

LECTURE XV.

LOCKE. HIS LIFE.

Locke: his biography.—Sprang from a liberal family.—His first studies.—Descartes disgusts him with scholasticism.—He pays particular attention to medicine.—He enters into the political world; his friendship with Shaftesbury.—His varied fortunes.—Driven from the University of Oxford.—His refuge in Holland.—Revolution of 1688.—Favor of Locke until his death.—His character: disinterestedness, prudence, firmness, tolerance.—Review of his works.—The *Essay on the Human Understanding*.

LOCKE is the father of the whole sensualistic school of the eighteenth century. He is, incontestably, in time as well as in genius, the first metaphysician of this school. And, as we have said, morals, æsthetics, politics, are merely applications of metaphysics, applications which are themselves the bases of the history of philosophy. Moreover, Locke was not simply a metaphysician; he himself carried his metaphysics into the science of government, into religion, into political economy: his works of this class have served as a foundation to analogous works of the sensualistic school. In order to understand this school, it is then necessary to have a thorough understanding of the metaphysics of Locke; for this reason I propose to examine him with the most scrupulous care, and at sufficient length.

But before exposing to you the philosophy of Locke, it is important that you should know what was the life and character of this man, who has exercised such a powerful influence over the moral and intellectual destiny of so great a number of his fellow-beings.

John Locke* was born at Wrington, a few leagues distant from

* We have made use of the Life of Locke, written in French, by his intimate friend Leclerc, and inserted in the 4th vol. of the *Bibliothèque Choisie*, 1705; of the Eulogy of Locke by Coste, contained in a letter to the author of

Bristol, in the county of the same name, on the 29th of August, 1632. Very little is known of his family, except that his father was the clerk of a justice of the peace, that he took part in the political troubles of 1640, and even served as a captain in the parliamentary army under Colonel Alexander Popham. Young Locke pursued his first studies in Westminster College, London. Here he remained until the age of nineteen or twenty years, until 1651 or 1652, when he went to the University of Oxford, to the identical Christ's College where, at a later period, he was examiner.

The University of Oxford was then, as it appears to be now, much attached to the cause of the past: and the cause of the past, in philosophy, was then peripatetic scholasticism. A single man turned it aside from this sterile study, and this man was our Descartes, the common master of all the great minds of his times, even the most opposite. Locke, in reading the works of Descartes, admired the perfect clearness of his exposition, without adopting his system; and he became disgusted with the barbarous philosophy that was taught at Oxford; so that Descartes has the honor and the merit of having contributed to the formation of his most redoubtable adversary.* Locke received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1655, and that of Master of Arts in 1658. The study to which he applied himself particularly was medicine. He did not take the degree of doctor; nor did he practise, on account of the extreme feebleness of his health; neither had he any professorship; but procured at Christ's College a simple benefice, that is, a title, that of fellow, a prebend without functions. But although he had never practised nor professed medicine, Locke acquired considerable reputation at

the *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres*, and published in these *Nouvelles*, February, 1705; of the life of Locke in the classical edition of his works; finally, of the excellent chapter of Dugald Stewart on Locke, in his preliminary discourse in the *ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA*, *On the progress of metaphysical and moral sciences in Europe after the revival of letters*.

* This curious fact is attested to by Leclerc, who declares that he received it himself from Locke. Dugald Stewart has repeated it.

Oxford, if we may judge by the testimony of one of the most skilful practitioners of that period, Sydenham, who in the dedication of his *Observations* on Acute Diseases*, congratulates himself on the approbation of Locke. Such were his occupations until the year 1664. Observe the nature of these occupations and their influence on the direction of the mind. The study of medicine supposes that of the physical and natural sciences; it develops the taste and the talent for observation, and, in this respect, it may be said that the study of medicine is an excellent preparation for metaphysics; but, it must be added, for a well-formed mind,† for when we are continually surveying phenomena of organic life, it is easy, it is natural to be surprised and carried away by the appearance, and to confound with these phenomena other phenomena which are very different; and I pray you not to forget that, in fact, in the review which I have presented to you of all the philosophical schools, we have seen sensualism and empiricism, as well as skepticism, often proceed from schools of natural philosophers and physicians: call to mind, in antiquity, Sextus Ænesidemus, and more than one successor of Aristotle.

In 1664, Locke accompanied William Swan, as secretary, to the Court of Berlin. At the end of one year he returned to Oxford, and it was there, in 1666, at the age of thirty-four years, that he made an acquaintance which decided his destiny. Ashley Cooper, afterwards Earl of Shaftesbury, having come to Oxford for his health, was introduced to Locke; and after having consulted him as a physician, he became attached to him as a friend, and never did they separate. Locke shared the prosperity of his friend, but he also shared his adversity; he joined him in his exile, he closed his eyes in a foreign land, and he undertook, at a later period, to write his life and vindicate his memory.

Who was Shaftesbury? History seems to point him out as a man of strong mind, without settled convictions, as an ambitious

* Published in 1676.

† In regard to this, see Dugald Stewart's art. discourse already cited.

politician, who more than once changed his position, but an ambitious person of great talent, and even of great character. A strange friend for a philosopher! I give you this opinion as that of historians, and not as my own; I have not sufficiently studied the affairs of this period to pass a safe opinion on the men who took part in it. I know that in these revolutionary times the same end was often pursued by the most different ways; I find no essential contradiction in all the changes with which Shaftesbury is reproached; it is possible that, under the appearance of intrigue, and with intrigue itself, there was in him a sincere patriotism, and I confess that the friendship and high esteem of a man as sensible and as virtuous as Locke, protect, in my opinion, the doubtful memory of this ardent and uneasy statesman, at one time engaged with Lord Falkland in the party of the court, then united with that of the parliament, afterwards lending a hand in the re-establishment of Charles II., and minister of this prince; finally, conspiring perhaps against him, and leaving his country to die in Holland.

Ashley drew the young physician from the peaceful solitude of Oxford, and placed him in the brilliant circles of London. Locke there became connected with the most important personages, Lord Halifax, the Duke of Buckingham, and the Earl of Northumberland, whom he accompanied to France in 1668. A few years after, in 1674, having gone to Montpellier for his health, which had always been very delicate, he made the acquaintance of Lord Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, to whom he afterwards dedicated his great work on the *Human Understanding*.

On returning from Montpellier, he passed through Paris and formed connections with some of the learned men, and, among others, with the traveller Bernier, the Calvinist Justel, who afterwards, being obliged to quit France, became a bookseller to the King of England, and with the antiquary Toinard, with whom he held a regular* correspondence during all his life.

* A great part of this unpublished correspondence is in the hands of M. Brunet, the learned author of the *Manuel du Libraire*.

Ashley was one of the eight lords to whom Charles II. conceded the territory of Carolina. These eight proprietors applied to Locke for a constitution, and it appears that this constitution, which I have not read, was much more favorable to the rights of the proprietors than to those of the inhabitants, since in 1719 the inhabitants demanded the repeal of this constitution which had been given to them by the liberal Ashley and the philosopher Locke, and besought the crown to take them again under its immediate authority. In 1668 Locke was named member of the Royal Society of Sciences. In 1672, Ashley having been made Earl of Shaftesbury, and having been elevated to the dignity of Lord Chancellor of England, gave to Locke an important office, that of secretary of presentations. A ministerial revolution in 1673 deprived the minister of his office, and the philosopher of his situation. In 1679 Shaftesbury was again restored to favor, and his renewed favor was shared by the philosopher; finally, renewed disgrace fell upon them both, more severely, too, than before, and much more prolonged. The Earl of Shaftesbury, thrown into the ranks of the opposition, was accused of having carried opposition even to faction, was imprisoned, placed in the Tower of London, compelled afterwards to leave England and take refuge in Holland, where he died in 1683. Locke followed him thither and inherited all the hostility of the opposite party. The Court of Charles II. determined that the University of Oxford should dispossess him of his employment in Christ's College; and as Dean Fell made some resistance to this, on the twelfth of November, 1684, a warrant signed *Charles II.* struck Locke from the list of the members of the University of Oxford, without judgment or previous inquest. The hatred of his enemies went still farther. It was the time when the Earl of Monmouth was engaged in foreign conspiracies against the throne of the Stuarts. Locke was implicated in these conspiracies; his extradition* was demanded, and if he had been delivered up, he would

* See Leclerc for the details of this affair.

doubtless have ascended the scaffold and closed his life like Sydney. Fortunately, he had found friends in Holland: he concealed himself, and suffered the storm to pass. Some time after, with some theologians and physicians of Holland, he formed a small philosophical society, which bore its fruit. Among these men were Leclerc, the author of the *Bibliothèque Universelle*, and Limborch, a Protestant minister, a remonstrant and Arminian, men penetrated, like Locke, with the liberal spirit which prevailed in religion and politics. The first efforts of Locke as a writer were there made, his *Methodus Adversariorum*, inserted in the journal of Leclerc, and his letter to Limborch on Toleration,* a veritable manifesto of the persecuted minority. There, too, he completed the great philosophical work which he had undertaken many years before, the work entitled the *Essay on the Human Understanding*; but at first he published a mere abridgment, a sort of prospectus, in the *Bibliothèque Universelle*, of January, 1688.

In the mean time the revolution of 1688 took place. You can easily conceive that Locke, who in his exile had been, as it were, the intellectual chief of the whole persecuted party, received at London in 1689 the most honorable reception. King William accorded to him his entire confidence; and, if his health, and perhaps the modesty of his tastes, had not been opposed to it, Locke would have acquired the highest political fortune. He was offered the appointment of minister to the Court of Vienna or to that of Berlin, or to any other court that he might choose.† He contented himself with a more humble employment, but still one of some importance, first with that of member of the Board of Commissioners of Appeals; afterwards with that of member of the Board of Commissioners of Trade. Besides his great work

* The following is the title: *Epistola ad clarissimum virum T. A. R. P. T. O. L. A.*, scripta a P. A. P. O. J. L. A.; that is, *Theologia apud remonstrantes professorum, tyrannidis osorem, Limburgum, Amstelodunensem, scripta a pacis amico, persecutionis osore, Johanne Lockio, Anglo.*

† See Leclerc.

on the *Human Understanding*, he published several writings which aided powerfully in strengthening and popularizing in England the constitutional government of 1688, that government which conciliates, at the same time, the tutelar power of the crown and the rights of the people; that government which, in the eighteenth century, inspired Montesquieu, and at a later period served as a model for that which sprang from the French Revolution. Locke is therefore in this respect one of the benefactors of humanity. About the year 1700 the condition of his health compelled him to renounce a political career; he retired to Oates, in the county of Essex, to the family of Lady Masham, daughter of the celebrated Doctor Cudworth, an accomplished person and much distinguished for nobility of character and rare qualities of mind. The last years of his life, completely occupied in preparation for death, were passed between the reading of the Holy Scriptures and the services of friendship. Thus he died at the age of seventy-three years, on the 28th of October, 1704.

Such was the life of Locke: let us now examine his character. All his contemporaries, and, what is better, all the known actions of his life testify, that no one was more sincerely and constantly attached to truth, virtue, and the cause of human liberty. He loved and served this noble cause; he even had the honor of suffering for it, but without ever departing from the most perfect moderation. Locke was, in some sort, born a sage. Moderation and cautiousness were, as it were, in his temperament. It may be said that he had something of Socrates, or at least of Franklin, in him. I shall not blame him for having loved his country so much as to be associated with its destinies; but those who would blame a philosopher for having left his solitude, and having mingled in public affairs, cannot deny at least that he therein showed the greatest disinterestedness. In 1700, when on account of his health he resigned his place as one of the Commissioners of Trade, the king wished to continue his salary, which was very considerable,* and at the same time dispense with his