

## Locke and Liberal Origins

*Barry Shain*

**Launching Liberalism: On Lockean Political Philosophy**, by Michael P.

Zuckert, *Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. xi + 375 pp.*

THIS COLLECTION, FOR IN TRUTH it is not a unified book, brings together thirteen of Michael Zuckert's essays and lectures written during the past three decades. Although the title suggests that the essays' focus is on liberalism, or at least on Locke's political philosophy, neither is the case. That is, there is almost no mention of liberalism per se until the last thirty pages of the volume; concerning Locke, though some mention of his thought occur in the introduction and in most of the other essays, he serves mainly as a portable backdrop for the particular concern of each essay.

In the Introduction, one of two new pieces in this volume, Zuckert indicates that he is a defender of a broadly Straussian understanding of Locke—that is, Locke as an esoteric author, a follower of Hobbes, and a thinker not captured by time or place. But what makes this essay of interest is that after paying his respect to Strauss, Zuckert actually breaks with this characterization of Locke and suggests

that Strauss had been wrong in his description of Locke as a closet Hobbesian.

Zuckert, however, never returns to this probing line of argument. Instead, he promises to devote most of his attention to “attempting to stake out and defend a position on Locke's modernity.” As well, Zuckert suggestively argues that Locke's “understanding of politics has more in common with medieval constitutionalism, his understanding of morality echoes any number of earlier positions, including Stoicism, [and] his understanding of religion shares much with Protestantism contemporary with him. Thus, Locke's ‘conservative’ or ‘traditionalist’ face is by no means merely a facade. The difficult task in understanding Locke is to give both faces their due weight and to avoid one-sidedly emphasizing one to the exclusion of the other, as I believe most of the literature does.” Unfortunately, the essays that follow bear no observable relationship to this intriguing and attractive juxtaposition.

Part One contains four essays that were mostly written in the mid-1970s and lack the Introduction's focus on Locke, as well as its freshness. What we find instead is a tired defense of Straussian esotericism and a rant against historically based interpreters of modern political thought, including John Dunn, Peter Laslett, Quentin Skinner, and Richard Ashcraft. In

---

BARRY SHAIN is Professor of Political Science at Colgate University. He was an ISI Weaver Fellow who received his doctorate in political science from Yale University.

making his case, Zuckert follows a pattern to be found throughout the volume. He offers a curious combination of a close reading of a secondary text, invariably one that a reader of these essays has not read in decades, a contemptuous and breezy attack on other works, and sweeping generalizations about Locke's thought or influence. Zuckert far too often sings only to the Straussian choir and is simply dismissive of the broader community of scholars. Most particularly, he is greatly disturbed by historians' interest in matters historical. Thus, he faults the Cambridge school of historians for pressing "the need to sever entirely our study of the history of thought from our own political life or action." One must wonder whether reading texts, as Zuckert proudly does, with their contemporary utility uppermost in mind is really the best way to get their meaning right.

In Part Two, a section of three essays, we are introduced, although far more subtly, to another plank in the Straussian system of belief—that is, that anyone as clever as Locke could not possibly have been a believer in a different system of belief, one including a belief in God. The cornerstone to this contention rests on Zuckert's insistence that Locke's "'official theory of revelation' has many difficulties," in particular, that "in order to verify any alleged revelation as a real revelation, reason must have rational knowledge of the existence of a revealing God.... But it is Locke's view that reason is not in possession of such rational knowledge of the existence of a revealing God.... Since Locke lacks rational knowledge of a revealing God, he knows of no authentic revelation, including of course the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures."

There is much to find wanting in this claim. Almost everything about it is suspect, but most problematic is Zuckert's confidence, without evidence or argument, that Locke's perspective is not Christian. Given the range of opinion in the

seventeenth century, between the far reaches of Christian humanism and extreme Protestant fideism, such a bold statement is indefensible. And even if Zuckert's understanding of Locke were correct, what is called for is not a series of piecemeal essays whose central goals are any number of concerns, but instead a sustained argument. As he writes at the end of this section, "a full version of this story would need to include at least Grotius, Hobbes, Spinoza, Pufendorf, and Locke, all of whom contributed in important ways to the emergence of the modern natural rights philosophy." Indeed, such a book is one that Zuckert has the learning and intelligence to write. Or more simply, he might have produced a volume to challenge Jeremy Waldron's sustained argument in *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke's Political Thought* that makes the opposite case to that advanced by Zuckert's lightly argued assertions.

In Part Three, two essays focus on the American Declaration of Independence and a third on Blackstone. We are told early on that "the source ultimately lying behind the bulk of these outpourings of the American mind [that is, the Declaration] is John Locke, although for present purposes that fact is irrelevant." Strangely, in these essays on Locke's liberalism, Locke himself is consistently off-stage. We are told repeatedly that American thought was Lockean, but there is no persuasive evidence of this or any clarification about the way(s) it might have been Lockean. As well, again without historical evidence, we learn that in two lines of the Declaration is to be found "a general theory of legitimate, rightful, and just government," and that any effort to show that the document had a far more limited historical purpose, such as that mounted recently by Pauline Maier, is to be dismissed with contempt.

There is one chapter in this section, number ten, that I would like to single out

because Zuckert suggests in it that he will consider an intriguing question: that is, “How did the Americans of the revolutionary moment understand natural rights, and what role did those rights play in the revolution they made?” He points out that the dominant position among historians follows one of two lines of thought: that Americans were led to successively more radical stances due to their being forced to abandon English historical rights, or that after finally accepting natural rights, Americans assigned them little importance. Zuckert dismisses both views and claims that Americans were consistently guided by natural rights language. Thus, he is led to ask, “How can it be that natural rights, prominent on the very surface of the Revolution, can yet plausibly be denied by eminent scholars and politicians?” In defense of his position, he offers two citations before comparing the English Declaration of Rights to the American Declaration of Independence. Yet no one defending one of the two lines of historically based argument would accept this comparison as a meaningful test.

But much is revealed about Zuckert’s approach to historical materials in his handling of the most prominent of his documentary claims. Drawing on the 1774 Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress, he notes that in “its first resolution” we find “the familiar triad of rights: ‘life, liberty, and property,’” rights held under the “immutable laws of nature.” What is troubling about this presentation is the way that Zuckert misrepresents the actual text and avoids discussing the well-known commentary on this passage in John Adams’s *Autobiography* and *Diary*.

First, missing in Zuckert’s characterization is that in this document *every* other mention of rights is couched in the language of historical English rights. Moreover, in the unique remark he cites, he reverses and carefully disregards in-

convenient elements, something that Zuckert does throughout this short chapter. Thus, when one examines the passage in its entirety, a very different picture emerges. The passage reads as follows: “the inhabitants of the English colonies in North-America, by the immutable laws of nature [again, the only mention in the text], the principles of the English constitution, and the several charters or compacts, have the following RIGHTS...that they are entitled to life, liberty and property: and they have never ceded to any foreign power whatever, a right to dispose of either without their consent.” What Zuckert fails to include, then, is that the rights being asserted rested on both natural and *historical* grounds, and that these rights, by clear implication, were ones that could be legitimately limited by one’s own government, but not by a foreign one. At the very least, the actual language of the document paints a far different picture from that presented by Zuckert.

Second, Zuckert seems unwilling to draw his readers’ attention to the debate in Congress regarding this passage and the reticence of delegates to rest American rights on a naturalistic rather than a historical foundation. As John Adams records, there was no issue that so divided the Congress as whether, in searching for grounds upon which to defend their break with England, they “should recur to the law of nature, as well as to the British Constitution, and our American charters and grants.” Adams writes that “Mr. Galloway and Mr. Duane were for excluding the law of nature,” but that he “was very strenuous for retaining and insisting on it.” And why did Adams take this position? Because, as he explains, it was “a resource to which we might be driven by Parliament much sooner than we were aware.”<sup>1</sup> According to Adams, then, a “natural rights philosophy” was not a fundamental commitment that led the Americans into their conflict with

Great Britain, but rather a polemical tool to which, lacking recourse to any others, they would surely “be driven.”

When one explores Adams’s notes of this debate, again one finds that much of the discussion revolved around which line of argument would prove most efficacious: appeals to nature or, as Mr. Duane claimed, to “the laws and constitution of the country from whence we sprung, and charters, without recurring to the law of nature; because this will be a feeble support.”<sup>2</sup> In the end, however, Congress did insert one brief appeal to natural law—*not* natural rights—within nearly a dozen references to “the principles of the English constitution...the several charters or compacts...the rights, liberties, and immunities of free and natural-born subjects, within the realm of England...the foundations of English liberty...[and their claim that Americans were entitled] to the common law of England.” It is quite difficult, then, fairly to describe such language as reflecting a purposeful design to create, as Zuckert suggests, a “natural rights Republic.”

In Part Four, Zuckert in three pieces discusses the rule of law, John Rawls, and Alasdair MacIntyre and Alan Gewirth. Zuckert makes much of Locke’s concept of self-ownership. However, instead of evidence one confronts a string of assertions that fail to mention the tension in Locke’s thought between self-ownership and man’s ownership by God. It appears that Zuckert decided that the more prominent of the two arguments in the *Two Treatises* could simply be ignored.

Zuckert is clever and learned. But perhaps because he too regularly writes for an audience for whom much of what is contested in the history of political thought is already dogmatically settled, he fails to deliver the books he promises. To do so, he must wean himself from dependence on fellow travelers who uncritically accept half-argued claims and, what might be, less than honest schol-

arly practices. This would demand patience and a sustained focus, something lacking in the essays in this volume. But Zuckert has the ability to meet this challenge, and his readers should encourage him to write the book that lies still-born in this poorly conceived and executed collection of essays.

1. Adams, “Extract from Autobiography,” in *The Works of John Adams*, ed. C. F. Adams, II:374. 2. Adams, *Diary* for 8 September 1774, in *ibid.*, II:371.

## *Interpreting Ancient Texts*

MARK SHIFFMAN

**What is Ancient Philosophy?** by Pierre Hadot; translated by Michael Chase, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002. 352 pp.

PIERRE HADOT, emeritus professor of classical history at the Collège de France, is highly regarded among scholars of ancient philosophy for his authoritative commentaries on Plotinus and for an outstanding study of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* (*The Inner Citadel*, Harvard, 1998). In broader intellectual circles, however, he is better known for a thesis, presented schematically in earlier essays, that receives magisterial treatment in *What is Ancient Philosophy?*

That thesis, briefly stated, is that we thoroughly misunderstand ancient philosophy when we take it to be the elaboration of intellectual “systems,” because its essence is above all the choice, prac-

---

MARK SHIFFMAN is an Ennis Fellow in the Core Humanities Program at Villanova University. He held an ISI Western Civilization Fellowship during his doctoral studies in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.