

Preface to the Paperback Edition

The Unvarnished Doctrine originally was published in 1990. Reviewers generally treated the book fairly and sympathetically, offering constructive criticism and encouragement. A few were very generous in their assessments. The rare displays of real hostility toward my work were distressing on one level, yet rewarding on another; for the fury of such criticism assured me that I had succeeded in striking vital nerves among the defenders of orthodoxy both in American historiography and in academic political theory.

I continue to view the political thought of the American Revolution as a powerful and humanizing matrix of ideas in which Locke's liberalism, properly understood, constituted one essential, defining, and progressive element. Of course I stressed that element in *The Unvarnished Doctrine* as I sought to initiate a reversal of the deliberalization of eighteenth-century American political thought—a movement informed, on one hand, by a dangerous exaggeration of the desirability of a “politics of virtue” in a diverse society and, on the other, by a failure to understand the inseparable connection between liberalism (its imperfections notwithstanding) and human freedom. John Locke explored and articulated this connection in the seventeenth century, and American Revolutionary thought generally—and often explicitly—understood freedom and the preconditions of freedom in Locke's distinctive terms. The success of the “republican revival,” I argued, thus depended in substantial measure on prob-

lematic interpretations of political theory. These failures of interpretation, moreover, generated a one-sided, distorted historiography that could supply factitious legitimacy to the erosion or subversion of liberal politics—of freedom—in the present.

Some of the best scholarship since 1990 suggests that, at the very least, I was on the right track. A number of authors have shown that eighteenth-century American political thought was broader, more complex, and more Lockean-liberal in a positive sense than the paradigm depicted in republican historiography. Locke scholarship, too, has advanced significantly toward the textual redemption of Locke's philosophy from dogma and obfuscation. Let me mention a few works that relate in interesting ways to my own.

In his elegant and engaging book, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Cornell University Press, 1990), Isaac Kramnick maintains that the historiographic shift away from Locke "has gone too far" in its treatment of Anglo-American thought in the second half of the eighteenth century as a paradigm which (as Kramnick quotes J. G. A. Pocock) does "'not necessitate reference to Locke at all'" (pp. 167, 164). Allowing late eighteenth-century figures in England and America "to speak for themselves," he discovers Locke "very much alive and well" in their writings and speeches (p. 170). Binding the Revolutionists (and the English radicals and Protestant Dissenters) to classical republican ideology, Kramnick argues, falsely portrays them as "nostalgic defenders of the past, set against modernity and commerce." In fact, they were "ardent believers in progress and change" and as such they "relied heavily" on Locke's ideas (pp. 32–33). If Locke were indeed as irrelevant or hostile to the American Revolutionary impulse as republican historians claim, why, he asks, did the Tory and clerical establishment embark on a "crusade to root out his ideas" (p. 185)? And why did loyalists, such as Josiah Tucker, denounce the Revolutionists as "'Mr. Locke's disciples'" (p. 176)?

Ellis Sandoz, in his fascinating and learned study, *A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding* (Louisiana State University Press, 1990), understands the founding as an "anti-modernist embodiment of medieval principles of order" (p. 235), fun-

damentally opposed to “the currents of radical secularist modernity” (p. 85). The founding was, in this sense, reactionary. It looked back for inspiration and guidance, however, not to a sanitized Machiavelli and the secular virtue of republican Rome, but to Biblical religion, classical philosophy (Plato and Aristotle), and medieval theology and political thought. The founding thus represented “a unique anti-modernist rearticulation of Western Civilization . . . profoundly indebted to classical and Christian influences” (p. 25); it was “a great conspiracy of faith and reason” (p. 125). Sandoz acknowledges the presence of other intellectual tendencies, such as liberalism and republicanism, in the founding philosophy, but he asserts nonetheless the determinative preeminence of “classical and Christian thought” in the American Revolution and its constitutional settlement (pp. 100, 83).

One could argue about this estimate of the *relative* importance of classical philosophy and Christian thought (whether or not it was *decisive*) in the philosophy of the American founding, or about the *authenticity* (as distinguished from the *expediency*) of the founders’ religious commitments. The inherent methodological limitations of intellectual history allow nothing more than informed speculation in such matters. Moreover, reverence or nostalgia for the classical and Biblical (and republican) traditions ought to be tempered by analysis of the relationships between those traditions and the intolerable forms of oppression they historically defended: for instance, slavery and the domestic subordination of women. Can the traditions be detached, as it were, from those dehumanizing practices and institutions, and reconciled to the demands of justice? Whatever the answer, Sandoz’s reaffirmation of the historical and theoretical importance of religion in the American founding stands out as a vital contribution to this field of study.

It is worth noting an ironic link between Sandoz’s book and *The Unvarnished Doctrine*. To my horror, Sandoz demonizes Locke, driving the dull stake of “esoteric interpretation” through Locke’s covertly Hobbesian heart. Although he insists that “we must deal, of course, with what is said in Locke’s books,” this turns out to be something other than what Locke himself *actually* says. Indeed, Sandoz explic-

itly adopts the method of Leo Strauss in *Natural Right and History* (University of Chicago Press, 1953) and thus reads Locke (and apparently only Locke) “with a suspicious eye, as it were, on the assumption that Locke means more or less or something other than simply what he says.” This stratagem allows Sandoz to dismiss parenthetically the manifest and essential differences between Hobbes’s absolutism and Locke’s advocacy of religious toleration and limited government. From the “Straussian viewpoint,” as Sandoz calls it, Locke is Hobbes in sheep’s clothing—an anti-Biblical hedonist who emancipated the acquisitive instinct from the salutary constraints of classical morality and revealed religion while chattering disingenuously about God and the law of nature. Thus conceived, Locke bears primary guilt for virtually all the great sins of modernity, including “the chronic terror of existence in the shadow of universal barbarism and annihilation” (pp. 58–60, 64–65, 72–73, 82).

Although *The Unvarnished Doctrine* strongly dissents both from this jaundiced reading of Locke and from the capricious method that produces it, I certainly agree with Sandoz when he asserts that such a reading “was simply unthinkable to the American founders,” who generally read Locke “as a Christian Whig and an opponent of Hobbes” (pp. 134, 191). Indeed, when Sandoz, after excoriating Locke as a duplicitous Hobbesian heretic, concedes that “Locke may have been read quite *accurately* by Americans . . . as a spokesman for traditional Christian natural law and rights” (p. 191, emphasis added), he ironically confirms a central argument in my book.

In *Algernon Sidney and the Republican Heritage in England and America* (Princeton University Press, 1991), Alan Craig Houston spans two fields—historiography and political theory—with clarity and grace. Confronting the enthusiasm of the “republican revival,” Houston reminds us that “the cultivation of civic virtue is an unattractive and impractical ideal for large, complex, and heterogeneous societies” (pp. 3–4). Classical virtue is “a martial ethos that manifests itself in a cult of masculinity and in a glorification of conquest and expansion” (p. 9). His most telling theoretical point in relation to the historiography of the American founding, however, emerges from his interpretation of Locke’s contemporary, Algernon Sidney.

The claim that “the defining characteristic of republicanism is a classical theory of virtue, and that the republican language of virtue is distinct from and in tension with the liberal logic of rights and interests” constitutes a central principle of republican historiographers (p. 146); they cite Sidney, moreover, as the quintessential republican and thus the ideological nemesis of Locke. Houston, however, shows that the distinctive feature of Sidney’s thought consists not in an advocacy of civic virtue as an alternative to liberal rights and interests, but in a “dramatic reconfiguration” of classical republican themes and the fusion of these transformed themes with those of liberal theory (pp. 157, 166). In Sidney’s republicanism, “the language of virtue and corruption was inseparable from the [liberal] logic of rights, interests, laws, and contracts” (p. 169). Indeed, “when attention is restricted to those cases in which the influence of Sidney’s ideas” among the American Revolutionary generation “was strongest,” we see that “virtually all of the ‘republican’ principles drawn from Sidney’s writings were perfectly compatible with Lockean liberalism.” Houston’s careful textual analysis thus “casts doubt on the widely held view that there existed a distinct and coherent ‘republican’ language of politics in Revolutionary America that was distinct from and in tension with Lockean liberalism” (pp. 224–225). This conclusion, which Houston extends to a range of themes, indicates “the need to modify the conceptual framework employed by republican revivalists” (pp. 9, 277).

This emerging critique of the polarity between liberalism and republicanism in the political thought of the American founding is the most noteworthy development in the field over the past three years, and it receives important support from Garrett Sheldon in his excellent study, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). Sheldon shows how Jefferson systematically combined elements of both traditions in a coherent and consistent political philosophy. Sheldon’s work, like Houston’s, thus suggests that historians had actually smuggled into the past the polarity they claimed to have discovered there.

Students of eighteenth-century American political thought can look forward to Jerome Huyler’s book on the philosophy of Locke and the American founding (forthcoming from the University Press of

Kansas). Huyler, whose work I have read in manuscript form, argues that the removal of Locke from the philosophy of the founding, as well as the mutual exclusivity of republicanism and liberalism, rest on an inadequate understanding of Locke. He offers a new, sympathetic interpretation of Locke's political philosophy, which he skillfully deploys, planting the flag of Lockean liberalism atop the high moral and ideological ground of the founding of the American Republic and advancing the critique of the polarity that informs the conceptual framework of the republican revival.

Huyler's Locke differs from the Locke portrayed in *The Unvarnished Doctrine*. Both, however, take the side of the angels. Indeed, Locke interpretation remains a growth industry; and the most serious and original scholarship over the past few years continues the liberation of Locke's philosophy from the superficially narrow compass of hostile orthodoxy. The literature is too large to treat here, but I should mention Peter A. Schouls's *Reasoned Freedom: John Locke and Enlightenment* (Cornell University Press, 1992), which is among the best of an outstanding array of scholarly productions.

Schouls's analysis of Locke reveals neither a moral relativist nor a Hobbesian hedonist, but a thinker who "rejects subjectivism about happiness and relativism about the good" and believes that "human beings have no right but to impose upon themselves invariant truth and goodness" (pp. 113, 136–139). How do we know truth and goodness? How do we discover the right way to live? According to Schouls, Locke adopts Descartes's "revolutionary" method: to gain such knowledge, and thus to become "more fully human," people must first "reject *as automatically binding* the principles which their cultural contexts would impose" (p. 44, emphasis added). This method deeply informs Locke's epistemic individualism, producing the view that people "do not become fully human unless they initially reject all prevalent doctrines and opinions *and* accept only such doctrines as can pass a certain test imposed by *each individual's own intellect*" (pp. 28–29, emphasis added). Far from endorsing moral relativism, however, Locke here intends precisely "to *overcome* the relativism of belief conditioned by specific cultural epochs" (p. 35, emphasis added). And he fundamentally rejects any axiomatic identification of the

good with the pleasurable. Schouls takes seriously, and as a central element of Locke's philosophy, his explicit insistence that "'the principle of all virtue lies in a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires, where reason does not authorize them'" (pp. 137, 207).

The inalienable obligation to employ one's own reason in pursuit of truth and goodness (or salvation) requires a political form in which religious dogma cannot forcibly be imposed on individuals. Schouls believes that Locke's "methodology and epistemology together [thus] account for the 'revolutionary implications' of his works on politics, on religion, and on education" (p. 22). This indeed is the key to the unity of Locke's thought.

So *The Unvarnished Doctrine* is not—nor did I ever presume it to be—the last word either on the philosophy of John Locke or on the political thought of the American founding. Scholars continue to extend the horizon of our understanding. I would like my book to be read and regarded in the context of, and as a contribution to, this ongoing collective endeavor.

My younger son, Rawley, arrived too late—by a matter of weeks—to join his older brother, Charlie, in the acknowledgments in the first edition. Rawley is here now, offering sympathy and hugs as I growl at the computer. Like his brother, he teaches me something new and important every day.

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