

daring to write on philosophical topics; but this experienced professional has given us a farrago of nonsense. ■ MR

# The Secret Locke

*Launching Liberalism:  
On Lockean Political  
Philosophy*

MICHAEL P. ZUCKERT  
UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KANSAS, 2002  
XI + 375 PGS.

Professor Zuckert has taken on a task that not even his outstanding scholarly and philosophical abilities enable him to accomplish. He endeavors to defend Leo Strauss's contention that Locke, though a professed Christian, insinuated into his work a skeptical message for the few careful readers he hoped to find. And this is not merely a question of interest to biographers of Locke. Locke's secret atheism radically affects our understanding of his political theory.

In spite of his frequent citations of "the judicious Hooker," Locke was not in Strauss's interpretation a Christian natural law thinker. In fact, he was a Hobbesian; human rights do not reflect God's dictates but arise from the struggle for self-preservation.

Zuckert is not an altogether faithful follower of his mentor Strauss. He thinks that Strauss pushes his Hobbesian thesis too far: "I [Zuckert] agree with Strauss on Locke's manner of writing, but not on his identification of Locke as, in fundamental ways, a Hobbesian" (p. 3). Locke's principle of self-ownership allowed him a much more robust concept of rights than Hobbes possessed. Zuckert suggests that Locke's account holds up well against the theories of contemporary philosophers, including Rawls, Gewirth, and MacIntyre.

Leo Strauss famously contended that ancient and early modern political philosophers practiced "secret writing." To avow openly doctrines at variance with accepted religion would expose anyone foolhardy enough to do this to great personal danger. But "all the gods of the nations are idols" (Psalm 96:5): Strauss thought that true philosophers by the very nature of their activity brought conventional religion under criticism.

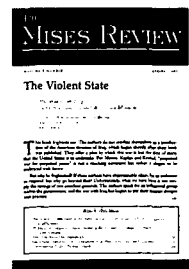
What then was a philosopher, aware of the danger of the times for those with unconventional beliefs, to do? Strauss suggested that he would

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provide hints of his true views. In particular, a philosopher would make apparently contradictory and mistaken claims. If read carefully, these “mistakes” showed that the philosopher really rejected the conventional beliefs he seemed to profess.

Zuckert rightly argues that the truth of this intriguing thesis cannot be decided on an *a priori* basis. We must proceed case-by-case, examining the alleged mistakes and contradictions

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that indicate a hidden meaning at odds with the apparent main thesis of the text. Zuckert gives us a number of examples designed to support an esoteric reading of Locke, but these for the most part strike me as unpersuasive.

According to Zuckert, Locke hinted at his esotericism in a place where one would least expect it. In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke appears to denounce philosophers who write deceptively and

unclearly: “[T]here were philosophers found, who had learning enough to prove, that snow was black; i.e., to prove, that white was black. Whereby they had the advantage to destroy the instruments and means of discourse, conversation, instruction, and society” (p. 122, quoting Locke).

Although Locke here seems to denounce deceptive language by philosophers, his real meaning is to show that he himself is a master of disguise. “Those philosophers who proved that snow was black and thus may have harmed society thereby, at least still argue, as did the ‘unlearned men,’ that snow had a color; they did not go so far as did John Locke, who proved not that snow is black but that it had no color at all. Locke’s philosophical position is the far more radical break with the commonsense understanding” (p. 123).

Zuckert’s argument, then, is this: Locke condemns philosophers for writing in a devious fashion. But he himself holds a position even more contrary to common sense than the one he imputes to them. Locke then actually supports devious language; otherwise, he condemns himself.

But Zuckert misrepresents what Locke is saying. Locke holds that phenomenal colors are ideas in the mind: what is present in objects is the power to produce these ideas in us. This account of color in no way requires us to deny the evidence of our senses. Objects, on Locke’s view, look just the same as they always have. Locke’s view of color in no way threatens the ordinary meaning of discourse, unlike the

claim that our senses deceive us. Contrary to anything Zuckert has shown, the passage from Locke does not refer to himself. Why not then take his condemnation of deceptive philosophers as sincere?

Zuckert is no more successful when he considers specific theological doctrines that Locke professes. Locke cannot genuinely believe in God as the source of natural law, our author contends: “Locke made central to his proof [of God’s existence] the following step: the human race cannot be self-created and thus must be created by a God. That conclusion follows, Locke said, from a consideration of the human condition: ‘If man were creator of himself . . . he would also have granted himself an eternal duration for his existence. . . . For it is impossible to imagine anything so hostile and inimical to itself, which, though it could grant itself existence, would not at the same time preserve it.’ But what of another being who had the power to grant humanity existence—is it not the same act of hostility to grant humanity existence and ‘not at the same time preserve it’? . . . If there is a creating God, he is hostile to humanity. But if he is hostile to humanity, then his will is neither obligatory to nor the source for the content of the good for humanity” (p. 190).

Once more Zuckert has failed to grasp Locke’s point. Locke here relies on a metaphysical principle, famously defended by Spinoza: every being endeavors to preserve itself in existence. A being with creative powers that denied itself immortality would

then display hostility toward itself. Not so a being who created some other entity. No metaphysical principle requires one to preserve in being whatever one creates. If God made us mortal, he does not thereby manifest hostility toward us.

Does not Zuckert’s argument fail on another ground? Human beings die; but does not Locke believe that God has given humans immortal souls? In what way, then, can God be deemed hostile to humanity? We here arrive at

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the central point of Strauss’s and Zuckert’s claim that Locke was an atheist. As they see matters, Locke did not genuinely believe that humans have immortal souls. “[I]f there is a true natural law, Locke holds, the natural reason must be capable of proving the existence of the afterlife, but, Locke also explicitly says, the natural reason cannot do that. Therefore, by Locke’s own criterion, there cannot be a law of nature such as he describes and seems to accept” (p. 34).

Locke says that morality does not make sense without rewards and punishments after death. But he offers no proof of life after death. Thus, says Zuckert, Locke writes deceptively: he does not really believe that morality depends on what happens to us after we die.

Zuckert takes no notice of a simple alternative to his analysis. Locke's argument for immortal souls just is the fact, as he thinks it, that morality would make no sense without this postulate. Why must Locke come up with some proof independent of morality that we possess immortal souls? Rather his argument has this form: (1) Unless X, morality makes no sense. (2) Morality makes sense. (3) Therefore X. "X" here of course is, "Human beings have immortal souls." Locke here anticipates Kant in the *Critique of Practical Reason*; much to my surprise this has escaped Zuckert.

Further to the same issue, Strauss and Zuckert incorrectly interpret this passage from Locke as a denial that reason can prove the soul's immortality: "That the dead shall rise and live again: these and the like, being beyond the discovery of *reason*, are purely matters of *faith*, with which *reason*, has, directly, nothing to do" (p. 32, quoting Locke). This passage refers to the resurrection of the body, which in standard Christian theology is indeed viewed as a teaching of faith. It need not be read as a denial of reason's power to prove the soul immortal. Further, even if Locke did think that belief in immortality rests on faith, why does this make him an atheist?

Zuckert also endeavors to show that Locke's profession of belief in Christianity did not reflect his real views. In the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke places great stress on Christ's miracles, as reported in the New Testament. "The miracles, he holds, were so numerous and so public that 'they never were, or could be, denied by any of the enemies or opposers of Christianity.' . . . Locke focuses the issue by

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citing the example of the Emperor Julian; even he 'never dared to deny' the miracles" (p. 161).

Locke, according to Zuckert, conceals an anti-Christian message behind this seemingly straightforward apologetic point. "Locke continues, however, in a most curious way that entirely undermines the argument for miracles; he [Julian] dared not deny so plain a matter of fact, which, being granted, the truth of our savior's mission *unavoidably*

follows. . . . The instance of Julian himself [who rejected Christianity] contradicts Locke's point in a way he must have meant to convey" (p. 161).

Zuckert here takes the word "unavoidably" in a wooden way. Why not take Locke to be saying that the conclusion that Christ is the savior is rationally compelling, given the truth of the miracles? In like fashion, someone who contends that the premises of a syllogism make the conclusion

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unavoidable means that the premises imply the conclusion. He does not suggest that no one will in fact fail to reason correctly.

I must be fair to our author: one of his arguments seems to have some weight. He notes that Locke reduces Christianity to one essential dogma: the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. But this is exactly the claim that Hobbes, generally taken to be an atheist, made when he professed belief in Christianity.

How decisive is this point? Does the fact that Locke agreed with Hobbes show that he too was a secret atheist

and Hobbesian? Perhaps he thought that Hobbes was right about the essence of Christianity, but did not accept his atheism. No doubt this hypothesis is too simple for the convoluted mind of a Straussian, but it should not on that account be scorned.<sup>1</sup>

Suppose, though, that Zuckert is right: Locke was not a Christian natural law thinker. What follows for his political theory? Zuckert maintains that, detached from its Christian trappings, Locke offers an account of self-ownership that remains plausible today. Locke, our author contends, thought that "[t]he self in its very nature is posited as self-owning, a fact witnessed in our most elementary locutions—I, me, mine, to quote an old Beatles' song" (p. 195).

But the self, for Locke, is no ethereal entity. It is inevitably bound up with the body. "The self appropriates the body and makes it its own, that is to say, makes it the instrument of its intentional actions in relation to its broader purposes in life" (p. 195). But this claim is exclusive: the self, by appropriating its body, repels the claims of anyone else to that body.

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<sup>1</sup>The argument of course assumes that Hobbes was an atheist, a contention that has been thrown into question by, among others, A.P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and F.C. Hood, *The Divine Politics of Thomas Hobbes* (Clarendon Press, 1964).

And does this not establish a basis for rights? “In the first instance this ownership has nothing moral about it; it is merely a fact of the structure of self-consciousness. Yet it has moral implications, for the ‘I’ necessarily is concerned with its own happiness and misery. . . . The self posits itself as a possessor of rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Its very claim for itself as a self contains a claim of exclusivity vis-à-vis others” (p. 196).

I cannot think that this argument succeeds. No doubt the self, as Zuckert presents it, wishes to engage unimpeded in its own activities. But why should this fact generate a moral demand on others to refrain from interfering with these activities? Zuckert’s Locke has not succeeded, as our author asserts, in deriving “the ‘ought’ of moral inviolability” from “an ‘is’ (the fact of self-ownership)” (p. 194). The “rights” that Zuckert professes to establish generate no moral claims; they are mere assertions of individual power.

I have expressed skepticism about Straussian secret reading, as applied to Locke; but I should now like to hazard the claim that Zuckert’s own book has an esoteric thesis. (I hasten to add that my claim is intended only as speculation.) I suspect that Zuckert is aware that his “Lockean” rights are not moral rights at all. They are mere Hobbesian claims; and, contrary to his professed difference from Strauss, Zuckert also regards Locke as a Hobbesian. He thinks that Locke’s views, as he presents them, form a good basis for political action today. But he correctly sees that open advocacy of

Hobbesian statism would avail him nothing. Instead, he offers us Hobbesian doctrine under a thin veil of alleged Lockean rights.<sup>2</sup> ■ MR

## Rich, Not Powerful

### *Controversial Essays*

THOMAS SOWELL  
HOOVER INSTITUTION PRESS, 2002  
X + 321 PGS.

It is always agreeable to be proved right. In an earlier review, I suggested that Thomas Sowell “had a genius for the striking fact and the apt analogy” (*The Mises Review*, Fall 2001, p. 24). In his new collection of essays, Sowell once more demonstrates his uncanny ability to apply basic economic principles in unexpected fashion.

One of his most valuable points develops a theme much stressed by Mises, although Sowell has apparently arrived at the insight independently. Mises often stated that capitalism is a

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<sup>2</sup>Readers interested in Strauss should consult the review article, “Sphinx Without a Secret” by M.F. Burnyeat in *The New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1985, and the subsequent correspondence in the October 1985 issues of the same journal.