

Comments on Panel, “Locke and Christianity”
Southern Political Science Association
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Let me begin by reading a formulation of the issue behind today’s panel. I’ll tell you the author later, but for now will say that the passage is from a series of lectures called “The Problem of God,” delivered at Yale in 1962:

[The] problem of God is unique in that no man may say of it, “It is not my problem.” Dostoevski’s challenge is valid: “If God is not, everything is permitted.” But the challenge needs to be amended to include, “except one thing.” If God is not, no one is permitted to say or even think that he is, for this would be a monstrous deception of oneself and of others. It would be to cherish and propagate a pernicious illusion whose results would necessarily be the destruction of man. On the other hand, if God is, again one thing is not permitted. It is not permitted that any man should be ignorant of him, for this ignorance, too, would be the destruction of man. On both counts, therefore, no man may say that the problem of God is not his problem.

Now it seems to me that both John Locke and Leo Strauss would say that for political men, the political solution to the problem of God is somewhere between the atheist and the believer. For Locke, perhaps God is, but the polity ought not to try to establish the fact authoritatively, but should tolerate instead a wide variety of religious belief, provided men keep the peace and mind their business. For Strauss, perhaps God is not, but a healthy society needs shared beliefs and might require some official dogma that lifts men’s thoughts toward the divine.

Our papers today approach the problem of God and politics through Locke and Strauss. To discuss them in the reverse order from which they were delivered: Paul Sigmund provides a useful chronicle of Straussian, or as he says, “neo-Straussian” commentary on Locke. He declares Strauss wrong about Locke without feeling a need to show why beyond citing a few critics, then seems a bit astonished that years after Strauss was apparently refuted, a new generation or two of scholars have taken up Strauss’s reading of Locke and developed it. Sigmund doesn’t explain why this is so – perhaps he would liken the phenomenon to original sin – but he does pay those he dubs “neo-Straussians” the compliment of attempting a refutation here and there. Since among the ablest of the neo-Straussians are on this panel and are fully capable of defending themselves, I need not interfere with a good fight if they are willing to have one. But I will say two things further about the Sigmund paper.

First, when Professor Sigmund does marshal evidence from Locke against Strauss and his students, I found his shots miss the target. In the *Essay*, part II, chapter 21, Locke mentions immortality and the afterlife, but not to establish their existence – rather, to describe the psychology of how men ought to act if they really believe in it, or to wonder whether, on the basis of their actions, they really do. Likewise, in *Essay*, part IV, chapter 18, article 7, Locke calls it a matter of faith, not reason, “that the dead shall rise and live again,” as Sigmund mentions. Yes, this may refer to the resurrection of the body, not the immortality of the soul, but Locke doesn’t say so explicitly, for he doesn’t mention “body” or “soul.” One might add that

when he speaks of “eternity” in the *Essay* (II.29.16 and II.14.27), it is not to acknowledge it but to explain that men imagine what it is from their experience of long duration.

Second, I like the moniker “neo-Straussian,” but Sigmund employs it indiscriminately and so misses an opportunity to make a useful point: that at least some of the neo-Straussians who write on Locke also depart from Strauss in an important way. To put the matter a little boldly, Strauss thought Locke an atheist, and condemned him; the true neo-Straussians think Locke an atheist, but celebrate him as an architect of the modern self. Yes, there is some ambiguity in Strauss’s “condemnation”: it was to drudgery, not fire. Yes, Locke’s solid world is sober; no high aspiration for happiness ought to disturb the engine of contentment that is modern civil society and liberal democracy. This isn’t East Coast/West Coast Straussianism, since both agree in celebrating Locke – but a dispute between those who have made their peace with modernity, not to say embraced it, and those who still turn toward the ancients, as did Strauss himself.

Dwight Allman is a neo-Straussian by Professor Sigmund’s definition, but it is not so clear to me whether he is by the revised definition I am suggesting. I liked his paper very much, thinking it right on the mark in its discussion of the Lockean rejection of original sin, in its account of how Locke uses theology, in its demonstration of how Locke argues by selective quotation of the Bible, in its recognition of the radical individualism in Locke’s account, and in its suggestion of the political consequences of this. Here are my questions for him:

First, are toleration and consent so clearly consistent in Locke? Consent as the basis of government implies that men can agree to take charge of their future in common; but toleration implies that regarding the things of the soul, or the afterlife, they cannot. In religion, voluntary societies must always be open for dissolution. In politics, by contrast, consent binds – and if a problem arises, Locke recommends not exit but repair.

Second, Professor Allman makes a very ingenious point about God’s punishment of man’s original sin with the requirement of future labor: that Locke embraces the curse implies that he denies the sin. Is this so clear? If sin is disorder, then punishment might be restorative, and so a kind of good. On the parallel point concerning the punishment of woman, the Old Testament might present subjection of wife to husband as punishment for sin, but the New Testament presents it as an image of the relation of Christ to the Church.

Third, concerning Locke’s “open-ended commitment to human possibility,” mentioned toward the end of the paper: Does Professor Allman mean that Locke learns this from Christianity, which, as Strauss somewhere says, puts the golden age in the future rather than the past? Do not Locke and Christianity – but not Strauss – thus oppose the pessimism of the ancients, and their consequent inegalitarianism? In other words, is Strauss’s critique of Locke and modernity a critique of Christianity, too?

Finally, let me venture a few comments on Professor Michael Zuckert’s paper, which I also liked very much. In *God, Locke, and Equality*, Jeremy Waldron is doing the theoretical work that the patrons of equality will need if they are to succeed in their post-election quest to

learn “God-talk.” But I think Zuckert is right on the mark in saying he is not yet doing it well enough: Waldron asserts rather than proves Locke’s Christianity and takes for granted Christianity’s egalitarian meaning.

What of Zuckert’s own alternative, rational (or natural theological) egalitarian Locke? He cut short before presenting that today, allowing me to dispense with comments on it, though he and I have an exchange on the topic in the current issue of *The Review of Politics*. On the basis of what he said today, let me put my question in this form: Granted that Locke’s egalitarianism depends on his theory of self-ownership, in the legal sense of ownership as entailing the right to exclude others, not the Machiavellian sense of self-assertion (“one’s own arms”), doesn’t it then depend on the “workmanship” argument plus conveyance of God’s property in us to ourselves? But if men’s origins are as mysterious as our destiny, can the workmanship argument be made as natural theology? Is epistemological agnosticism capable of natural theology, or are we left with an inability to speak *philosophically* about God – however artful Locke may be in articulating a way to put Christianity on the road to ultimate extinction, or in Paul Sigmund’s phrase of a moment ago, in subverting by reinterpretation.

I promised I’d tell before closing who is the author of *The Problem of God*, the lectures delivered in 1962 at Yale from which I quoted at the beginning of my remarks. It is Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J., who at the very moment he articulated this traditional account of the antimony of the atheist and the believer, was busy formulating what would soon become the Vatican II document on religious liberty, embracing, in an American but not quite Lockean way, toleration of religious difference, even in the face of religious truth.

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