****

**Occupation**: Scientist, mathematician, and astronomer

**Born**: August 29, 1632 in Wrington, Somerset, England

**Died**:  October 28, 1704 in Essex, England

**Best** **known** **as**: 17th century English philosopher and physician known as the “Father of Classical Liberalism.”

Counted amongst the most influential of Enlightenment thinkers, John Locke was the first to define the self through a continuity of consciousness. His writings contributed greatly to the development of the fields of political philosophy, epistemology[[1]](#footnote-1), and education. His works inspired generations of philosophers to follow, and significantly influenced the likes of Voltaire and Rousseau. Born as the son of a country lawyer in a small town in England, he grew up to be a good student and was accepted into the prestigious Westminster School in London. As a young man he was more drawn towards the works of modern philosophers than he was interested in studying the prescribed curriculum. Along with philosophy he developed an interest in medicine and went on to become a professional physician. He found a mentor in the famous physician Thomas Sydenham who took him under his wings and greatly influenced the development of Locke’s philosophical thinking. Along with his medical career he also served as Secretary of the Board of Trade and Plantations and Secretary to the Lords Proprietor of Carolina, and this helped shape his political thoughts. As a political theorist, he contributed immensely to classical republicanism and liberal theory which are reflected in the United States Declaration of Independence.

**Childhood & Early Life**

John Locke was born on August 29, 1632, in Wrington, Somerset, England, to Puritan parents. His father, also John Locke, was a country lawyer and a small landowner who had served as a captain of cavalry for the Parliamentarian forces during the English Civil War. His mother’s name was Agnes Keene.

He studied at the prestigious Westminster School before moving on to attend Christ Church, Oxford in 1652. As a college student he discovered the works of philosophers like Rene Descartes which kindled his interest in the subject. He earned his bachelor’s degree in 1656 and a master’s degree in 1658. He also developed an interest in medicine and studied medicine extensively, working with noted physicians and thinkers like Robert Boyle, Thomas Willis, Robert Hooke, and Richard Lower.

**Career**

Locke helped to treat Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1st Earl of Shaftesbury, who had come to Oxford seeking treatment for a liver infection in 1666. Cooper was impressed with Locke and appointed him as his personal physician. Locke moved to London to assume this position in 1667.

He resumed his medical studies under the prominent physician Thomas Sydenham who proved to be a great influence on young Locke. He was then elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1668 and graduated with a bachelor’s of medicine in 1674.

During the early 1670s he became active in politics and served as Secretary of the Board of Trade and Plantations and Secretary to the Lords Proprietor of Carolina.

Locke travelled to France during the mid-1670s and returned to England by 1679. He wrote extensively during his years of service to Lord Cooper. At around this time he started composing what would eventually form the bulk of the ‘Two Treatises of Government’ which would be published years later.

The early 1680s was a period of great political turmoil in England and Locke was forced to leave the country under strong suspicion of his involvement in the Rye House Plot.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, there is little historical evidence to prove that he was directly involved.

He fled to the Netherlands in 1683 and wrote extensively over the next few years. He eventually returned to England and began publishing the works he had painstakingly composed in the past years.

In 1689, his ‘A Letter Concerning Toleration’ was published. Initially written in Latin, the work was soon translated into other languages. The work, which reflected his views on religion and society, stated that the Church can gain genuine converts only through persuasion and not through violence.

Another one of his seminal works, ‘Two Treatises of Government’ was also published in 1689, though anonymously. He attacked the concept of patriarchalism[[3]](#footnote-3) in the First Treatise and explained his ideas for forming a more civilized society in the Second Treatise. He had developed these political theories during his years of service to Lord Cooper.

The year 1690 saw the publication of his work ‘An Essay Concerning Human Understanding’ in which he described the mind at birth as a blank slate which is later filled with experience. This work is considered a principal source of empiricism in modern philosophy. Several enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume and George Berkeley cited it as a source of inspiration.

In his 1693 publication ‘Some Thoughts Concerning Education,’ he stated that the current curriculum and syllabus in schools and colleges needs to be broadened. He also called for the better treatment of students. The ideas espoused in this work had an enormous influence on the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

**Major Works**

His work ‘Two Treatises of Government’ is an important text on political theory. Locke’s political ideas were founded on social contract theory and he advocated governmental separation of powers along with the establishment of a civil society to resolve conflicts in a civil way.

The treatise ‘Some Thoughts Concerning Education’ gave a framework of Locke’s ideas on how to improve education in England. It became a significant philosophical work on the concept of education and was translated into almost all of the major European languages within a century.

**Personal Life & Legacy**

John Locke never married or fathered any children.

He had a very close friendship with Lady Damaris Cudworth Masham that lasted till his death. During his later years he was invited by Lady Masham to come and live with her family at Oates in High Laver, Essex.

He died on October 28, 1704 and was buried in the churchyard of the village of High Laver.

“John Locke Biography.” *The Famous People*. Accessed February 12, 2016. http://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/john-locke-134.php

1. the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope; the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alleged 1683 Whig conspiracy to assassinate or mount an insurrection against Charles II of England because of his pro-Roman Catholic policies. The plot drew its name from Rye House at Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, near which ran a narrow road where Charles was supposed to be killed as he traveled from a horse meet at Newmarket. The king’s unexpectedly early departure in March foiled the plot. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. political theory that arose in England in the seventeenth century that defended the concept of absolute power for the monarchy, through language that emphasized the “paternal” power of the king over the state and his subjects. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)