic ideas underlying liberal constitutional democracy. That book's influence upon political thought throughout the English-speaking world has been profound. Locke firmly believed that each human being possessed natural rights, and that these included not only life, but personal liberty and the right to hold property. The main purpose of government, Locke asserted, was to protect the persons and property of the subjects. This view has sometimes been called the "night-watchman theory of government."

Rejecting the notion of the divine right of kings, Locke maintained that governments obtained their authority only from the consent of the governed. "The liberty of man in society is to be under no other legislative power but that established by consent in the commonwealth..." Locke strongly emphasized the idea of a social contract. This notion was derived in part from the writings of an earlier English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). But whereas Hobbes had used the idea of a social contract to justify absolutism, in Locke's view the social contract was revokable:

...whenever the legislators endeavor to take away and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people, who are thereupon absolved from any further obedience, and are left to the common refuge which God hath provided for all men against force and violence.

Also, "...there remains still in the people a supreme power to remove or alter the legislative when they find the legislative act

contrary to the trust reposed in them..." Locke's defense of the right of revolution strongly influenced Thomas Jefferson and other American revolutionaries.

Locke believed in the principle of separation of powers; however, he felt that the legislature should be superior to the executive (and therefore to the judiciary, which he considered a part of the executive branch.) A believer in legislative supremacy, Locke would almost certainly have opposed the right of courts to declare legislative acts unconstitutional.

Though Locke firmly believed in the principle of majority rule, he nevertheless made it clear that a government did not possess unlimited rights. A majority must not violate the natural rights of men, nor was it free to deprive them of their property rights. A government could only rightfully take property with the consent of the governed. (In America, this idea was eventually expressed by the slogan, "No taxation without representation.")

It is evident from the foregoing that Locke had expressed virtually all the major ideas of the American Revolution almost a century before that event. His influence upon Thomas Jefferson is particularly striking. Locke's ideas penetrated to the European mainland as well—particularly to France, where they were an indirect factor leading to the French Revolution and the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. Although such figures as Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson are more famous than Locke, his writings preceded theirs and strongly influenced them. It therefore seems reasonable that he should precede them on this list.