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Review of John Locke: The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso by Victor Nuovo

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Abstract: A review of Victor Nuovo's recent book, *John Locke: The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Keywords: Christian virtuoso, philosophy, John Locke, ethics, morality

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Nuovo, Victor. *John Locke: The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 320 pp. \$74 (hbk). ISBN: 9780198800552.

Reviewed by PATRICK J. CONNOLLY

In the Acknowledgements at the outset of his new book, Victor Nuovo provides a helpful account of how the book came to be. It emerged from his quest to understand how two works as different as the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* and *Reasonableness of Christianity* might have been authored by one and the same person. Nuovo reports that he was able to arrive at the answer to this question upon reading Robert Boyle's *The Christian Virtuoso*. As the title of Nuovo's book indicates, it is this conceptual category, that of the Christian virtuoso, that helps us to understand Locke's intellectual endeavors as part of a unified project and that provides the correct framework for the interpretation of his thought.

Locke, of course, did not invent the category of Christian virtuoso, and he was certainly not the first specimen of the type. Accordingly, the book is split into two parts. Part 1, by far the shorter part, comprises three chapters in which Nuovo provides relevant background and seeks to offer an account of Christian virtuosity as it was understood and practiced in seventeenth-century Britain. Part 2, consisting of five chapters, seeks to leverage this background to provide a thorough interpretation of Locke's philosophical output, with primary focus on the *Essay* and *Reasonableness*.

Part 1 begins with a chapter on Francis Bacon. Bacon was, of course, hugely influential on the early founders of the Royal Society and those who fit the mold of Christian virtuosi. Accordingly, Nuovo spends a great deal of time examining both Bacon's own religious views and Bacon's views on the relationship between religion and natural philosophy. On Nuovo's reading, Bacon was careful to make a distinction between the two that protected each from inappropriate encroachment by the other. Properly understood, they could be seen as mutually reinforcing components of a unified worldview and systematic approach to knowledge. The second chapter focuses on Robert Boyle, who is perhaps the paradigm for a Christian virtuoso. Nuovo highlights Boyle's deep and lasting concern for Christian morality, an interest that predated his scientific pursuits. But the bulk of the chapter is devoted to a careful analysis of Boyle's mechanism. These two chapters lay the groundwork for understanding the balanced commitments to both experimental natural philosophy and a version of Christianity marked by moral commitments that were the hallmark of the Christian virtuoso.

Chapter 3 is titled "Epicurus, Lucretius, and the Crisis of Atheism" and seeks to outline a particular challenge faced by Christian mechanical philosophers in Locke's time. The chapter is quite varied and tracks through a large number of subjects including Lucy Hutchinson's translation of *De rerum natura*, the Earl of Rochester's poetry, and Hobbes's materialist theology. But the uniting theme relates to the fact that the mechanical philosophy, endorsed by the virtuosi under discussion, was inherited from ancient sources that were religiously suspect. So the *Christian* virtuosi in this period faced the challenge of reconciling their commitment to Christianity and revealed religion with a commitment to open inquiry into nature's workings and to a religiously tainted mechanism.

With this background in place, Nuovo transitions to Part 2 of the book and his interpretation of Locke as a Christian virtuoso. Chapter 4 is among the most interesting and adventurous in the book. Nuovo attempts to examine the earliest origins of the *Essay* by reconstructing from Draft A the *Essay*'s "Urtext": the "hasty and undigested thoughts" delivered to a group of friends in his chambers that Locke references in "The Epistle to the Reader." Nuovo's account of Locke's thought and motivation at the outset of the *Essay* are, he admits, conjectural. And to my mind many of the claims made here are controversial. I imagine most readers will take issue with at least some of what Nuovo says in this chapter, but I also imagine they will nonetheless profit from his efforts. More generally, here and elsewhere it is refreshing to see Nuovo track so carefully through the diachronic changes in Locke's thought. In recent decades Locke scholarship has become better at cataloging and attending to the ways in which Locke's thought developed and morphed over time. But on this front it still lags behind, say, Descartes or Leibniz scholarship. Nuovo's book sets an admirable standard for careful attention to these issues.

The next two chapters seek to understand, respectively, Locke's approach to the mind and his approach to the world. The first of these comes under the guise of Locke's "logic." Nuovo discusses Lockean ideas, the ways they function and coordinate in the mind, and what this means for the scope and limits of human knowledge and belief, with special attention on our knowledge of morality. Locke's approach to the world comes under the guise of his "physics," and much of Nuovo's discussion focuses on Locke's efforts to grapple with the mechanical philosophy. A great deal of the material in these chapters is standard fare for treatments of the *Essay*. But Locke experts will want to examine these chapters to get Nuovo's take on their topics of special interest.

In the next chapter Nuovo tackles Locke's moral thought. This subject presents a challenge in a number of ways. On the one hand, Christian virtuosos were meant to be especially motivated by moral considerations, and this is certainly true of Locke. On the other hand, it is also true that Locke failed to produce a systematic treatment of morality. Nuovo voices the opinion that Locke's corpus does contain a great deal by way of moral thought, which "when taken together and considered with a measure of patience and charity, can be brought together into a more or less coherent scheme" (183). But he declines to reconstruct such a scheme on Locke's behalf, choosing instead to work through some of Locke's views on moral epistemology and the metaphysics of morals (including issues of free will and personal identity). Again, much of the coverage will be familiar to Locke experts. But again, Locke experts will want to know about Nuovo's particular stance on these issues. And certainly the chapter achieves Nuovo's goal of showing that Locke had thought deeply and systematically about central issues in ethics.

The final chapter explores Locke's theology. The special focus is on Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* and *Paraphrase of the Epistles of St. Paul*. Nuovo's view is that these works have been consistently and wrongfully neglected. According to him, they form both an important original contribution to Biblical theology and a key part of Locke's larger philosophical program. Much of the chapter involves a summary of the two works. Given that Nuovo is correct about the relatively small amount of attention they have received, I suspect many readers will find his guided tour of them to be very helpful. But the chapters provide much more than mere exegesis. Nuovo departs from received interpretation of the *Reasonableness* with a substantial argument that Locke was not a creedal minimalist. And he also does well to emphasize the *moral* content in these two

texts. The moral import of *Reasonableness* and *Paraphrase of the Epistles* is meant to help us recognize how closely they are aligned with Locke's other philosophical works.

This book is in many ways excellent, and nearly all readers will find a great deal of value between its covers. Nuovo's reading of Locke and other figures is rich and highly textured, which is to say that he does not confine himself to a narrow path of explanation or argumentation. Instead, he takes the time to explore topics of interest when and as they arise. Nuovo is also in admirable command of Locke's manuscript remains and frequently puts them to good work. And, as will be no surprise to those familiar with his earlier work, Nuovo is among the very best at understanding Locke's theological context and positioning him appropriately within it.

It is increasingly common to see Locke situated among his contemporaries and the context of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe. But one notable contribution of this book is to remind us that Locke and his contemporaries were also keenly attuned to the texts and argumentative dialectics of the ancient world. Nuovo stands out among Locke commentators for his admirable knowledge of and facility with this important background. And his points are often enhanced by a useful quotation from Democritus or a clever insight gleaned from Cicero. More systematically, this careful attention to the ancient world pays dividends in helping with one of the more difficult tasks in Locke scholarship: how are we to understand the relationship between Locke's practical philosophy and his theoretical philosophy? By focusing on the moral components of Locke's Christianity and the way in which this colored his approach to ancient views about mechanism and morality, Nuovo offers an interesting bridge between these two sides of Locke's thought.

Nuovo is certainly correct that the category of the Christian virtuoso is highly useful for understanding Locke. But some readers might question the way in which Nuovo approaches the category. His presentation of Christian virtuosity focuses mainly on Bacon and Boyle. With regard to the first, while Locke was certainly operating in a "Baconian" context it is not always easy to make a direct link to Bacon himself. The fact remains that there is very little actual evidence of Locke reading and engaging with Bacon's works. Boyle and his works assuredly played a bigger role in Locke's intellectual development. But even here questions remain. Did Locke's approach toward natural philosophy undergo a shift after he left Oxford, during the period when he was closely associated with Sydenham? Did his early enthusiasm for a Boylean mechanism temper into a more epistemically cautious approach to the natural world? Some evidence suggests a positive answer to these questions. As discussed above, Nuovo does an admirable job tracking a number of developments and shifts in Locke's thinking over time. But these questions are not addressed. Given how important they are to the book's central themes, this is unfortunate. It is also unfortunate because, in virtue of the work done in the rest of the book, Nuovo is remarkably well-positioned to offer genuine insight into some of the more vexing questions surrounding Locke's attitude toward mechanism. Focusing on how much of Boyle's thought Locke initially accepted and how much might have been later abandoned seems essential for making progress on this topic. More generally, it could have been useful to fill out the picture of Christian virtuosity with a larger cast of characters. How would our image of Christian virtuosity change if figures like John Ray, Richard Lower, Nehemiah Grew, and John Wilkins were considered alongside Bacon and Boyle? Related to this, the book does exclude some literature which addresses Locke's virtuosity and virtuosity more generally in the period. Engagement with work by authors

like Sorana Coreanu, Elliot Rossiter, and Steven Shapin might have added more depth and contour to the picture of the Christian virtuoso that Nuovo provides.

Returning to Nuovo's original question, how was it that one and the same individual was able to write both the *Essay* and *Reasonableness*? Nuovo's answer, that both texts are of the sort we should expect from the pen of a Christian virtuoso, is certainly correct. And Nuovo's book is also successful in showing that the two works are less divergent than they first appear. There are key themes, particularly to do with Christian morality, that unite them. In this respect the book is a success. But the book also seems to endorse the further claim that the *Essay* and *Reasonableness* should be seen as part of a unified Lockean project, a project that was continuous throughout his life starting with his early Boylean natural philosophical research and ending with his commentary on St. Paul. About this larger claim, I think we might have some reservations. Of course, Locke was one individual with a stable personality throughout his adult life. As far as we know, he did not undergo any kind of radical conversion or disruptive shift of identity in the course of writing his major works. So we ought to admit that there is a certain level of unity to his thought. That being said, *Reasonableness* and, for example, Draft A of the *Essay* do seem to come from markedly different periods of Locke's life, periods during which he was animated by different issues and concerns. How much variability should we allow to the different stages of Locke's career? Even if it is true that Locke was a steadfast Christian virtuoso throughout his life might it also be true that his goals in the *Essay* were substantially different from his goals in *Reasonableness*? These are difficult questions. It is hard to know what a complete or correct answer to them might even look like. Nuovo's new book makes a number of important contributions to Locke scholarship. But to my mind, one of the most important is to bring these difficult but very important questions into crystal clear focus. And while some readers might disagree with the answers he gives, it is clear that in the course of giving them he has provided us with a book of great value.

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