

Religion, Soulcraft, and Education
in Locke's Liberalism
Dwight D. Allman
Baylor University

A paper prepared for the annual conference of
The American Political Science Association,
September 1-4, 2005
Washington D.C.

This paper explores why and how Locke ties his essentially materialist politics to a conceptualization of the liberal citizen that nevertheless represents citizenship as a kind of spiritual vocation. Moreover, I argue that Locke's understanding of the soulcraft required by a liberal polity shapes both his treatment of the Church as a private, informal but also key institution in the social-moral equation of liberal society and his radical departures from orthodox Christian theology (as, for example, in his rejection of the central Christian doctrine of original sin). Finally, I contend that tying Locke's treatment of religion and theology to his attempts to work out the moral and cultural conditions of a liberal politics sheds a proper light on the question of his relation, as a political thinker, to Christianity, not to mention the question of his own religious commitments.

I.

Looking up from the pages of the most widely read and influential statement of Locke's liberal politics, *The Second Treatise of Government*, one might well conclude that Lockean liberalism utterly neglects what is arguably the central theme of pre-modern political philosophy—the cultivation and/or formation of human beings in the name of making possible the best life and political order available to them. Locke's treatment of the problem of politics in the *Second Treatise* as one of legitimating a governing authority in the face of the immutable claims every individual has on liberty and equality seems to presume a natural state that autonomously provides for the spiritual completion and/or perfection of human beings. Political society proves necessary only because human beings cannot be relied on to avail themselves consistently of the distinctive powers, which they fully possess outside of political life, to shape natural man for, and to

direct him towards, a properly human existence: one in which right reason governs animating passions, interests and prejudices by imposing the law prescribed by nature for directing human activity and securing human well-being.¹

To be sure, Locke persistently hints at problems in the state of nature with respect to achieving a truly humane existence (cf. 2T: §38, 83, 124, 131, 136). Some kind of man-made order proves, in the end, to be indispensable, particularly for securing the liberty and individual property that a life properly directed by reason presupposes. But Locke sharply distinguishes between “the state of nature” and “political society” in the *Second Treatise*, making clear that he understands the latter to be simply a conventional structure whose legitimacy derives entirely from its ability to facilitate prospects and possibilities fully contained within the former. In the argument of the *Second Treatise*, natural man is in no essential sense a *political* animal (see 2T: §95). Politics, by extension, is not formally defined or metaphysically sanctioned in terms of what Socrates first describes as the core political problem—*caring for the soul*.² In his original *Letter Concerning Toleration*, composed in 1685 while he was still at work on the *Two Treatises*, Locke even adopts this traditional formulation to argue for a formal separation of “care of souls” from politics, identifying the liberal state strictly with the material or bodily prerequisites of human agency (and, therein, of attending to the soul). Locke thus confines politics to “the procuring, preserving, and advancing of [the citizen’s] own civil interests,” though he states his case for religious toleration, and for a liberal polity that institutionalizes its commitment to tolerance through a formal separation of religion from

¹ As Locke explains it, the state of nature is beset by certain “inconveniences”—primarily a result of the fact that individuals in that condition must be “judges in their own cases”—for which “civil government is the proper remedy.” See *Second Treatise of Government*, §12-13. References to the *Second Treatise* (2T) will be hereafter included in the text.

² In Plato’s *Apology* Socrates defends his life devoted to philosophizing, which he represents as the greatest civic service Athens has ever known, in the name of caring for the souls of his fellow citizens (see 28b-30b).

political power, in the language of a medieval discourse which formally conceptualized political life and the organization of society around care of the body (the function of the temporal, or secular, government) and care of the soul (the mission of the church). He defines “civil interests,” in turn, as “life, liberty, health, and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture and the like”(LCT, 26).³ In relation to the late-scholastic politics against which it would define itself, the liberalism expounded in Locke’s *Second Treatise* likewise turns on a contraction of the political realm, restricting public action to the material preconditions of what Locke suggests is the spiritually rarefied existence prescribed by nature (and by nature’s God) for human beings.⁴ While the most influential currents of pre-modern political thought characteristically promote a *politics of the soul*, the modern strand of political thought that descends from Locke could be said to contend unapologetically for a *politics of the body*.

If the *Second Treatise* were Locke’s final word on the matter, one might perhaps rightly charge him with a certain naiveté concerning the autonomous and natural self-sufficiency of human beings to live as self-directing, moral and social agents (not to mention, as liberal citizens). Beyond dispute is the fact that Locke’s brand of modern politics places a hitherto unthinkable burden of responsibility for the cultivation of its participants on structures, institutions and associations that are not properly speaking “political,” particularly in Locke’s diminished sense of that term. It is this radical privatization of the civic sphere that demarcates modern, and especially Lockean, politics

³ Quotations come from William Popple’s original translation, published in 1689 and reprinted as *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. James H. Tully (Hackett Publishing Co., 1993). Page references will be given in the text after LCT.

⁴ According to the *Second Treatise*, the natural existence of human beings is bounded by “the rule of right reason,” which Locke describes in the *First Treatise* (1T) as “the voice of God” in human beings. Those who trespasses right reason are variously condemned as “noxious creature[s]” and “savage beasts” for having “quit the principles of human nature.” See 1T: §86; 2T: §10-11.

from its pre-modern rivals. Within the framework of Lockean liberalism, soulcraft is therefore largely relegated to the private realm, at the center of which stands a disestablished church. Tocqueville's famous observations about the unequivocal importance of intermediate institutions, private associations and independent churches in the civic equation of American democracy begins in this light to look like a commentary on the pervasively Lockean quality of American society. However, Locke is not otherwise silent on the question of how liberal citizens might in fact be fashioned. Most significantly, he published *Some Thoughts On Education* (in 1693), a kind of how-to manual originally composed as a series of letters to a friend concerned with rearing his son to be a proper liberal gentleman; later he brought out *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1697), which reads like a guide to the self-education of adults who would live freely as self-governing agents. Much less conspicuously, if no less intentionally, Locke treats the question of political formation in the *Letter Concerning Toleration* and its three sequels; while in other writings like *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (composed in 1695), where his ostensible focus is Christian theology, the role of religion in the civic culture of a liberal, or at least liberalizing, polity seems to be never very far from the center of his concern.

The tradition of modern political thought that emerges in the course of the sixteenth century, finding its seminal voice in John Locke at the end of the seventeenth century, recasts the concept of the citizen, as it reconceives politics and redraws the boundaries demarcating the public from the private sphere of association. This development makes way for that uniquely modern configuration of informal, mostly ad hoc, but ultimately indispensable institutions that constitute what we know as "civil society," which relocates in turn much of what falls under "civic life" from the public to

the private arena. But it also precipitates something of a quandary with respect to the idea of citizenship, a concept that no longer conveys in the ideal case a kind of spiritual vocation, and yet that continues to call on individuals to reverence public ends and duties as of the highest order. In Locke's hands, citizenship seems to become, at best, a second-order activity, a strategic endeavor by which one merely seeks the material provisions and bodily security that enable life and condition higher pursuits. One might go so far as to say that Locke gives the confusion encompassing citizenship in modernity its classic expression with his argument for a separation of church and state posed as a case for consigning care of the soul to private life, while formally limiting public activity to interests and concerns arising primarily from care of the body. Nevertheless, Locke does not escape the need to address the problem or question that guided the pre-modern tradition of political thought stretching back to Plato and Socrates—the question of the best regime. Locke contends in the *Letter* for a separation of church and state, and for a tolerant politics confined to caring for bodily existence, in the name of the political order that all right-thinking Christians *ought* to embrace. He defends liberalism, in other words, as the politics best suited to true Christians who desire above all to live as genuine disciples of their Lord. As a consequence, the *Letter* is cast in the seemingly paradoxical form of a theological argument for the exclusion of religion from the public square. By the same token, some of Locke's other writings, particularly those that focus on education, promote a rehabilitation of the classical idea that citizenship properly entails something akin to the spiritual perfection of the citizen qua human being.

In sum, underlying my study of Locke's treatment of the matter of liberal citizenship is the contention that his writings reveal, on the one hand, a thinker acutely aware of the fact that the modern revolution in politics he seeks to extend begins with the

rejection of the pre-modern tradition of conceptualizing civic engagement, obligation and duty in terms of the human and/or religious priority of caring for the soul. On the other hand, Locke's station as a political thinker whose theorizing is driven by his participation in an active campaign to reconfigure the political landscape of seventeenth-century Europe confronts him with the necessity of having to defend his liberal polity as the best contestant in an unrestricted contest of regimes. As the original proponent of a liberal order, in other words, Locke is compelled to consider the issues of political life in the broadest possible terms. Corollary to the question of the best regime is of course the question of the best life.⁵ It is this question that Socrates distills into the problem of caring for one's soul as he makes his *apologia* to Athens against the charge that his life of philosophizing represents a civically irresponsible and impious existence.⁶ In promoting liberal citizenship, Locke finds that he too must take up the question of the best life: he must make plain that the life best suited to human beings qua human beings (and/or qua Christians) is the life vouchsafed by a liberal regime. Like ancient and medieval thinkers, then, Locke conducts his philosophizing about politics on a morally comprehensive level, working from the question of the life best suited to human beings to the question of the political arrangements that best provide for such an existence and from the question of the best political order to a defense of the kind of life it intrinsically promotes and best sustains. But he also recognizes that this labor demands that he stake his claim to an intellectual territory long since colonized by religion. Like his modern counterparts, however, Locke desires to replace the spiritual and/or otherworldly foundations of pre-modern political life with a temporal orientation configured primarily by a material calculus of this-worldly interest. I seek here to explore and to assess Locke's attempts to

⁵ Consider Aristotle's *Ethics*, 1094a.4-1094b.12.

⁶ See *Apology*, 29c-30c

meld his essentially materialist politics to a conceptualization of the liberal citizen that cannot, in the final analysis, fail to represent citizenship as a kind of spiritual vocation. In this way, I aim to shed light on the complex relationship in our modern—and, particularly, American—tradition of liberalism between what might usefully be described as a politics of the soul and a countervailing politics of the body.

II.

Locke's treatment of religion makes plain that he views it as a source of oppression, division and strife impeding the achievement of liberty, equality and social comity, but he also recognizes that religion must play a key, even an indispensable, role in the social-moral vitality of a liberalizing and, finally, liberal society. In the *Letter*, Locke directs himself in the first instance to the problem of intolerance within the family of Christian denominations. He begins boldly, claiming that he esteems "toleration to be the chief characteristical mark of the true church," and proceeds to enumerate a list of offenses, including the persecuting, tormenting, and killing of other men, that have marked Christianity's history in politics. He contends that the rivalry among the different Christian persuasions, whether over the antiquity of lines of authority, worship practices and rituals, or the scope and content of different reforms, amounts to so much wrangling for "power and empire." In a similar vein, he dismisses disputes over orthodoxy, noting that "every one is orthodox to himself," and suggesting that controversies revolving around even core theological and metaphysical questions ultimately clarify very little with respect to the authenticity of a given profession of Christian faith (LCT, 23). Locke points rather to the *practice of toleration* as the best touchstone of a true faith.

He thus appears to side with those who would give priority to concrete acts, the living expression of professed beliefs, in any evaluation of faith: "[L]et such a one talk

never so much of the church, he plainly demonstrates by his actions, that ‘tis another kingdom he aims at, and not the advancement of the kingdom of God” (LCT 25). His full intention, however, may well be a more radical one, namely, to depreciate the status of theology (elevated in the medieval university to “queen of the sciences”), and by extension the authority of the doctors of theology, in the assessment of what counts as a true Christian walk. The argument of the *Letter* seems, on the one hand, to represent Christian denominations of all stripes as conducting themselves primarily as political vehicles in the service of a particular set of designs and interests, while it proposes, on the other hand, that rules of conduct accessible to natural reason ought ultimately to guide judgments about genuine faith and true religion. Regulating the claims of faith by an appeal to moral and/or religious truths that can be established by reason alone looks also to guide Locke in making his case for *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. But Locke never opts for a strictly natural religion, that is, for an essentially terrestrial faith that resides “within the limits of reason alone” (as Kant would eventually define it), although the approach he takes to religion consistently privileges natural reason over revelation.⁷

In the *Letter*, Locke turns from a sharply critical appraisal of denominational strife to what one might describe as the constructive labor of tracing the institutional and theological boundaries within which religious life might flourish as part of a liberal order. In short, Locke takes up what is rightly termed *political theology*, pressing the case for banning religion from the public arena and confining it strictly to the realm of private institutions as accords, on his account, with the dictates of a purely rational theology and with correct Christian belief. If Locke would diminish the influence of scholastic theology and theologians on public life, he seems nevertheless to be engaged in

⁷ Kant first published his *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* in 1793. [Brief account of Locke’s treatment of revelation in *Reasonableness of Christianity*.]

rehabilitating the practice of political theology—a discourse pioneered by the ancient philosophers before the pagan emphasis on the statesman’s *phronēsis*, or *prudentia*, was displaced by Christianity’s elevation of piety to the rank of highest moral qualification for politics.⁸ Locke’s employment of theology represents, in other words, a kind of civic discourse and mode of soulcraft by which he seeks to reconcile a religiously rooted public opinion to his liberal politics. However, Locke would persuade his readers that tolerance and the other virtues he emphasizes in the *Letter* are qualities recommended by Christianity itself, and that a politics that properly embraces and promotes these virtues should be the politics of right-thinking Christians. To this extent, the argument of the *Letter* plainly aims to promote a particular construction of Christianity, what might be termed a liberal theology. It seems, moreover, that he likewise hopes to shape the commitments of clerics who might function as allies and advocates—in effect, a body of liberal clergy—in the public dialogue about politics.

The contention, around which Locke structures the extended argument of the *Letter*, that Christians, with their different creeds, confessions and denominations, ought to view religious toleration as the “chief characteristical mark of the true church” is remarkable both for what it says and for what it does not say. On the one hand, it confronts the reader with Locke’s intention to argue for an understanding of Christianity as a system of belief centered on a commitment to toleration. As such, it stands as an expressly theological claim. It suggests, moreover, that religions, in general, and the numerous and rival congregations of Christians, in particular, might be sorted and ranked in regard to their standing as “the true church” by examining their practices with respect to toleration. On the other hand, it conspicuously fails to connect the truth or authenticity

⁸ The key text for documenting this watershed development in western political thought and life is Augustine’s *City of God Against the Pagans*. See, in particular, his account of the model Christian king at V: 24-26.

of religion to the divinity of Jesus, to his atoning sacrifice on the cross for human sinfulness, or to his resurrection and the conquest of death. The curious dimensions of this statement are, in fact, emblematic of the theology Locke propounds in the *Letter*, as well as of his practice of political theology in general. Here he proposes a liberal theology of toleration, or a defense, set out in theological terms, of the paramount duty of toleration and of a social-political order structured around the priority of securing the individual rights that define a temporal condition of spiritual agency and bodily well being in the face of religious difference and dispute. Locke's theological case for toleration thus resembles a mode of practical reasoning cast in theological form. It conveys little that is strictly doctrinal in nature; it consistently avoids ultimate questions; and it gives every appearance of being regulated by Locke's stated conviction that "reason must be our last judge and guide in every thing."⁹

Locke turns immediately to the task of delimiting the realm of religion from that of politics. While the boundary lines that Locke draws for the liberal state effect a shrinking of the public square from its more-or-less comprehensive dimensions within the medieval polity, his identification of "civil (as opposed to ecclesiastical) government" with bodily well being represents a perpetuation of medieval thinking about the constitution of the social whole. As earlier noted, the liberal order conceived by Locke departs, perhaps most radically, from its pre-modern antecedents in the degree to which public life will now rely on private structures to cultivate political actors ready to assume the responsibilities attendant on a rights-bearing sovereign body. If Locke thereby challenges the institutional identity, standing and function of the church in European society, his liberal politics nevertheless presume that the church, now in an informal and unofficial capacity, will yet perform a key role in the "spiritual formation" of proper

⁹ See *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV. 19.

citizens. A study of the *Letter* enables us to bring to light the contours of this spiritual formation.

Locke's case against conceiving of the church as a public institution that properly exercises its power and influence within the political arena grounds itself in the apparently theological contention that care of the soul necessarily rests strictly with the individual, whom God constituted as a moral agent solely responsible for his/her own salvation. No one, according to Locke, "can so far abandon the care of his own salvation, as blindly to leave it to the choice of any other" (LCT, 26). Corollary to this singularly individualist concept of agency is Locke's claim that "[a]ll the life and power of true religion consists in the inward and full perswasion of the mind" (LCT, 26-27). But it goes without saying that no proponent of the public office exercised by the Church of England in Locke's seventeenth-century world would defend "blindly" leaving one's salvation to "the choice of another."¹⁰ Similarly, defenders of a state church with the "civil magistrate" at its head would in no way accept the contention that their position implied a complete abandonment of individual agency.¹¹ Drawing on traditional authorities, one might plausibly contend that only within a social order constituted and governed according to God's revealed truth does individual agency, in any meaningful sense, become possible. In short, the cogency and logical force of Locke's argument for toleration look to depend on conceiving of human agency as a necessarily insular phenomenon rooted in the completely self-contained exercise of individual choice. It is easy to imagine, of course, that the historical experience of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dissenters would recommend such a formulation; nevertheless, it is also clear that

¹⁰ [See the response to the *Letter* by Jonas Proast.]

¹¹ One only has to think of Hobbes, Locke's immediate progenitor in the tradition of liberal thought, to appreciate that some conceptual wiggle room exists between the forfeiture of individual agency and the idea of a complete exclusion of the church from any public office. See *Leviathan* ??

Locke's configuration of human agency presumes a conceptual framework that privileges a radical kind of independence and spiritual self-sufficiency.

As Locke here stages it, then, the moral priority of toleration and, by extension, of liberalism itself arises from a theology that presupposes what is arguably an extreme version of individualism, which nevertheless becomes in Locke's argument the precondition of genuine agency. However debatable, these presuppositions perfectly coincide with the uniquely self-sufficient dimensions of the natural condition of human beings that Locke elaborates in the chapter of *The Second Treatise* devoted to the state of nature. Locke decisively modifies a framework found also in Hobbes by disentangling "the state of nature" (chapter 2) from "the state of war" (chapter 3), transforming a corrupted condition in which force and passion reign into a normative pattern for the conventional arrangement of society. The Lockean state thus rests its legitimacy on realizing the defining qualities of Locke's state of nature (cf. 2T: § 4). Locke's account of the natural condition, in turn, stands as a sketch of the true nature of human beings allowed to flourish in their natural habitat and, at least implicitly, as an argument for Locke's liberal polity as the political order best suited to human beings as such. At the same time, Locke's theology of toleration and his account of the state of nature lend essential support to his rendition of the principle of consent, another element of his political theory that descends from Hobbes but with critical modifications. From the theological vantage point developed in the *Letter*, a highly individualist interpretation of caring for the soul bolsters the idea that individual consent must consistently underlie any legitimate form of government, civil or ecclesiastical. Thus, Locke maintains not only that the "civil magistrate" ultimately derives his powers from the consent of the people (LCT, 26-27), but also that the church, properly defined, represents a "voluntary society"

of individuals, joined together “of their own accord,” who regulate themselves with “laws” established “by common consent” (LCT, 28-29).

In examining the nature of a church, Locke is led to confront the doctrine of apostolic succession and, somewhat less directly, the question of priesthood itself: “Some perhaps may object, that no such [voluntary] society can be said to be a true church, unless it have in it a bishop, or presbyter, with ruling authority derived from the very apostles, and continued down unto the present times by an uninterrupted succession” (LCT, 29). In response to this presumed objection, he calls for the definitive evidence that “Christ has imposed that law upon his church,” and likewise insists that such evidence, in order truly to settle the matter, be “very express and positive.” It is noteworthy that he does not here even discuss, let alone dispute, the key passage from *Matthew* (16: 15-19) upon which the Roman Church and its British offshoots had historically hung their claims to divine authority and authenticity. Pointing rather to a favorite contending verse,¹² he simply affirms: “Certain I am that nothing can be there [in such gatherings] wanting unto the salvation of souls; which is sufficient to our purpose” (LCT, 29). While alleging a scriptural basis for doubting apostolic succession, Locke nevertheless proves unwilling even to explore, or to venture any conclusion, on the basis of this apparent contest of proof texts. This tentativeness contrasts markedly with the certainty he exclaims about what “the salvation of souls” requires in the way of ecclesiastical authority or religious association and organization. His profession seems all-the-more remarkable insofar as it necessarily discounts not only the weighty question of a historic and successive authority connecting the disciples Jesus commissioned and ordained with those in the present who presume to speak and to act in his name, but also

¹² “For where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them.” *Matthew* 18: 20.

the tradition of sacraments—holy rites, officially administered, by which Christians properly navigate their walk of faith towards salvation—without serious comment, textual exegesis or theological explanation. However, if Locke’s theology of toleration derives, in the first instance, not from study of the Bible but from self-instruction in the precepts of natural religion, his conclusions about the nature of religious associations would not require “express and positive” support from revealed scripture before he might be willing to insist on their certainty.

While Locke’s case in the *Letter* for a politics of toleration institutionalized through a formal separation of church and state takes the form of a sustained theological argument, it offers at almost every turn reason to conclude that Locke vests his faith, first and foremost, in his mortal reason as the most reliable guide to translating the divine teaching found in Christian revelation and tradition into a conception of government. Elsewhere, in fact, Locke contends for the regulative priority of reason in forming and exercising religious belief, explaining that “faith is nothing but firm assent of the mind; which if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything but upon good reason.”¹³ In the context of the *Letter*, this rule of right thinking and correct belief is manifest in the practical and secular cast (if one might put it so) of Locke’s theologizing. It is the secular or temporal problem of constituting the *city of man*, not the eternal priority of reaching the *city of God*, that shapes Locke’s theology of toleration. This theology promotes, in turn, the same end as does his philosophy of education—the cultivation of morally independent and self-directing rational agents. It is in this light, moreover, that Locke’s characterizations of “true and saving religion” should be read, a concept he consistently ties to the moral/spiritual sovereignty and self-governance of each individual (cf. LCT, 26-27, 29, 35, 37-38), as also his proscriptions against the

¹³ *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV. 17:24.

inclusion of either Catholicism (a church “which is constituted upon such a bottom, that all those who enter into it, do thereby, *ipso facto*, deliver themselves up to the protection and service of another prince”) or Muslims (who, as such, are “bound to yield blind obedience to the *Mufti of Constantinople*”) within the boundaries of liberal toleration (LCT, 50-51). In the same breath, however, Locke also excludes atheists (who, in denying “the being of a God,” forfeit the ability to make “promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society”) from the legitimate embrace of a regime of toleration (LCT, 51). One is compelled, as a consequence, to wrestle with the question of Locke’s relation to otherworldly presuppositions that any foray into theology seems to call into play.

To describe Locke’s theologizing in the *Letter* as an exercise in political theology suggests that he constructs his arguments in a theological form because, in the first instance, the public discourse of his day (not-to-mention the original recipient of the *Letter*) demanded it. That is not to say, however, that theology for Locke is merely a kind of rhetoric, or that his professions of piety are at bottom insincere. Locke’s treatment of atheism plainly indicates that he is prepared to defend both belief in God and the notion that some such belief sustains the political life of a healthy society. Theology, by implication, stands as a substantive endeavor in its own right. With his arguments in the *Letter*, Locke obviously seeks to persuade his Protestant readers to take up something like a liberal politics. But I would contend for an even more comprehensive ambition that amounts, at the same time, to an encompassing engagement with the matter of a liberal soulcraft (something with which Locke is not often credited). On my reading, Locke strives also to determine the theological boundaries of the public culture in which he hoped a fully liberal politics might take root. As suggested earlier, he seeks converts

not only to a liberal conception of government, but also to a theological framework that might encourage and accommodate an emerging liberal politics. Locke speaks most directly to the latter when addressing those who profess to be “minister[s] of the word of God,” charging them with a duty to teach “this doctrine of peace and toleration” (LCT, 34; see also 50). As a political thinker, in other words, Locke represents significantly more than an advocate for a certain leftwing variety of politics among the contemporary contestants in early modern Europe (a description that may nonetheless fit, more or less, his collaboration with Anthony Ashley Cooper, the leading Whig politician of the day). He champions an altogether new order of society, a uniquely modern regime. In this capacity, Locke manifests that he understood the relation between politics and theology to be a critical one, if one that must always be fixed within certain limits. In short, political theology comes to light as an essential part of the metaphysical labor that attaches to the ambition of the political philosopher who would build his conception of the social world from the ground up.

As such, theology represents a subset of a kind of philosophizing that begins with the attempt to comprehend human beings and their existence as they come to light within a natural order that is fully intelligible to a mortal reason unsupported by revelation. And political theology, as practiced by Locke, amounts to an adaptation of this natural theology to the cultural conditions structuring the contest of regimes that occasions his case for a liberal politics. Locke’s political theology thus stands in sharp contrast to the traditional project of Christian theology, for which divinely communicated truths constitute a foundation underlying and directing every reflection on human society. I do not mean to imply, however, that what I have defended as Locke’s position in the *Letter* on the sufficiency of unaided reason to either the conceptualization or the practice of

social and political life constituted an immutable or static element of his thought. Indeed, a growing preoccupation with the question of religion in the last decade of his life points, perhaps, to increasing uncertainty and flux in Locke's musings about the right relation of reason to faith, particularly with respect to the prospect of natural religion alone proving adequate to the moral life of society.¹⁴ Be that as it may, Locke's reflections on the task of fashioning citizens for a liberal society lead him to articulate a philosophy of education that looks to supplement and to complement, if also to deepen and to complicate, the teaching of the *Letter* on care of the soul. I turn now to those reflections.

III.

Of particular note, for my purposes, is the fact that Locke's thinking about the task of education tends to replicate the divide between care of the body and care of the soul that explicitly structures his case for a liberal politics in the *Letter*. Early in his essay *Of The Conduct Of The Understanding*, for example, Locke emphasizes that education is largely a matter of properly exercising one's "faculties and powers," both those of "the body" and those of "the mind." Returning to this same point, he later declares: "[W]e should always remember what I said above, that the faculties of our souls are improved and made useful to us just after the same manner as our bodies are"(CU: §4 & §6).¹⁵ Though he formally relegates care of the soul to private life in the *Letter*, Locke devotes particular attention to care of the mind and/or the soul (often using *mind* as a synecdoche for *soul*) in writing about education, especially in *Conduct Of The Understanding*. He enumerates two principal goals that properly configure the serious pursuit of education: every individual should seek "to understand fully the business [1] of his particular calling

¹⁴ [See Steven Forde's excellent work bearing on this matter.]

¹⁵ Quotations come from the edition, based on the earliest published version of 1706, prepared by Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov in *John Locke: Some Thoughts Concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, eds. R.W. Grant and N. Tarcov (Hackett Publishing Co, 1996). Page references for quotes from *Conduct of the Understanding* will be given in the text after CU.

in the commonwealth, and [2] of religion, which is his calling as he is a man in the world” (CU, §19). Of these, the first concerns bodily existence, or “the support of this life,” while the second plainly attends to the soul and to what Locke terms the question of “future life” (CU, §8).

The concept of “soul,” however, proves to be a somewhat inconstant one in Locke’s hands, lending the notion of “caring for the soul” a similarly unsteady status. Locke inherits, of course, the idea of the soul as deployed in Christian scripture and theology as well as in the works of ancient (Greek and Roman) philosophy. In the former instance, the soul comes to light as essentially an otherworldly entity that finds its true residence in the kingdom of God, in the latter, as a term encompassing the distinctive powers and potentials of a humanity whose temporal realization or perfection constitutes human flourishing. Caring for the Christian soul is the defining aim of religion and entails, first and foremost, the saving ministry of the church; care of a this-worldly humanity, on the other hand, consists in the temporal (and, for Plato and Aristotle at least, quintessentially political) labor of bringing to completion those immaterial qualities or excellences that delineate a uniquely intelligent human nature within the animal kingdom. To care for the soul, then, culminates in its mortal *perfection*, in the one case, in its post-mortal *salvation*, in the other. And yet, in treating the matter of education, Locke eschews generic divisions or fundamental distinctions between, for example, civic education and philosophic or scientific education, as also between these and religious or sectarian formation. Rather, Locke consistently treats education as something of an unswerving continuum—a straight and single line, as it were, though clearly one composed of multiple points at which different individuals come to a halt.¹⁶

¹⁶ Not unlike his ancient predecessors, however, Locke does take account of different soul-types in discussing the project of education. For Locke’s discussion of discrete types, see TCE, 75-76.

As a consequence, the moral and liberal education suited to the average citizen looks to be of a piece with the philosophic and scientific education appropriate to the rare polymath. Locke is thus able to represent the education of liberal citizens not as a formation bounded by the peculiar configuration and discrete purposes of a historically and geographically situated regime, that is, not as civic education in the traditional sense, but as the universal education most appropriate to human beings as such, both in their essential nature as rational agents and in their timeless longing for immortality in the kingdom of God. Lockean liberalism, by extension, becomes a commitment to that political order in which civic education has been made fully reconcilable to philosophic education, while the latter, in turn, is taken to be entirely compatible with religious formation: the citizen and the philosopher (not to mention, the saint) now have hopes of living together in uncompromised comity. To recall briefly the point from which the story of the citizen and the soul begins—Plato’s classic formulation of the paradox underlying the defining promise of every polity to the institution of justice—liberalism appears to hold out the possibility of a politics in which those fashioned by a genuinely philosophic education might actually rule. Could it be that herein lie the seeds of so much contemporary wrangling in American society (e.g., objections to a biology that fails to accommodate creationism, or to literature that unsettles parochial convictions) over the philosophical and scientific content of public education? Are the tensions that characterize modern, liberal citizenship further compounded by Locke’s conflation of civic formation with the ideals of philosophic and scientific enlightenment?

It is at any rate the classical ideal of philosophic education, the originally Socratic notion of *perfecting the soul*, which guides Locke’s formulation of the broad task of education. He emphasizes this point in *Conduct Of The Understanding* with language

that might be mistaken for a passage from Aristotle's *Ethics*: "[W]e are born to be, if we please, rational creatures, but it is use and exercise only that makes us so" (CU, §6). This statement sums up a paragraph in which, as noted earlier, Locke speaks of the need to cultivate "the faculties of our souls" and proceeds to recommend a regimen of mathematics as the best way to "exercise [one's] mind in observing the connection of ideas and following them in train."¹⁷ Both of the treatises on education that Locke brought out after achieving renown as Europe's leading political thinker are centrally concerned with the task of cultivating liberal citizens. In both texts, moreover, Locke roots this task in a teleological anthropology that organizes and directs the enterprise of education, while it recalls the normative structure of his argument in the *Second Treatise*. To underscore the architectonic character of education at the end of his *Thoughts Concerning Education*, he once again adopts a markedly Aristotelian language that attributes to human rationality the natural priority of "the highest and most important faculty of our minds." The cultivation of this faculty, with its attendant virtues, deserves "the greatest care and attention," inasmuch as it supplies the defining end of our existence: "the right improvement and exercise of our reason being the highest perfection that a man can attain to in this life" (TCE, §122; cf. CU, §6). It is, moreover, the natural state of this "rational creature" that establishes the preconditions of a legitimate politics, just as it determines the aim and priorities of liberal education.

The idea of *saving the soul*, on the other hand, marks the divide for Locke between the properly political and public realm and the private sphere. Salvation is an otherworldly concern transcending the material interests that circumscribe the resolutely terrestrial practice of liberal politics. And yet, Locke also represents it as "the greatest

¹⁷ Compare Socrates' placing of mathematics just before dialectic in the philosophic education of the guardians at *Republic* VI: 509d-511e.

concern” (see CU, §8), and therein seems to tie it to our essential humanity and to make it necessary for liberalism (as a political philosophy and account of how one ought to live) to encompass it. In the final analysis, it is to this highest concern that Locke seeks to tie the moral priority of a liberal and tolerant politics in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*. If reason, duly cultivated, points the way towards a politics that appropriately promotes the perfection of the soul without trespassing on the private pursuit of salvation, it also teaches that in directing citizens towards the civic duty to perfect their souls liberalism cannot hope to bracket or to ignore the primary question of religious faith—the fate and future of the soul.

* * *