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Course

Date

John Locke and Political Power

In the period generally described as the Enlightenment there were two opposing philosophical views on knowledge: the empiricist view and the rationalist view. Generally speaking, the rationalists held the view that knowledge was something innate, independent of exterior sensation. This view is exemplified by Descartes' idea that the only thing we can be sure of is that we exist. The proof of this is that the very fact that when I ask the question – Do I exist? – I have proof of my existence. Rationalists like Descartes were very sceptical of the knowledge that could be transmitted via the senses because the senses could mislead. He gives the example of a person suffering from jaundice, who might see everything tinged with yellow.

The empiricists, on the other hand, believed that all knowledge was transmitted to the mind via the senses. Locke belonged to this school of thought. He describes the mind of the human being as akin to that of a blank sheet of paper. From the very beginning of our existence, as babies, we experience the world, and these experiences are written onto our minds as if a pen was writing on the piece of paper. The experiences are cumulative and so our knowledge of the world derives from these accumulated experiences of life.

It could be argued that Locke's philosophical position was independent of his political views. Locke believed that the sovereign only had the right to rule if he ruled justly. There was a kind of social contract between the sovereign and the people. If, however, the sovereign took unjust measures, he would be in breach of that contract and, therefore, the people would have a

right to revolt against him. Locke's arguments came in direct opposition to those of Robert Filmer who, in *Patriarcha, or The Natural Power of Kings* (1680) argued that the sovereign ruled by divine right. The important thing to note here is that these arguments were taking place in the late seventeenth century, long before the Enlightenment proper is supposed to have started. But the seventeenth century is notable for the huge advances in science that were taking place. Galileo had effectively challenged the teachings of the Church on the movements of the planets. Church dogma was allied to the Aristotelian belief that the sun was the centre of the universe and that on the outer rings sat the heavenly bodies – angels and the like. Although Galileo was only picking up where Copernicus had left off, he was a much more influential figure than the reclusive Polish canon of the church of Frombork. The power of the Church depended on the acceptance of Church dogma so that science posed a clear threat to this. Filmer's affirmation – that the sovereign ruled by divine right – fit neatly into the Church's way of presenting its view of the world. The English had, however, already undermined the power of the Catholic Church a century before, when Henry VIII declared himself head of the Church of England. And in the middle of the seventeenth century, the English Civil War and the deposition and beheading of Charles I illustrate that attitudes towards any church and even the sovereign could easily change.

Some of the great thinkers of the modern age were deeply religious – Kepler, for example, struggled with the fact that he had undeniable proof that the planets moved in ellipsoids rather than Aristotelian circles. Berkeley, an empiricist, was an Irish cleric. But there was more room for religious faith for the rationalists than for the empiricists. Having found proof of his own existence, Descartes struggled to find proof for the existence of God. He found it by arguing that he could not believe that God would allow a demon to fool his senses. Taken to an extreme, empiricism would allow you to disbelieve anything that you could not verify with your senses.

Locke is quoted as saying, 'How a rational Man ... that should enquire and know for himself, can content himself with a Faith or Religion taken upon trust ... is to me astonishing' (Porter, 2001, 62).

So the idea that kings had a right to rule because God had granted them that right would be high up on the list of the unverifiable. In *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke takes issue with Filmer's position, equating it with a kind of apology for slavery. He sums up Filmer's system as:

That all government is absolute monarchy.

And the ground he builds on, is this,

That no man is born free. (Locke, bk. 1, ch. 1, par. 2)

The *Two Treatises* must be seen in the wider context of the political world in England in the seventeenth century. It was published in 1689, a year after the so-called Glorious Revolution, when the Catholic king, James II, had been deposed and his place on the throne taken by William, Prince of Orange, and Mary, James' daughter, so the work was initially seen to be a defence of the new order. He sees the new order as having saved England from 'the very brink of slavery and ruin' (Locke Preface). However, the work was initially published anonymously, along with his *Letters Concerning Toleration*. As a consequence, the *Two Treatises* do not appear have played a major role in justifying the Glorious Revolution (Uzgalis).

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