JOHN LOCKE:
PHYSICIAN, PHILOSOPHER, AND POLITICAL THEORIST

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John Locke was one of the leading figures of his day: he was among the most important philosophers of the seventeenth century and, arguably, one of the great minds of all times. An astounding polymath, he was a philosopher, a political theorist and political activist, a linguist, and a physician. He lived and wrote before the specialization that characterizes modernity, a time when philosophers, scientists, theologians, and physicians all spoke more or less overlapping professional languages, understood one another, and often worked together in the universities and especially in the Royal Society. The Society was officially founded in 1660 as a “a Colledge for the Promoting of Physico-Mathematicall Experimentall Learning” by people who would eventually be numbered among Locke’s friends and invited him to join.

The seventeenth century was a period of profound change and what the vantage of hindsight suggests resembled intellectual frenzy. Oxford in the 1650s was at the center of much of this activity, and Locke was to become one of its most radical movers. Of course, we don’t know why some people advocate change and others resist it; biography has something to do with it, but we cannot come up with a general theory and so must tell individual stories that work and make sense and to which “Yes, but...” is not too frequent a response, a tactic that Locke himself urged in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding, asking his readers to consult their own experiences and humbly describing himself as an “under-laborer” who sought to understand as much as he could, knowing that comprehension of the entire universe was considerably beyond his skills – and everyone else’s as well, it turns out.

Locke was born in the west of England in 1632. He came from a Puritan – dissenting, non-Anglican – family and attended Westminster School during the later days of the bloody and terrifying English Civil War. In fact, he may have been in school nearby when King Charles I was beheaded on January 30, 1649. Locke entered Oxford in 1652 in company of friends and

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2 “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 others of that strain; it is ambition enough 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; which certainly had been very much more advanced in the world, if the endeavours of ingenious and industrious men had not been much cumbered with the learned but frivolous use of uncoutch, 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 uncapable to be brought into well-bred company, and polite conversation.”

former schoolmates with interests in medicine, a field that was changing perhaps much faster than any other scientific study. It was moving from a theoretical study and activity in which logical principles dictated diagnosis and treatment to the chemistry-based medicine (known by medical historians as “iatrochemistry”) that Locke studied and which, in his vision, would ultimately give place to what we today call “clinical medicine.”

Medical practice for Locke should consist, loosely speaking, of singular examinations and diagnoses without reliance on pre-conceived theories. There is obviously something problematic about this recommendation in its baldest form, for no clinical – or “bedside,” in the words of Kenneth Dewhursrt, Locke’s medical biographer – examination (or any other professional evaluation, for that matter) can reasonably be expected to take place in an intellectual and experiential vacuum: we always bring ourselves and our knowledge to what we observe and analyze.

In this move, Locke was encouraged and taught by his friend and mentor, Thomas Sydenham, one of the pioneers of clinical medicine. Although he had long been headed in that direction, this transformation in Locke’s outlook was completed in 1668 when, after leaving Oxford for London, he became Sydenham’s associate and eventually ministered to his own patients.

My interest is in Locke’s social and political thought and in his philosophy, in three bodies of work: the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (published 1690), his most important work, which laid the foundations for modern empiricism and the experiential basis of knowledge and understanding; the *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), which is the bedrock of modern liberal constitutionalism; and the *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) and its defenses, which are strong, early, and influential calls for the separation of church and state.

The *Essay* is a brilliant and innovative examination of the nature and sources of human knowledge; it encapsulates, summarizes, and, in my judgment, emerged from even as it offered bases for the rest of Locke’s concerns. He worked on it intermittently from the 1660s until its publication, frequently discussing it with his friends, often altering and adding to it, and producing at least three fully revised versions of the text. The domain of the *Essay* is the things we are capable of knowing, what it means to know, and how we come to know and understand. The book’s arguments are often dependent on the activities of children, whom Locke observed and studied throughout his life; the ways they learn provided evidence for many of his claims and conclusions.

The “under-laborer” humility is immediately followed by a meticulous and devastating attack on innate or inborn ideas that is anything but humble. Innatism was a psychological notion that there are substantive ideas that naturally exist in the human mind altogether prior to and independently of direct experience. Belief in innate ideas was widespread in the late seventeenth century, and

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2My long-time interest in Locke – I have worked on and worried over him the whole of my professional life, more than 50 years – began in high school, when I took time off from science fiction and baseball to discover that the *Two Treatises* played an important role in shaping the Declaration of Independence.
that belief colored much philosophical reasoning. It was rooted in theology and was seen by Locke as a major obstacle to intellectual advancement as well as to spiritual understanding. While the mind and the intellect are endowed with reason and the ability to grasp self-evidence, he argued, substantive knowledge and ideas enter as a consequence of experience — where they are acted on, clarified, arranged, and even rearranged by reason — not by the inherent structure of the understanding itself. Pushed by Locke as far as he thought possible, the “human understanding” that emerged in the Essay was constrained negatively by our finite capacities but ultimately rescued by reliance on God, whose existence is undeniable, whose knowledge and powers are infinite, and in whose mind all makes sense in ways that are often beyond human comprehension.

The Two Treatises, not so evidently important for our immediate purposes, is built on a conception of “natural rights,” rights of possession and ownership and rights of resistance and revolution in particular. The end of his argument is modern constitutionalism, that is, the doctrine that governments are limited, that officials are to be held accountable when they overstep those limits, and that in the final analysis, the wills of individual people determine both the ends that government should serve and the legitimacy of official actions. In many respects, Locke was politically the most optimistic of his contemporaries, for he believed — based on his experiences — that rights of personal judgment and resistance would not lead to chaos and frequent revolutions but, on the contrary, would actually strengthen the bonds of civil society.

The toleration writings, also tangential, are among the earliest attempts we have to set forth a conception of government and politics suitable for a society that contains multiple religious denominations and, in consequence, to argue for the total separation of religion from politics. The prevailing wisdom in Locke’s day was that an official or “established” religion was the surest way to preserve the political order: the common body of religious beliefs bound the members to one another, protected the fundamental constitution, and helped preserve order. But the Protestant Reformation had destroyed forever the possibility of religious uniformity. Long before we had the terms “multicultural,” “pluralistic,” and “diverse” to characterize societies, theological England was all these things. It was a Humpty Dumpty world that no one could reassemble, and the general responses of those in charge moved from failed attempts to force everyone back into a single, unified Church of England going back to the sixteenth century, thorough persecution of dissenters from the Establishment — also unsuccessful — to grudging “toleration” but without political entitlements. It was the genius of Locke — based on what he seen in the world and fortified by his philosophic empiricism (which, as I shall argue, was bolstered by his medical knowledge and opinions) — to appreciate the need for an understanding of governance that incorporated the sectarian multiplicity that was anathema to so many of his contemporaries. It was a conception that was at one with the constitutionalism of the Two Treatises.

I knew that there also was an important medical and scientific interest that ran throughout Locke’s life: he was trained as a physician at Oxford and continued to practice medicine and study science, often in conjunction with and under the patronage and tutelage of some of the leading physicians and scientists in England: Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and Thomas Sydenham. His journals and notebooks — all carefully preserved — are filled with medical notes, careful measurements, jottings, and diagnoses. He played a major role in treating the liver
ailment of his patron, Anthony Ashley Cooper (Lord Ashley and later first Earl of Shaftesbury, the name by which he is generally known), an important political leader, founder of the Whigs, opponent of the Stuart monarchy in late 1670s and 1680s, and, more than likely, an advocate of revolution against the growing power of the reigning Stuarts. Finally, Locke wrote an interesting if somewhat obscure and unfinished tract on medical practice in 1669, *De Arte Medica*, that has been attributed to Sydenham, but the most recent, and in my opinion definitive, scholarship confirms Locke’s authorship.5

I had never paid much attention to the physician side of Locke’s life but had simply regarded it as interesting aspect of his biography and a further sign of his widely-ranging interests, astounding and learned figure that he was. I was very pleased when I was invited to talk about Locke and medicine, for it provided an opportunity for me to fill in some gaps in my knowledge and to flesh out a bit of Locke’s biography that I had not previously examined.

The task turned out to be more complicated than I had anticipated. Medical history requires a genuine understanding of medicine and stands apart from intellectual history and even from the history of science. Locke scholars have tended to treat this part of Locke’s life as little more than a biographical sideline. Although some have seen relationships among his understandings of what physicians should do, his veneration of science, and his empirical philosophy, medicine has almost always been regarded as illustrative rather than determinative. It is not my intention to start a new project – for you or for myself – but to try to find a larger role for the medicine in Locke’s life and his intellectual development.

I am persuaded that all these activities and concerns are of a piece and that there is a coherence to his writings; that coherence, that unity, is his life-long commitment to experience and to empiricism and his suspicion of theory and of what he called “speculative.” All this can be seen by examining the aspects of Locke’s medical career that I mentioned above: his Oxford training and medical practice, his service to Ashley (Shaftesbury), and his medical tract (which is also related to his work with Sydenham).

Oxford, Medicine, and Observation

When Locke entered Oxford in 1652, he did so in the company of friends who intended to study medicine, and they persuaded him to join them. The field was rapidly changing at that time. The influence of Baconian empiricism was beginning to be felt, and chemistry was emerging as the center of medical studies. After completing his B.A. in 1656 and achieving the M.A. (which was not an earned degree but, rather, was awarded two years after the B.A.) in 1658, he remained at the University where he delivered a series of lectures on natural law as part of the disputation with new recipients of the baccalaureate degree.6 He continued to pursue his interests in chemistry and medicine and in 1660 met and began to study with Robert Boyle.

Locke was on the verge of a scientific career, but his life changed in 1665 when he accepted an appointment as secretary to a diplomatic mission to Brandenburg. His travels took him to Cleves, from which he wrote a number of scientific letters to Boyle that reflected his observational and experiential methods. One of the most significant of those was not about science at all but about the tolerance of religious differences that he witnessed:

“The town is little, and not very strong or handsome; the buildings and streets irregular; nor is there a greater uniformity in their religion, three professions being publicly allowed: the Calvinists are more than the Lutherans, and the Catholics more than both (but no papist bean any office) besides some few Anabaptists, who are not publicly tolerated. But yet this distance in their churches gets not into their houses. They quietly permit one another to choose their way to heaven; for I cannot observe any quarrels or animosities amongst them upon the account of religion.

“This good correspondence is owing partly to the power of the magistrate, and partly to the prudence and good nature of the people who (as I find by enquiry) entertain different opinions, without any secret hatred or rancour.”

What is significant about this series of observations and the conclusions Locke drew from them is that just five years earlier, in a pair of unpublished essays on the powers of the civil magistrate to enforce religious uniformity, he had been deeply skeptical about the ability of a society to withstand significant theological differences and had argued for extensive magisterial authority. The experience in Cleves changed his judgment, and within two years, he would write the first draft of what was to become his attack on religious compulsion, arguing that members of a political society could co-exist despite their religious differences.

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8Published from the manuscripts as John Locke, Two Tracts on Government, ed. Philip Abrams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

9Also unpublished in Locke’s lifetime but now edited as An Essay on Toleration and available in several sources, most conveniently in John Locke, Political Essays, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 134-159. The received interpretation of this essay and its relationship to the Two Tracts is that the earlier writings are “authoritarian” and that Locke had changed his mind by 1667 (see, for instance, the introduction by the editor to the Two Tracts). I am persuaded on the contrary that the differences between the two positions was empirical not conceptual and was simply a matter of how much diversity – to use the modern term – in Locke’s judgment a society could contain. The Cleves experience showed him much more flexibility and adaptability than he had originally thought possible. But his overall position remained constant throughout his life: it was the job of the civil magistrate to protect society from threats to its “common good,” as he put it, and even in the radical Letter Concerning Toleration he acknowledged the power of the magistrate to constrain threatening religious practices, but only on political and never religious grounds. I have discussed this in two essays, “Toleration, Revolution, and Judgment in the Development of Locke’s Political Thought,” Political Science, 40 (1988), 84-96; and “John Locke and Religious Toleration,” The Revolution of 1688-89: Changing Perspectives, ed. Lois G. Schwoerer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 147-164.
By 1665/66, Locke had returned to England and was assigned by Boyle to take barometric readings in the lead mines of Somerset, his home county and in which he owned property. (In the end, he was not able to take the readings because the miners were suspicious of his equipment, so Locke took them from hilltops.) The plague of 1666 sent Locke and Boyle back to Oxford, where their association became closer. Locke rejected the pleas of his friends that he accept ordination in order to remain at the University. That same year, Locke moved from medical chemistry to medical practice as the assistant of the famed Oxford physician David Thomas.

**Shaftesbury**

One of Locke’s first patients was the rising politician Anthony Ashley Cooper, who had come to Oxford to see Thomas and for the waters. But Thomas had to be away and instructed Locke to attend to Shaftesbury who was impressed with Locke’s conversational skills as well as his medical abilities. At Shaftesbury’s invitation, Locke left Oxford for London in 1667 to become his personal physician and a member of his household at Exeter House, more or less in the role of a general secretary. This move took place after Locke failed – or refused – to take the medical examination and again refused to take a divinity degree, but his fellowship was extended by royal dispensation. It was in London that Locke would eventually begin his association with Sydenham, whose medical practice pulled him from the laboratory and from chemistry to the patients’ bedsides for the study of medicine.

Shaftesbury, who had become more involved in Parliament and politics, was Chancellor of the Exchequer, which increased Locke’s non-medical activities (about which he complained to Boyle). Shaftesbury had suffered from an abdominal abscess since 1661, and it was that ailment that had originally propelled him to Oxford to see Thomas and for the waters. By June of 1668, the abscess required surgical drainage, which Locke supervised and on which he made extensive notes. Based on those notes, William Osler in 1900 diagnosed the abscess as hydatids of the liver. In order to keep the drainage site opened, a candle was inserted; it was soon replaced by a silver tube, and by September, Locke decided that the tube should remain in place so long as the abscess continued to drain. Shaftesbury wore the tube for the rest of his life, washing and rinsing it in red wine every other day. He believed that he owed his life to Locke, who, more trusted now than ever, continued to work with him on politics and affairs of state.

Also in 1668, Locke was elected to membership in the Royal Society largely through the efforts of people he had met as a member of the Shaftesbury household.

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10 William Osler, “John Locke as a Physician,” reprinted from The Lancet, 20 October 1900, in the author’s *An Alabama Student and Other Biographical Essays* (London: Henry Frowde, 1909), p. 89. After quoting extensively from Locke’s notes, Osler went on to say that Shaftesbury’s surgery is “one of the first cases on record in which the abscess was opened.”

11 Locke’s unpublished 1667 toleration essay and his *Two Treatises* were both originally drafted for Shaftesbury, the first during what would ultimately be a failed campaign to pass toleration legislation and the latter as the theoretical support for Shaftesbury’s attempt in 1681-82 to keep James II from succeeding to the throne by revolutionary means if necessary. That attempt also failed, but when there was a successful revolution in 1688-89 – the so-called Glorious (or Bloodless) Revolution – Locke’s tract was published as a defense.
De Arte Medica

This tract, written in Locke’s hand and found in manuscript among Locke’s papers in the Shaftesbury collection at the Public Record Office, has long been assumed to have been written by Locke, but there are also long-standing claims that Sydenham is actually the author – his handwriting appears at various places in the manuscript – and that Locke was his amanuensis. Careful textual analysis has confirmed Locke’s authorship,¹² and I want to add some substantive and theoretical observations to that analysis.

The document is highly empirical and opens with an insistence that physicians should learn their skills through experience rather than from “remote speculative principles”:

“Length of life with freedome from infirmity and pain as much as the constitution of our fraile composure is capable of is of soe great concernment to man kinde, that there can scarce be found any greater undertakeing then the profession to cure diseases, nor is there any art that soe well deserves all the care and industry and observation of its professors to improve it and bring it to perfection, which I doubt not but in many parts and to a great degree it is capable of. . . . .yet I think I may confidently affirme, that those hypothesis which tied the long and elaborate discourses of the ancientts, and suffered not their enquirys to extend them selves any farther then how the phenomena of diseases might be explaind by these doctrines and the rules of practise accommodated to the receivd principles, has at last but confined and narrowed mens thoughts, amused their understanding with fine but uselesse speculations, and diverted their enquirys from the true and advantageous knowledg of things. The notions that have been raised into mens heads by remote speculative principles though true are like the curious imagery men sometimes see in the clouds which they are pleased to call the heavens. . . “¹³

And to clinch his argument for observation, he wrote:

“These speculative theorems doe as little advantage the physick as food of men. And he that thinks he came to be skild in diseases by studying the doctrine of the humors, that the notions of obstructions and putrefaction assists him in the cure of feavers, or that by the acquaintance he has with sulphur and mercury he was lead into this useful discovery, that what medecines and regimen as certainly kill in the latter end of some feavers as they cure in others, may as rationaly beleive that his Cooke owes his skill in rosting and boyling to his study of the elements and that his speculations about fire and water have taught him that the same seething liquors that boiles the egg hard makes the hen tender. The begining and

¹²See the articles by Walmsley and Anstey and Burrows cited above. The latter presents the most thorough textual analyses published to date.

¹³[John Locke], De Arte Medica (1669), as printed in Kenneth Dewhurst, Dr. Thomas Sydenham, 1624-1689; His Life and Original Writings (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 79 and 80-81, emphasis added. Dewhurst is among those who believe that Sydenham is the author, so there is some irony in the fact that I am using his edition of the text.
improvement of useful arts, and the assistances of human life, have all sprung from industry and observation; true knowledg grew first in the world by experience and rationall operations; and had this method beene continued and all mens thoughts beene impoid to adde their own tryalls to the observation of others noe question physick, as well as many other arts, had been in a far better condition then now it is.”

No one but Locke could have written these passages, the same John Locke who wrote in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding:

“I have been forced to take several things for granted, which is hardly avoidable to any one, whose task is to shew the falsehood or improbability of any tenet; it happening in controversial discourses as it does in assaulting of towns, where, if the ground be but firm whereon the batteries are erected, there is no farther enquiry of whom it is borrowed, nor whom it belongs to, so it affords but a fit rise for the present purpose. But in the future part of this discourse, designing to raise an edifice uniform and consistent with itself, as far as my own experience and observation will assist me, I hope to erect it on such a basis, that I shall not need to shore it up with props and buttresses, leaning on borrowed or begged foundations; or at least, if mine prove a castle in the air, I will endeavour it shall be all of a piece, and hang together. Wherein I warn the reader not to expect undeniable cogent demonstrations, unless I may be allowed the privilege, not seldom assumed by others, to take my principles for granted: And then, I doubt not, but I can demonstrate too. All that I shall say for the principles I proceed on is, that I can only appeal to men's own unprejudiced experience and observation, whether they be true or no; and this is enough for a man who professes no more, than to lay down candidly and freely his own conjectures, concerning a subject lying somewhat in the dark, without any other design than an unbiased enquiry after truth.”

14[Locke], De Arte Medica, p. 81.

15Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, I, iv, §25. The rejection of the speculative as a suitable category for social and political oversight is a theme in the Letter Concerning Toleration as well, which is a further argument for Locke’s authorship of De Arte Medica. I have not identified any other seventeenth-century figure who used this terminology in this manner.