

JOHN LOCKE

1632-1704

- 1667: Physician to the first earl of Shaftesbury.
- 1684: Expelled from Oxford post as part of intrigues against Shaftesbury.
- 1690: Publication of the *Essay, Letter Concerning Toleracion, and Two Treatises of Government*.

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which is a pretty formidable book of technical philosophy, drew some protests over its title, and others of a contrary tendency over its method. It seemed too heavy, hard, and long to be a mere essay. On the other hand, its basic material was described as too trifling to merit so much analysis. For all Mr. Locke proposed to do in several hundred knotty pages was to analyze a few ideas that he found lying about in his own mind.

As usual, the philosopher, who was nothing if not a long-headed man, had considered these criticisms already and had devised a single answer for both. His book was an essay because, like that of Montaigne, it aimed to explore the mind of mankind in general through a discriminating analysis of one mind in particular. When Locke analyzed the ideas of his mind, the ways they were acquired and put together, he found they were clear when they were based on direct experience, and adequate when they were clear. Usually, it appeared, problems occurred when the basic ideas with which he was trying to calculate were blurred or confused or did not refer to anything determinate. Thus a critical analysis of the ideas in an individual mind could lead straight to a rule about adequate ideas in general and the sort of subject where adequate ideas were possible. On the basis of such a limitation, individuals might reach rational agreement with one another, and so set up an area of natural law, within which a common rule of understanding was available.

The clergy were naturally upset over Locke's new "way of ideas," which invited people to discard from their minds any ideas that they could not reduce to clear, distinct, i.e., determinate, form. "Mysteries of faith" were essential to the mental economy of churchmen. How could the Trinity or the doctrine of predestination be reduced to clear, distinct ideas? If they couldn't, must one then discard them? On this last point, Locke was polite but very firm. Yes, if one wanted to discourse reasonably and understandably, one really must discard any idea which could not be given a determinate shape and meaning. The philosopher had evidently performed this operation on any unclear and indistinct ideas he found in his own mind. What was left of Christianity when one got rid of all its "unreasonable" elements was a cool, general, undemanding creed, which did not commit one to much more than a belief in the existence of God, and was therefore known as "Deism." Locke did not like labels, but he was a kind of Deist. Though a scandalous idea in the late seventeenth century, Deism was a quite respectable creed by the time of Pope.

Like most philosophers, Locke had a minimum of personal history. His

background and connections were all with the Puritan movement, but he was early disillusioned with the enthusiastic moods and dogmatic persecutions to which he found the Puritans prone. Having a small but steady private income, he became a student, chiefly at Oxford, learning enough medicine to act as a physician, holding an occasional appointive office, but never allowing any of these activities to limit his controlling passion, which was simply for thought. After 1667, he was personal physician and tutor in the household of a violent, crafty politician, the first earl of Shaftesbury (Dryden's "Achitophel"). But Locke himself was always a grave, dispassionate man, almost frighteningly judicious. On one occasion, Shaftesbury's political enemies at Oxford had Locke watched for several years on end, during which he was not heard to say one word either critical of the government or favorable to it. When times are turbulent, so much discretion is suspicious in itself; and Locke found it convenient to go abroad for several years during the 1680s. He lived quietly in Holland, and pursued his thoughts. The Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 and the accession of William III brought him back to England, and made possible the publication of the *Essay*, on which he had been working for many years. Its publication foreshadowed the coming age of reason, not only in the positive ideas that the book advanced, but in the quiet way it set aside as insoluble a range of problems about absolute authority and absolute assurance to which the seventeenth century had prodigally sacrificed its best resources of mind and heart.

From An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

From *The Epistle to the Reader*

Reader,

I here put into thy hands what has been the diversion of some of my idle and heavy hours; if it has the good luck to prove so of any of thine, and thou hast but half so much pleasure in reading as I had in writing it, thou wilt as little think thy money, as I do my pains, ill bestowed. Mistake not this for a commendation of my work; nor conclude, because I was pleased with the doing of it, that therefore I am fondly taken with it now it is done. He that hawks at larks and sparrows, has no less sport, though a much less considerable quarry, than he that flies at nobler game; and he is little acquainted with the subject of this treatise, the Understanding, who does not know, that as it is the most elevated faculty of the soul, so it is employed with a greater and more constant delight than any of the other. Its searches after truth are a sort of hawking and hunting, wherein the very pursuit makes a great part of the pleasure. Every step the mind takes in its progress towards knowledge makes some discovery, which is not only new, but the best, too, for the time at least.

For the understanding, like the eye, judging of objects only by its own sight, cannot but be pleased with what it discovers, having less regret for what has escaped it, because it is unknown. Thus he who has raised himself above the alms-basket, and not content to live lazily on scraps of begged opinions, sets his own thoughts on work to find and follow

truth, will (whatever he lights on) not miss the hunter's satisfaction; every moment of his pursuit will reward his pains with some delight, and he will have reason to think his time not ill spent, even when he cannot much boast of any great acquisition.

This, reader, is the entertainment of those who let loose their own thoughts, and follow them in writing; which thou oughtest not to envy them, since they afford thee an opportunity of the like diversion, if thou wilt make use of thy own thoughts in reading. It is to them, if they are thy own, that I refer myself; but if they are taken upon trust from others, it is no great matter what they are, they not following truth, but some meaner consideration; and it is not worth while to be concerned what he says or thinks, who says or thinks only as he is directed by another. If thou judgest for thyself, I know thou wilt judge candidly; and then I shall not be harmed or offended, whatever be thy censure. For, though it be certain that there is nothing in this treatise of the truth whereof I am not fully persuaded, yet I consider myself as liable to mistakes as I can think thee; and know that this book must stand or fall with thee, not by any opinion I have of it, but thy own. If thou findest little in it new or instructive to thee, thou art not to blame me for it. It was not meant for those that had already mastered this subject, and made a thorough acquaintance with their own understandings, but for my own information, and the satisfaction of a few friends, who acknowledged themselves not to have sufficiently considered it. Were it fit to trouble thee with the history of this Essay, I should tell thee, that five or six friends, meeting at my chamber, and discoursing on a subject very remote from this, found themselves quickly at a stand by the difficulties that rose on every side. After we had awhile puzzled ourselves, without coming any nearer a resolution of those doubts which perplexed us, it came into my thoughts, that we took a wrong course; and that, before we set ourselves upon inquiries 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. This I proposed to the company, who all readily assented; and thereupon it was agreed, that this should be our first inquiry. Some hasty and undigested thoughts, on a subject I had never before considered, which I set down against our next meeting, gave the first entrance into this discourse, which, having been thus begun by chance, was continued by entreaty; written by incoherent parcels; and, after long intervals of neglect, resumed again, as my humor or occasions permitted; and at last, in a retirement, where an attendance on my health gave me leisure, it was brought into that order thou now seest it.

This discontinued way of writing may have occasioned, besides others, two contrary faults; viz., that too little and too much may be said in it. If thou findest anything wanting, I shall be glad, that what I have writ gives thee any desire that I should have gone farther: if it seems too much to thee, thou must blame the subject; for when I first put pen to paper, I thought all I should have to say on this matter would have been contained in one sheet of paper; but the farther I went, the larger prospect I

had: new discoveries led me still on, and so it grew insensibly to the bulk it now appears in. I will not deny but possibly it might be reduced to a narrower compass than it is; and that some parts of it might be contracted; the way it has been writ in, by catches, and many long intervals of interruption, being apt to cause some repetitions. But, to confess the truth, I am now too lazy or too busy to make it shorter.

* * * I pretend not to publish this Essay for the information of men of large thoughts and quick apprehensions; to such masters of knowledge, I profess myself a scholar, and therefore warn them beforehand not to expect anything here but what, being spun out of my own coarse thoughts,¹ is fitted to men of my own size, to whom, perhaps, it will not be unacceptable that I have taken some pains to make plain and familiar to their thoughts some truths, which established prejudice or the abstractness of the ideas themselves, might render difficult. * * *

* * * The commonwealth of learning is not at this time without master-builders, whose mighty designs in advancing the sciences will leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity: but every one must not hope to be a Boyle or a Sydenham; and in an age that produces such masters as the great Huygenius, and the incomparable Mr. Newton, with some other of that strain,² it is ambition enough to be employed as an under-laborer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge; which certainly had been very much more advanced in the world, if the endeavors of ingenious and industrious men had not been much cumbered with the learned but frivolous use of uncouth, affected, or unintelligible terms introduced into the sciences, and there made an art of to that degree, that philosophy, which is nothing but the true knowledge of things, was thought unfit or incapable to be brought into well-bred company and polite conversation.³ Vague and insignificant forms of speech, and abuse of language, have so long passed for mysteries of science; and hard or misapplied words, with little or no meaning, have, by prescription, such a right to be mistaken for deep learning and height of speculation; that it will not be easy to persuade either those who speak or those who hear them, that they are but the covers of ignorance, and hindrance of true knowledge. * * *

The booksellers, preparing for the fourth edition of my Essay, gave me notice of it, that I might, if I had leisure, make any additions or

¹ Locke's mock-modest confession that his philosophy had been "spun out of his own coarse thoughts" gave rise to a good deal of critical ridicule; echoes of which are heard in the debate between the spider and the bee in Swift's *Battle of the Books*.

² Robert Boyle is the great Anglo-Irish chemist and physicist; Thomas Sydenham, a physician and authority on the cure of fevers; Christiaan Huygens was a Dutch mathematician and astronomer; and Newton is of course Sir Isaac. Locke's choice of scientists to illustrate the great minds of his time is certainly tendentious. A generation or two ear-

lier a list of "great men" would have consisted largely of theologians and perhaps lawyers.

³ Locke was tutor to Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, whose philosophical writings make of genteel social conversation and civilized good humor something like guides to ultimate truth. Whatever can't be spoken in a drawing room without exposing a gentleman to ridicule—so Shaftesbury comes close to saying—is not likely to be true. Locke's basic hostility to cant and jargon has been extended by Shaftesbury, but its original source is apparent.

alterations I should think fit. Whereupon I thought it convenient to advertise the reader, that besides several corrections I had made here and there, there was one alteration which it was necessary to mention, because it ran through the whole book, and is of consequence to be rightly understood. What I thereupon said, was this:—

“Clear and distinct ideas” are terms which, though familiar and frequent in men’s mouths, I have reason to think every one who uses does not perfectly understand. And possibly it is but here and there one who gives himself the trouble to consider them so far as to know what he himself or others precisely mean by them. I have therefore, in most places, chose to put “determinate” or “determined,” instead of “clear” and “distinct,” as more likely to direct men’s thoughts to my meaning in this matter. By those denominations, I mean some object in the mind, and consequently determined, i. e., such as it is there seen and perceived to be. This, I think, may fitly be called a “determinate” or “determined” idea, when such as it is at any time objectively in the mind, and so determined there, it is annexed, and without variation determined, to a name or articulate sound which is to be steadily the sign of that very same object of the mind, or determinate idea.

To explain this a little more particularly: By “determinate,” when applied to a simple idea, I mean that simple appearance which the mind has in its view, or perceives in itself, when that idea is said to be in it. By “determined,” when applied to a complex idea, I mean such an one as consists of a determinate number of certain simple or less complex ideas, joined in such a proportion and situation as the mind has before its view, and sees in itself, when that idea is present in it, or should be present in it when a man gives a name to it. I say “should be”; because it is not every one, nor perhaps any one, who is so careful of his language as to use no word till he views in his mind the precise determined idea which he resolves to make it the sign of. The want of this is the cause of no small obscurity and confusion in men’s thoughts and discourses.

I know there are not words enough in any language to answer all the variety of ideas that enter into men’s discourses and reasonings. But this hinders not but that when anyone uses any term, he may have in his mind a determined idea which he makes it the sign of, and to which he should keep it steadily annexed during that present discourse. Where he does not or cannot do this, he in vain pretends to clear or distinct ideas: it is plain his are not so; and therefore there can be expected nothing but obscurity and confusion, where such terms are made use of which have not such a precise determination.

Upon this ground I have thought “determined ideas” a way of speaking less liable to mistake than “clear and distinct”; and where men have got such determined ideas of all that they reason, inquire, or argue about, they will find a great part of their doubts and disputes at an end. The greatest part of the questions and controversies that perplex mankind, depending on the doubtful and uncertain use of words, or (which is the

same) indetermined ideas, which they are made to stand for: I have made choice of these terms to signify, 1. Some immediate object of the mind, which it perceives and has before it, distinct from the sound it uses as a sign of it. 2. That this idea, thus determined, i. e., which the mind has in itself, and knows and sees there, be determined without any change to that name, and that name determined to that precise idea. If men had such determined ideas in their inquiries and discourses, they would both discern how far their own inquiries and discourses went, and avoid the greatest part of the disputes and wranglings they have with others.

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1690, 1700

SIR ISAAC NEWTON

1642–1727

Isaac Newton was the posthumous son of a small farmer in Lincolnshire; as a boy, he invented machines, as an undergraduate he was making discoveries in optics and the higher mathematics, and in 1667, aged barely twenty-five, he was elected a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. It would be generous to describe intellectual life in Restoration universities as “torpid,” and Newton got little in the way of stimulus from his colleagues. Even the Royal Society, after an initial burst of activity in the 1660s, sank during the latter part of the century into lethargy and triviality. But Newton was a man whose mind worked incessantly and at the very highest level of insight; apart from specific discoveries in the fields of mathematics, physics, and astronomy, he generated an entire world view that was outdated only in the twentieth century by the work of Einstein. The importance of Newton’s thought cannot be described or even indicated here: interested readers should refer to a suitable history of philosophy or of scientific thought, or to a full-scale biography.

Much of Sir Isaac’s scientific work was reported in Latin, still the language of international scholarship; but when he chose, the great thinker could express himself in notably lucid and trenchant English. The first of his important experiments, having to do with light and color, took form as a letter to the Royal Society, which appeared in the *Society’s Journal*, dated February 19, 1672. The experiments and reasoning are described in language of perfect clarity; and when, as the last word of his summary, he drops a very heavy word indeed, he clinches the point like a carpenter nailing shut a box.

In point of fact, not all Newton’s conclusions in the *Letter* have held absolutely solid. But for a young man just five years out of college, his command of a rigorous experimental method is extraordinary. We are, evidently, in a world diametrically different from that of Sir Thomas Browne, who also thought himself a man of science.