



JOHN LOCKE

Biographical Summary

Early Life

John Locke was born August 29, 1632, in Somerset, England and died October 28, 1704, in Essex, England. His father, also named John Locke, was a Parliamentary lawyer, and his mother Agnes Keen was the daughter of a tanner. Both of his parents were Puritan. Because his father was a lawyer and at times a judge, Locke was always around politics. In 1647, Locke was sent to Westminster School to obtain his formal education. In 1652, he continued his higher education at Christ Church, Oxford. While at Oxford he studied logic, grammar, rhetoric, all sorts of philosophy and eventually medicine. At Oxford he earned a bachelor's degree, a master's degree and finally a Bachelor of Medicine degree in 1674.

A Move Toward Politics

In 1666 John Locke met Lord Ashley, first Earl of Shaftesbury, when the latter was seeking medical attention. Locke made such a powerful impact on Shaftesbury that he decided to hire Locke as his personal physician, even though Locke had not finished his studies. This relationship would prove to be a defining relationship in Locke's life. It launched Locke into a world of nobility and politics. Their relationship would last for the rest of Shaftesbury's life and by the time Shaftesbury died in 1683, Locke had used his acquaintance with Shaftesbury to make a name for himself.

It was his friendship with Shaftesbury that unlocked opportunities for Locke. For one thing, it was Locke's fervent conversations with Shaftesbury and with his teacher Thomas Sydenham that provided much of the material for his major work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

In 1683 at the age of 50 John Locke went into exile. This was because of his connection to Shaftesbury and fierce criticisms Locke had against King James II. Locke would remain in exile in Holland for five years, and during this time he was able to compose most of his two great works.

Life After Exile

Upon returning from exile, and in the company of the new Queen Mary, Locke was finally able to fulfill his lifelong work. With the good favor of the monarchy Locke was able to devote much of the next two years to his writing and in 1690, Locke published his two works *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treaties on Civil Government*. Following the publication of these two works Locke continued to devote time to politics, writing and medicine. Over the next decade, Locke would toil away and would continue to worry about the legacy of his two great works. John Locke died October 28, 1704, in Essex, England.

Writings

In 1690, at the age of 57, Locke published the two works that would ultimately earn his reputation as a philosopher and as a political theorist. The first of these works, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* helped shape the ensuing school of British Empiricism by expounding a variant form of how humans learn ideas. According to Locke, all humans are born with a blank slate as a mind and it is through experience that we get the knowledge of ideas.

John Locke is best known in history classrooms for his contribution to political theory. It is in this area that he wrote the second of his two influential works, *Two Treaties on Civil Government*. This work plays a formative role in the foundation of the United States' democratic ideals. As previously noted, this work is a product of its times. *Two Treaties* is a work written in the context of the revolution of 1688. It is written to justify the overthrowing of King James II. Because he lived in a time of political instability and upheaval, Locke is able to draw on much of his life's experience in politics to write a book that would resonate well into 1776 and 1787. The main argument of the work is that government is the derivative of a natural state of mankind, but people are still born with and should maintain certain natural rights. This is all stated in the second book of the *Two Treaties*. The work begins with a hypothetical depiction of the state of nature. This state is an anarchic state, as it exists in a time before government. While there is no one person or group of people to govern the actions of others, men are still not free to do as they wish. According to Locke, there exists amongst this group a natural law. However, not all men adhere to this natural law, or understand it correctly. It takes the formation of a group to protect the rights ownership of property and liberty. Locke believes that governments are formed for this purpose.