

Victor Nuovo, *John Locke: The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, 263 pp.

Victor Nuovo is well known among Locke specialists for his groundbreaking essays on Locke's religious thought, interest in ancient philosophical traditions, and involvement with Enlightenment culture. In 2011, several of his essays were collected in the volume *Christianity, Antiquity, and Enlightenment: Interpretations of Locke* (Springer). More recently, Oxford University Press published his monograph *John Locke: The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso*, which presents a novel interpretation and reassessment of Locke's oeuvre as the work of a Christian virtuoso. By this term, which was coined by Robert Boyle, is meant an "experimental natural philosopher, an empiricist and naturalist, who also professed Christianity of a sort that was infused with moral seriousness and with Platonic otherworldliness overlaid with Christian supernaturalism" (p. 1).

The vocation of a Christian virtuoso predated Locke. Thus, in order to better locate Locke's intellectual activity in the context of seventeenth-century philosophical, scientific, and religious thought, Nuovo devotes the first three chapters, which comprise Part 1 of the book, to the questions, themes, and challenges that shaped the development of Christian virtuosity. Chapter 1 makes the persuasive point that Francis Bacon, who lived and wrote in a context informed by theological meaning and purpose, was the first Christian virtuoso. Bacon followed a methodological rule that safeguarded the authority of scriptural revelation while pursuing natural philosophy and theology independently of each other. Later, as Chapter 2 points out, Boyle significantly elaborated this approach by combining natural philosophy with teleology. Boyle indeed maintained that empirical research provided evidence

of God's existence, creation, and providence. As Nuovo argues in Chapter 3, this methodological approach played a primary role in Boyle's and other English scholars' struggle against the atheistic implications of the rediscovery of Epicureanism in the early modern period. In this regard, Nuovo accurately reassesses the reception of Epicureanism among several important yet oft-neglected figures, such as John Evelyn, Lucy Hutchinson, and John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester. Briefly, Part 1 of this volume presents the first ever attempt at reconstructing, systematically and thoroughly, the genesis and development of Christian virtuosity, besides enabling the reader to better appreciate the relevance of the category of "Christian virtuoso" to Locke's work.

Part 2, which consists of five chapters, deals specifically with Locke. Nuovo aptly observes that Locke's religious interests permeated his production since his youth, and not only during his last decade, which he devoted mainly to theological writing. Chapter 4 shows that the questions, concerns, and methodological approach typical of a Christian virtuoso are evident in the drafts and notes that Locke wrote and revised, over around two decades, in preparation of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine the philosophy of Locke as a Christian virtuoso in its tripartite structure, which is explained in *Essay* IV.xxi – the last chapter of the *Essay* – and which consists of logic, physics, and ethics. Finally, Chapter 8 covers Locke's theology, with a focus on his biblical hermeneutics and soteriology.

In his analysis, Nuovo pays great attention to Locke's reflection on morality, which runs throughout his oeuvre and unites his thought. Locke saw ethics as "*the proper Science, and Business of Mankind in general*" (*Essay* IV.xii.11). He always regarded morality as demonstrable, but he failed to provide a rational demonstration of morality. Therefore, in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), he eventually had recourse to a Scripture-based ethics, which he judged to be coherent and cogent. He employed a historical method of exegesis, with the aim of rediscovering the true meaning of Scripture by considering the biblical texts in relation to both their respective contexts and the biblical discourse as a whole. He regarded the divinely given law of nature as eternally valid and universally binding. Though, he argued that only the Christian Law of Faith could effectively promote moral conduct and facilitate the pursuit of salvation, because Christ had complemented the law of nature with assurance of otherworldly rewards and sanctions and the promise of God's forgiveness of the repentant faithful. Even before the composition of the *Reasonableness*, however, Locke's views on morality were grounded in theism

and were supported by a Christian conception of life. Nuovo correctly notes that Locke's ethics is part of the modern natural law tradition beginning with Grotius, given that modern natural law theory combined empirical naturalism with natural theology (pp. 184-90). Nonetheless, in *De jure belli ac pacis* (1625), Grotius described the law of nature as objectively valid even if we were to suppose "that there is no God, or that he takes no care of human affairs". But this position, which entailed the possibility of a separation of natural law from theology, was foreign to Locke's thinking, since the theological foundation of natural law always occupied a prominent place in his moral, religious, and political thought.

Locke was both an experimental natural philosopher and a sincere Christian believer, "who was confident that the two vocations were not only compatible, but mutually sustaining, and who believed that they could be united in a single philosophical program to produce a system of philosophy, a Christian philosophy" (p. 247). He regarded natural reason and biblical revelation as complementary and mutually sustaining. Both natural theology and biblical theology play important, and complementary, roles in his thought. Thus, while Locke's writings in different fields represent different projects, these projects cohere in an organic whole, and the moral tension and the religious dimension pervading his intellectual effort are among the major factors determining this coherence. Nuovo's analysis emphasizes the internal coherence and unity of Locke's work, as it provides compelling evidence and arguments in support of a holistic consideration of Locke's corpus. This book convincingly revalues the religious background, aspects, and implications of Locke's philosophy and, hence, helps the reader to achieve a deeper understanding of his texts, context, and legacy. Therefore, this intelligently written book is to be recommended to all those interested in Locke's ideas and methods.

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