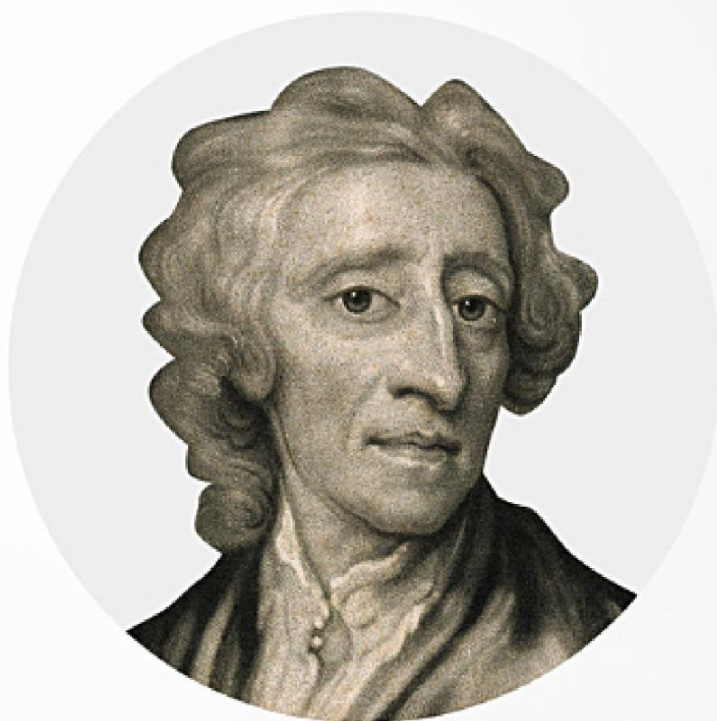


JOHN LOCKE

The Father of Modern Liberalism

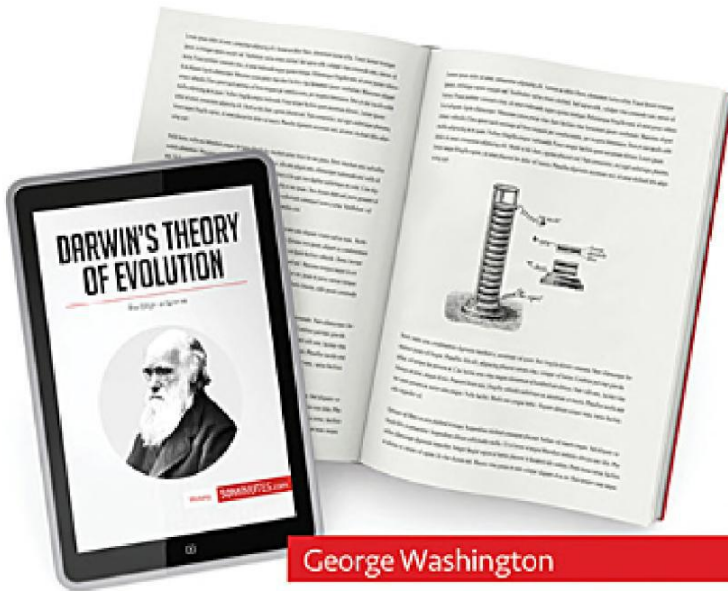


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JOHN LOCKE

KEY INFORMATION

- **Born:** 29 August 1632 in Wrington, Somerset.
- **Died:** 28 October 1704 in Oates, Essex.
- **Context:** The Glorious Revolution and the English Civil War (1642-1689).
- **Main areas of interest:**
 - empiricism
 - social contract theory
 - liberalism
 - the separation of church and state
 - governmental separation of powers.

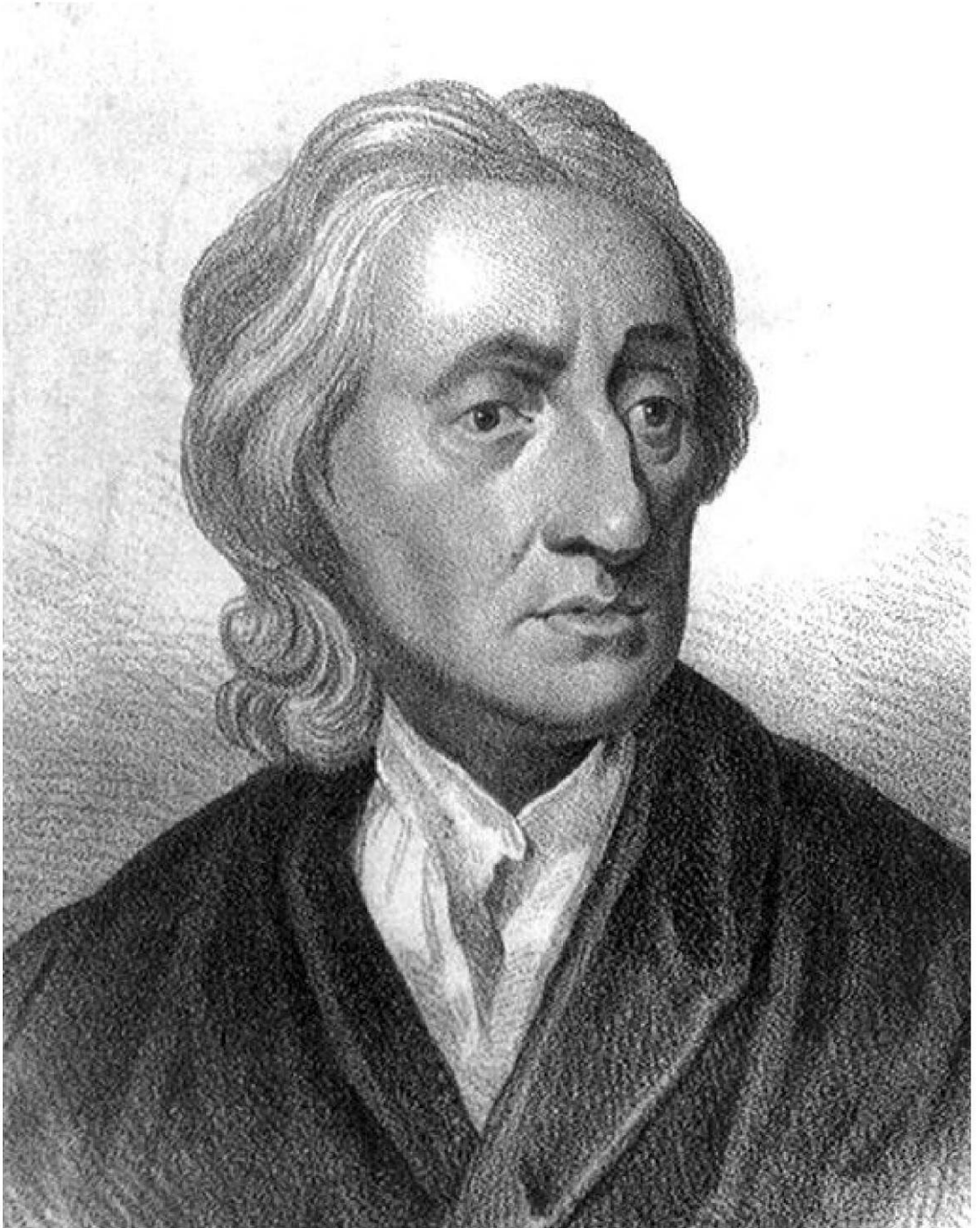
INTRODUCTION

John Locke was a philosopher and scientist, and is considered to be one of the greatest 17th-century English thinkers. However, his reflections on political philosophy were what he spent most of his time on and owed most of his reputation to.

Drawing inspiration from the works of his predecessors, such as Thomas Hobbes (English philosopher, 1588-1679) and René Descartes (French physicist and philosopher, 1596-1650), Locke developed his thoughts, using empiricism as a starting point. He cultivated a philosophy according to which senses and experience are behind all knowledge of the world. Secondly, human beings can only develop the understanding needed to comprehend complex ideas on the basis of this empiricism.

Additionally, the political and religious turmoil that marked his era and that personally affected him caused him to envisage a new conception of power, exercised by the people and for the people. He also campaigned for the separation of church and state, as well as for religious tolerance. His reflections developed over time, and he published his major works in relatively quick succession: *A Letter Concerning Toleration* and *Two Treatises of Government* were published in 1689, and *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was published in 1690. Locke thus developed a philosophy whose influence is only comparable to that of Plato (Greek philosopher, 427-348/7 BC), and which continues to be the basis of our political systems and of liberalism.

| BIOGRAPHY



A TASTE FOR LEARNING

John Locke was born on 29 August 1632 in Wrington, near Bristol, and spent his childhood nearby. His family were Puritans of the lower nobility. His father was a landowner and a lawyer, and his grandfather was a fabric merchant. Locke had a strict and austere education. In 1647, he entered the prestigious Westminster School in central London, thanks to the influence of Alexander Popham (English politician and Member of Parliament, 1605-1669), under whose command his father had served during the First Civil War (1642-1646). There he learnt ancient languages, including Hebrew, which was reserved for the school's best-performing pupils. However, he did not particularly enjoy it.

In 1652, again with Popham's support, Locke won a scholarship to study at Christ Church, Oxford University, with a view to becoming a minister. However, he disliked the teaching he received there and was more interested in the new sciences: physics, astrophysics and mathematics. But medicine was what interested him the most, and he began to study it keenly. Locke revealed himself to be a true, curious intellectual who would more happily focus on studying than on anything else throughout his life.

In the early 1660s, he also taught at the Church School as a professor of Greek, rhetoric and moral philosophy.

THE BEGINNINGS OF A POLITICAL FIGHT

In the meantime, in 1659 he wrote a letter in which he protested against excessive religious tolerance and criticised Catholics for obeying both the Church and the state. Subsequently, however, he changed his mind during a diplomatic mission to the state of Brandenburg (in modern-day Germany) in late 1665, where he observed that the peaceful coexistence of religions was not only possible, but also beneficial.

In 1666, he met Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper (1621-1683), who was appointed 1st Earl of Shaftesbury in 1672, and became a close friend of his. Locke acted as his personal doctor and political advisor from 1667 onwards. Cooper was strongly opposed to the policies of English King Charles II (1630-1685), for whom he acted as Lord Chancellor. In his opinion, religious persecution was dividing the nation, encouraging emigration and harming trade. Locke was mindful of these ideas and, at his mentor's request, wrote his *Essay Concerning Toleration* (1667), a sort of first draft for his later *Letter Concerning Toleration*. He thus began his reflections on the political and religious issues that were tormenting England and published writings through which he protested against the predominance of religion. He also met