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From Laslett to Waldmann: The Case for Reconsidering Strauss on Locke

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Abstract: The denial of Locke’s debt to Hobbes has long been characteristic of many scholars of Locke influenced by the Cambridge School. Peter Laslett was the first to argue for this view, and he did so in conscious opposition to Leo Strauss and his interpretation of Locke. The recent discovery by Felix Waldmann of a memoir that confirms Locke’s deep interest in Hobbes as well as his prudent concealment of that interest has undermined Laslett’s case against Strauss. Waldmann’s discovery, moreover, comes in the wake of other historical work, by Jeffrey Collins and others, that has provided further grounds for abandoning the Cambridge view of Locke. These developments have yet to lead to a serious reengagement with Strauss’s interpretation of Locke, but they should, because his controversial claim about Locke’s debt to Hobbes has been vindicated.

Felix Waldmann’s recent publication of an early eighteenth-century memoir by Pierre Des Maizeaux has shaken the prevailing understanding of John Locke’s relation to Thomas Hobbes. These notes from an interview with an anonymous acquaintance of Locke, identified by Waldmann as his once close but ultimately estranged friend James Tyrrell, record that when a

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student at Oxford, Locke “despised Science and Erudition. Nonetheless, he almost always had the *Leviathan* by H. on his table, and he recommended the reading of it to his friends. Mr. . . . bought it on his recommendation; however he [sc. Mr. L] afterwards affected to deny that he ever read it.”¹ This discovery undermines the account of Locke originated by the founders of the Cambridge School of historiography in the middle of the twentieth century and makes more plausible the interpretation of Leo Strauss, who stressed Locke’s deep engagement and kinship with Hobbes.²

In an interview with Alison Flood, Waldmann described his discovery as the “holy grail” of Locke scholarship.³ To understand the ramifications of Waldmann’s discovery, however, it is necessary to revisit some earlier developments in Locke scholarship. We explain how the denial of Hobbes’s influence became a widely held dogma among scholars influenced by the Cambridge School, and why Strauss held such a different view of the matter. Our aim in revisiting this debate is to argue that Strauss’ interpretation of Locke deserves reconsideration in light of Hobbes’s now confirmed influence on Locke.

In the first of two sections, we trace the considerations that led Peter Laslett to deny that Locke’s political philosophy was decisively shaped by an engagement with Hobbes. We examine Laslett’s complex motives, including his animus against both Whig historiography and Strauss, as well as his explicit arguments. Although Laslett’s view became a dogma in the Cambridge School, recent work by a number of contextualist historians has called it into question. In the second section, we discuss that work and the context it provides for Waldmann’s discovery. We argue that these developments in the “contextualist” study of Locke should lead to a greater interest in Strauss’s interpretation, since neither Waldmann nor the other contextualist historians have yet given Strauss’s interpretation of Locke the reconsideration it deserves. After sketching the most important aspects of Strauss’s interpretation in the last part of the second section, we clarify our main contention in the conclusion. That contention is not that Strauss’s interpretation is correct in all its claims—a question well beyond the scope of this article—but that its reconsideration should be part of a new look at the character of Hobbes’s influence on Locke. Locke scholarship has reached a point at

¹Felix Waldmann, “John Locke as a Reader of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*: A New Manuscript,” *Journal of Modern History* 93 (June 2021): 273. We translate *dans la suite* as “afterwards” in place of Waldmann’s “in the future.”

²See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 165–251; *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 197–220.

³Alison Flood, “Lost Memoir Paints Revered Philosopher John Locke as ‘Vain, Lazy and Pompous,’” *Guardian*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/book/2021/jun/24/lost-memoir-paints-revered-philosopher-john-locke-as-vain-lazy-and-pompous>.

which it should be possible to transcend some of the sectarian divisions that have long plagued it.

Revisiting Laslett's Thesis

Well into the first half of the twentieth century, many scholars conceived of Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* as a vindication of the English Revolution of 1688 based on a natural law teaching that opposed Hobbes's political theory. There is, of course, evidence for this interpretation. The Preface to the *Two Treatises* identifies the vindication of the revolution as the work's main purpose. And in describing the state of nature, Locke criticizes "some Men" who confounded it with the state of war.⁴ There can be no doubt that Hobbes is the most important of these unnamed men. Let us call this interpretation the Whig or "liberal" interpretation of Locke. It connects a Locke who was a seminal figure for the English Whigs with a glorious event that established the modern English constitution. It also conceived of the opposition between limited government based on consent and absolutism as resting on an opposition between a gentler and more moral conception of the human situation and the harsher outlook of Hobbes.

This liberal interpretation was first challenged by Willmoore Kendall, who emphasized Locke's deference to majority rule over and against the rights of individuals, making Locke into a democrat more than a liberal.⁵ Then came Strauss's interpretation in *Natural Right and History*,⁶ which Kendall characterized as the most important event in Locke scholarship in the middle of the twentieth century.⁷ Strauss did not try to distance Locke from the Glorious Revolution, nor did he deny that Locke's work involves some criticisms of Hobbes, but he argued that, despite surface appearances, Locke's natural right teaching had more in common with Hobbes's political philosophy than with Richard Hooker's and the older natural law teaching. Strauss stressed the ultimate similarity of Hobbes's and Locke's fundamental principles: the natural equality and freedom of all men. He explained the impression or appearance of their opposition by ascribing to Locke a prudent rhetorical strategy of distancing himself from Hobbes, who had the reputation of holding immoral and irreligious opinions. By exaggerating his kinship with Hooker, the highly respectable Christian divine, Locke, according to Strauss, made his position acceptable to a wider audience.⁸

⁴John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: A Critical Edition*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), §19.

⁵Willmoore Kendall, *John Locke and the Doctrine of Majority-Rule* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1941).

⁶Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 165–66, 202–51.

⁷Willmoore Kendall, "John Locke Revisited," *Intercollegiate Review* 2, no. 4 (January 1966).

⁸Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 165–66, 206–7.

A third attack on the liberal interpretation of Locke was launched by Laslett. According to Laslett, almost the entirety of the *Two Treatises* was written prior to Locke's departure for Holland in 1683, at a time when his employer, the first Earl of Shaftesbury, was waging a campaign to exclude James, the Duke of York, from succeeding his brother, Charles II, to the English throne.⁹ Laslett also argued that the *Second Treatise*, no less than the *First*, was directed exclusively against Filmer, not Hobbes, with whom there was no conscious or serious engagement, either negative or positive. If Jeffrey Collins is right that "effacing Locke's engagement with Hobbes . . . became a signature move of the Cambridge school founders,"¹⁰ then Laslett was the first to take this step.

Laslett was a protégé of Herbert Butterfield, who was known for his criticism of what he called "the whig interpretation of history" or "the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasize certain principles of progress and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present."¹¹ Butterfield's influence and a deep-seated aversion to liberal modernity is evident in the title of Laslett's monograph on preindustrial English society: *The World We Have Lost*, not, as a Whig historian would have it, *The World We Have Overcome*.¹² Laslett's discontent with liberalism is further visible in his early work on Filmer. In the eyes of most scholars today, Filmer was an advocate of an absurd political theory unworthy of even the critical attention bestowed on him by Locke. For Laslett, he was an admirable defender of a losing cause: "[The] two final decades of the seventeenth century were the formative years of the principles of British and American liberalism. Although he had been dead for thirty years, Sir Robert Filmer was the most important single influence to oppose them."¹³

In his influential introduction to his edition of the *Two Treatises*, Laslett suppresses his sympathy for Filmer and antipathy toward Locke. But his thesis in that introduction has the effect of demoting Locke from his prominent position in English political thought. Laslett does not merely argue that the *Two*

⁹Peter Laslett, editor's introduction to *Two Treatises of Government*, 45–66.

¹⁰Jeffrey R. Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan: John Locke and the Politics of Conscience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2.

¹¹Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: Pelican Books, 1931), v.

¹²Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 1965). Laslett bemoaned the end of an earlier society, structured around the traditional household: "Time was when the whole of life went forward in the family, in a circle of loved, familiar faces, known and fondled objects, all to human size. That time has gone forever. It makes us very different from our ancestors" (22). Laslett's "nostalgia" for the old world was pointed out by Gertrude Himmelfarb. See "A One-Class Society," *New York Times*, June 24, 1984, 7, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/06/24/books/a-oneclass-society.html>.

¹³Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Political Works*, ed. Peter Laslett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1949), 34.

Treatises were written almost entirely during the Exclusion Crisis; he also suggests that they are best read in that context and that the slight additions and changes Locke made in 1689 were mere tweaks to accommodate his work to the new situation. By severing the connection between Locke and the Glorious Revolution, by placing him instead in the context of the failed attempt of the Earl of Shaftesbury to exclude James from the throne, Laslett does his best to knock Locke from his pedestal in the English political tradition.

Laslett joined his criticism of the liberal interpretation of Locke to a denial that Hobbes was Locke's chief antagonist in the *Second Treatise*, as that interpretation had maintained. Laslett's criticism would have been perfectly compatible with the alternative contention that Locke knowingly adopted some of Hobbes's thoughts. In fact, that contention, by linking Locke to a thinker with a more dubious reputation, would have contributed to Laslett's devaluation of Locke. Laslett, however, avoids this path because his interpretation is also a polemic against Strauss, to whom Laslett refers eight times in his introduction.¹⁴ When Laslett is battling the liberal interpretation, with its admiration of Locke as an advocate of a moderate revolutionary settlement, he writes that Locke "went much further towards revolution and treason than his biographers knew, anxious as they were to present him as a man of unspotted personal and political virtue."¹⁵ But when battling Strauss, he presents Locke in a more favorable light and casts him as a less radical thinker and a more honest author.¹⁶ This twofold polemic produces a Locke who is more revolutionary as a political actor than previously supposed yet more traditional as a philosophic thinker.

Unlike some other critics of Strauss's thesis about esoteric writing, Laslett seems partly to agree with him. Laslett does not go so far as to argue explicitly that Locke was intentionally deceptive. But he does acknowledge that Locke sometimes endorsed views he believed to be false. Consider the case of innate ideas. In an editorial note to section 11 of the *Second Treatise*, he describes Locke's contention that the propriety of capital punishment of murderers is written in the hearts of all mankind as "the most conspicuous instance in the whole book of Locke's willingness here to take advantage of the belief in innate ideas," even though "he had rejected [this belief] as early as

¹⁴Laslett, introduction to *Two Treatises*, 74n, 82n, 86n, 89n, 97n, 104n, 106n, 116n.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 73, 82, 100, 109, 120. Kendall reads Laslett through the lens of his opposition to Strauss and characterizes Laslett's work as a "'last ditch' rescue operation for the 'good' Locke," in "John Locke Revisited," 230. This is an understandable error. Though Laslett suppressed to a great degree his antipathy to Locke in his introduction, making his polemic against him all the more effective, he was more frank in his less scholarly work. In an essay for the *Listener*, he describes the meeting of William III and Locke as "a meeting of two famous, important, and unlovable men" (Peter Laslett, "John Locke as Founder of the Board of Trade," *The Listener*, November 18, 1954, 857).

1659–64.¹⁷ Indeed, Laslett's own thesis about the composition of the text implies a deliberate perpetuation of a falsehood by Locke himself. Locke presents the *Two Treatises* as a justification of William's right to rule England, whereas Laslett believes that they must be read as a vindication of Shaftesbury's opposition to the succession of James.¹⁸

Surprisingly, Laslett acknowledges Hobbes's influence on Locke, an influence that he considers "positive in its effects, and quite unlike the influence of Filmer, which [was] negative in its direction."¹⁹ Moreover, insofar as Hobbes has succeeded in making his philosophy part of the political landscape, according to Laslett, "it is through Locke that he has done it."²⁰ These are both positions endorsed by Strauss. But, unlike Strauss, Laslett conjectures that Hobbes's influence exerted itself on Locke through unconscious borrowings from his early readings of Hobbes, through the medium of unnamed other thinkers engaged in disputes with Hobbes, and perhaps through unrecorded conversations with those well-versed in Hobbes. Although Locke early on rejected Hobbes, "with his interests and with his experience, he could never have escaped the Hobbesian impact."²¹ This explanation of Locke's debt to Hobbes turns Locke into a surprisingly obtuse thinker: "Locke was in the curious position of having absorbed Hobbesian sentiments, Hobbesian phraseology in such a way that he did not know where they came from."²²

Laslett offers three arguments to show that any important influence Hobbes had on Locke operated beneath the level of Locke's full awareness. First, he contends that Locke's comments on Hobbes reveal only a sketchy and inaccurate knowledge of his work. Laslett makes the interesting observation that the *Two Treatises* and *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* each contain only one explicit reference to Hobbes or the *Leviathan*. The passage from the *Two Treatises* occurs as Locke is justifying his argument that in establishing political society everyone must agree that the decision of the majority about the form of the government will be the decision of the whole. To insist on universal consent, Locke argues, "would make the mighty *Leviathan* of a shorter duration than the feeblest Creatures" (§98). Laslett reads this as a criticism of Hobbes based on "a serious misunderstanding, or misremembrance, of Hobbes's doctrine."²³ But in a note to Locke's text, he offers a completely

¹⁷*Two Treatises of Government*, 292n.

¹⁸Laslett, introduction to *Two Treatises*, 51, 61.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 74–75. Laslett thus suggests that Filmer influenced Locke in the way an antagonist influences an adversary, by forcing him to address his terms, concepts, and positions, whereas Hobbes influenced him in the sense that he adopted some of his ideas.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 92.

²¹*Ibid.*, 75.

²²*Ibid.*, 72.

²³*Ibid.*, 71.

different reading, claiming that the passage is “clearly sarcastic and not intended as a critical comment on the theory of *Leviathan*, nor on any particular passage in it. . . . Locke and Hobbes were agreed on the necessity of the consent of the majority being taken for the act of the whole, and it was Filmer who denied it.”²⁴ This note points in the right direction: the sarcasm is directed not at Hobbes but at Filmer, who, while wishing for a mighty *Leviathan*, in fact undermines the conditions of such a government.

Regarding the reference to Hobbes in the *Essay*, Laslett again claims that Locke “mistakes the Hobbesian case.”²⁵ In the passage in question (I 3.5), Locke maintains that if one asks a Hobbist why a compact should be kept, “he will answer: Because the Publick requires it, and the *Leviathan* will punish you, if you do not.”²⁶ Laslett argues that this is a misreading of Hobbes because “the keeping of covenants was the third of the laws of nature, as Hobbes understood them.”²⁷ But Hobbes admits that his laws of nature are nothing more than a reasonable articulation of what is necessary for human beings to live together in peace, and Laslett quotes Tyrrell’s report that Locke had expressed this very view to him: Hobbes’s “laws of nature are not properly laws nor do they oblige mankind to their observation when out of a civil state or commonwealth.”²⁸ The passage in the *Essay* is not a misrepresentation of Hobbes’s position but a concise and accurate restatement of it.

Laslett’s second line of argument for denying that Locke had a serious interest in Hobbes is that Locke’s “notes, his diaries, his letters, his book lists and purchases show no sign of such an interest.”²⁹ He maintains that “it cannot be shown that when he wrote [the *Two Treatises*] Locke had any recent contact with *Leviathan* or with any other work of Hobbes at first hand.”³⁰ Again, in the footnote to this very sentence, Laslett shows some awareness of a complication: he refers to his appendix to show that Locke “lent his *Leviathan* in 1674, and did not get it back till 1691.”³¹ But in that appendix, Laslett more

²⁴John Locke, *Two Treatises*, 351n. In a note in his introduction, Laslett writes of the same passage: “The passage is clearly ironic and general, not a comment on a passage in Hobbes” (71n).

²⁵Laslett, introduction to *Two Treatises*, 71–72.

²⁶John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), l.iii.5.

²⁷Laslett, introduction to *Two Treatises*, 72n.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 80. Laslett relies on a sequence of letters between Locke and Tyrrell in which Tyrrell discusses the accusation that Locke lifted the argument of the *Essay* from certain “moderne French Authours.” Laslett does not mention that Tyrrell’s main concern was that Locke’s philosophy was “very near what is so much cried out upon in Mr. Hobs.” See *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E. S. De Beer, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 36, 102; see also 108–9.

²⁹Laslett, introduction to *Two Treatises*, 71.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*, 71n.

reasonably refuses to insist that Locke did not get back his copy of the *Leviathan* until 1691: “it does not seem to have been in his possession in 1679–83.”³² It is perfectly possible that Tyrrell returned Locke’s book sometime after 1674 without us having any records of it. Or Locke could even have obtained another copy. As for Locke’s notes, Laslett finds only one extract in them from Hobbes. But this is not sufficient evidence of his lack of serious interest. Locke evidently destroyed any material that he thought might harm his reputation, and knew that any association with Hobbes would do just that.³³ The nearly complete absence of Hobbes in Locke’s surviving notes is perfectly consistent with a wish on Locke’s part to hide his knowledge of Hobbes from the eyes of enemies who might obtain his papers.

Third, Laslett refers to two statements by Locke in which he denies being a serious reader of Hobbes. One is in Locke’s *Second Reply to the Bishop of Worcester*. The Bishop of Worcester had accused Locke of weakening belief in life after death by suggesting the possible materiality of the soul. Locke had defended this suggestion by maintaining that God can make even a material soul immortal.³⁴ Allowing that God has this power, the bishop argued that the materiality of the soul nonetheless does “take very much from the evidence of the immortality.” He supports this claim by pointing out that this was the position of Hobbes who has “not been thought to secure the great ends of Religion and Morality.”³⁵ After arguing that the hope for life after death depends entirely on God’s promise in scripture and not at all on what is inherent in the nature of things, Locke turns the tables on the bishop by accusing him of weakening the credibility of scriptures: “I am not so well read in Hobbes or Spinoza as to be able to say what were their opinions in this matter. But possibly there be those, who will think your lordship’s authority of more use to them in the case than those justly decried names; and be glad to find your lordship a patron of oracles of reason, so

³²Ibid., 139, emphasis added.

³³Locke’s last day in residence at Oxford was the occasion of a famous book burning in which the works of Hobbes were primary targets. See John Harrison and Peter Laslett, *Locke’s Library Catalogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3. Laslett supposes that Locke effaced all references to the writing of the *Two Treatises* (64), which seems a safe supposition given that as far as we know Locke’s working notes on Filmer, which must have been quite extensive, have disappeared. For Locke’s “monumental carefulness” with his private papers and library, see Laslett, introduction to *Two Treatises*, 74, and for examples of his obsessive preoccupation with secrecy, see Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (London: Longmans, Green, 1957), xi, 59–63, 162–65.

³⁴John Locke, *The Works of John Locke*, vol. 4 (London: Thomas Tegg, 1823), 64–68. Compare Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding* IV.iii.6, II.xxvii.27.

³⁵Edward Stillingfleet, *The Bishop of Worcester’s Answer to Mr. Locke’s Letter, concerning Some Passages relating to His Essay of Humane Understanding* (London: Henry Mortlock, 1697), 54–57, emphasis original.

little to the advantage of the oracles of divine revelation."³⁶ Laslett's gloss is this: "'I am not so well read in Hobbes or Spinoza,' [Locke] said in 1698, and made an ironical comment about 'those justly decried names.'"³⁷ Laslett denies the sincerity of Locke's moral disapproval of Hobbes and Spinoza, but accepts Locke's simultaneous claim that he is not well read in these authors. The gist of Locke's comment, however, is that he is not well read in these authors precisely because of their immorality or impiety. If the last comment is ironic, should one not also suspect the sincerity of the former? Moreover, the bishop did not mention Spinoza's name in this context; it was Locke who encouraged a comparison of his own teaching with Spinoza's. Laslett's work on Locke's library has shown that Locke's denial of familiarity was dubious, for Locke owned all of Spinoza's works—and in some instances, duplicate copies.³⁸

The other statement Laslett relies on is Locke's reply to a critic of his *Reasonableness of Christianity*. The critic had argued that the shocking thesis of that anonymously published work—that believing that Jesus is the Messiah is the only article of faith necessary for salvation—was taken from chapter 43 of the *Leviathan*. After granting that Hobbes's doctrine "is almost identical" to Locke's, Laslett quotes Locke's response: "I. . . did not know those words he quoted out of the *Leviathan*, were there, or any thing like them. Nor do I know yet, any further than as I believe to be there, from his quotation."³⁹ Laslett offers three possible readings of these remarks. The first he relegates to a footnote, and we call this Laslett's "Straussian" reading inasmuch as it admits the possibility of Locke's prudential accommodation to prevailing views: "Locke may be prevaricating here, for in the same tract he denied all knowledge of Socinian literature which he certainly possessed and had almost certainly read: a year or two later he was citing it in his Biblical annotations."⁴⁰ But in the body of the text, Laslett offers two other possible explanations:

the resemblance in this case could have been coincidence, a result of that rationalist attitude which the two men had in common, applied here to the Christian Revelation. Or it may likewise be a case of a man having read something many years before, having read it and forgotten it, which he then reproduced as a notion of his own. This view, the more sympathetic one, seems to me to be the more likely. (73)

The latter of these explanations is, in Laslett's estimation, "more likely" than the former because of the compelling evidence that Locke "did read Hobbes. . . although it is so difficult to say when or how much,"⁴¹ and

³⁶Locke, *Works*, 4:477.

³⁷Laslett, introduction to *Two Treatises*, 74.

³⁸Harrison and Laslett, *Locke's Library Catalogue*, 22, 238.

³⁹Laslett, introduction to *Two Treatises*, 73; quoting Locke, *Works*, 4:420.

⁴⁰Laslett, introduction to *Two Treatises*, 73n.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 73.

perhaps because Laslett thought it improbable that the shared “rationalist attitude” of Hobbes and Locke would by itself lead them to the same conclusion. Strangely, Laslett never takes up the question of why his preferred explanation is more probable than the one he gives in the footnote, the one that maintains that Locke was prevaricating.

Judgments of probability largely depend on one’s experience of human behavior. We know of no instance of a person, to say nothing of a person of Locke’s intelligence, reading a book with the intention of rejecting it, finding in it an inflammatory doctrine that was rejected as impious by powerful and respected elements of his society, forgetting about having read that doctrine, and then reproducing it as a thesis of his own book without remembering where he got the idea. But there are many examples of human beings hiding their affinity with those of ill repute. One such case is Locke himself. Laslett has no difficulty acknowledging that Locke lied regarding his knowledge of Socinian literature. Why, then, would he think it improbable that he lied with regard to his knowledge of Hobbes? Locke’s response to his critic suggests that he did not even possess a copy of *Leviathan*, much less that he had studied it carefully. Yet Laslett’s own study of Locke’s library shows that, at the time he wrote that response, Locke almost certainly had possession of his copy of the *Leviathan*, and thus could have checked the reference.⁴² Laslett’s “Straussian” explanation is more plausible than his preferred explanation.

We have examined Laslett’s arguments for denying conscious incorporation of Hobbesian positions by Locke in order to show their tendentious character. Laslett seems to embrace them out of an aversion to the suggestion that Locke deliberately adopted Hobbes’s positions while concealing that fact from most of his readers. The very thought that a great thinker deliberately chose to conceal his opinions from the majority of his readers might have disturbed Laslett. But given his distaste for Locke and his acknowledgment of Locke’s prevarication in other circumstances, it seems unlikely that this was the primary source of his aversion to Strauss’s thesis.

To understand the motives behind Laslett’s polemic against Strauss, it helps to consider the views of his second great mentor, Karl Mannheim. John Dunn alerts us to Laslett’s debt to the author of *Ideology and Utopia*, whose influence explains, according to Dunn, why Laslett’s work on Filmer and Locke was “a conscious exercise in sociology of knowledge,” a field pioneered by Mannheim.⁴³ When Strauss introduced his thesis of esoteric writing in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*,⁴⁴ he, too, presented it as a contribution to

⁴²Laslett, Appendix B, in *Two Treatises*, 139.

⁴³John Dunn and T. Wrigley, “Thomas Peter Ruffell Laslett 1915–2001,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 130 (2005): 115. Also see Peter Laslett, “Karl Mannheim in 1939: A Student’s Recollection,” *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 17, no. 46 (1979): 223–26.

⁴⁴Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952).

the sociology of knowledge, but he broke with Mannheim's view of what that entails. Mannheim's sociology of knowledge maintains that philosophic thought cannot be understood on its own terms because all human thought is determined by the social position of the thinker. Strauss's sociology of knowledge, by contrast, insists on the possibility of some thinkers rising above the prevailing opinions of their societies. Laslett denies this possibility. He began his studies by more or less following Mannheim,⁴⁵ but as his work on Filmer matured he developed his own sociology of knowledge as a modification of Mannheim's social determinism. This is seen most clearly at the end of his last work on Filmer. This defender of patriarchy confirms Mannheim's framework, according to Laslett, since Filmer can be read as "a classic instance of determined thinking, of the man who projects into his philosophy the facts of his material environment."⁴⁶ But his sympathetic study of Filmer also led Laslett to supplement or modify Mannheim's sociological theory with a theory of personality as an irrational and partly independent force in history. Thus, we have statements such as these: Filmer "owed the destructive cast of his thought, his capacity for seeing straight through the arguments of others without being conscious of his own extraordinary irrationality, to no outside influence: they belonged to his own personality"; Filmer "could be used to prove that the only successful approach to intellectual history is the attempt to appreciate those who made it as individual, inconsistent, fundamentally unclassifiable human personalities."⁴⁷ By pointing to the role of individual personalities and their particular passions, these statements show that Laslett's social contextualism allows for idiosyncratic opposition to convention but not for rational liberation from it. The most likely reason for Laslett's aversion to Strauss's thesis is that it allows for the possibility of a rational independence of a philosophic mind from his or her social context.

Whatever Laslett's ultimate motive for denying Locke's conscious debt to Hobbes, this denial became an accepted premise at Cambridge. Again, as Collins puts it, "Effacing Locke's engagement with Hobbes . . . became a signature move of the Cambridge school founders."⁴⁸ Dunn, for instance, followed Laslett in claiming that "the disputed 'influence,' negative or positive,

⁴⁵Ernest Barker as an examiner of Laslett's dissertation on Filmer writes this critical note in his 1940 report: "'Sociological' interpretation (often of the Marxist variety) is a fashionable thing in modern studies of political theory. Laslett follows this fashion." Barker's note is quoted in Amir Skodo, "Idealism, the Sociology of Knowledge and Revisionist History of Political Thought: Peter Laslett's Reappraisal of Whig Historiography," *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 3 (2014): 545–56.

⁴⁶Peter Laslett, "Sir Robert Filmer: The Man versus the Whig Myth," *William and Mary Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1948): 544.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 546.

⁴⁸Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 2. Our remarks in this paragraph and the next are indebted to Collins's discussion and to James Stoner Jr., "Was Leo Strauss Wrong about John Locke?," *Review of Politics* 66, no. 4 (2004): 553–63.

of Hobbes upon the *Two Treatises* is irrelevant to the historical composition of that work."⁴⁹ By Dunn's account, "Hobbes himself and the dense and threatening mass of intellection which he represents make no appearance. . . . In [the *Two Treatises*], the Hobbesian *arguments* are not answered. They are merely and blandly ignored."⁵⁰ Quentin Skinner also followed Laslett in dismissing readings of the *Second Treatise* that find Hobbes lurking there either as influence or opposition. For Skinner, such "purely mythological" readings serve as examples of the clever but untenable ways in which authors like Strauss interpret thinkers like Locke to make them fit into predetermined narratives about the development of early modern political thought.⁵¹ Such narratives may make for gripping stories but are "quite unhistorical."⁵²

Although Dunn and Skinner are the most prominent figures who adopted Laslett's position, they are far from the only ones. That position came to be accepted by others working beyond the walls of Cambridge but influenced by the Cambridge School. John Higgins-Biddle, for instance, repeated Skinner's lament: "Among the most common fallacies of intellectual history is the notion that a 'great thinker' of one generation must have known the works of, and been positively or negatively influenced by, a 'great thinker' of the preceding generation. Modern historiography provides few better examples of this mistaken assumption than the case of Hobbes and Locke."⁵³ For Higgins-Biddle, as for Dunn and Skinner, the credit given to Laslett for setting the record straight goes together with a dismissal of Strauss's position as unhistorical.⁵⁴ The same combination can be found in the work of John Yolton⁵⁵ and of Gordon Schochet.⁵⁶ It would be going too far to say that Laslett's key contention led to a new consensus in Locke

⁴⁹John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the "Two Treatises of Government"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 79; see also 77 for Dunn's debt to Laslett.

⁵⁰Dunn, *Political Thought of Locke*, 82–83, emphasis original; see also John Dunn, "Justice and the Interpretation of Locke's Political Theory," *Political Studies* 16, no. 1 (1968): 68–71.

⁵¹Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 25–26. On Skinner's arguments contra Strauss, see Rafael Major, "The Cambridge School and Leo Strauss: Texts and Context of American Political science," *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 477–85.

⁵²Quentin Skinner, "The Limits of Historical Explanations," *Philosophy* 41, no. 157 (1966): 211.

⁵³John C. Higgins-Biddle, editor's introduction to *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, by John Locke (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), lxxiv.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, lxxiv–lxxv, xciv–xcv.

⁵⁵John Yolton, "Locke on the Law of Nature," *Philosophical Review* 67, no. 4 (1958): 477–78, 483–84.

⁵⁶Gordon Schochet, "The Family and the Origins of the State in Locke's Political Philosophy," in *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. John Yolton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 81.

studies, for there were always some who remained convinced by Strauss's account of the importance of Hobbes to Locke.⁵⁷ But Strauss's view was marginalized and came increasingly to be ignored.

Reconsidering Strauss's Locke

With Waldmann's discovery Laslett's narrative has come unraveled. Waldmann has produced evidence not only of Locke's interest in Hobbes but of its intensity and of Locke's effort to conceal it as his own literary career progressed. It is evidence, moreover, of a sort that no historical-contextualist scholar of Locke can dismiss. In an odd twist of fate, the kind of evidence most valued by the Cambridge School has undermined one of its characteristic theses.

Waldmann's discovery, however, did not emerge in a vacuum. It comes in the wake of the work of a number of historians who had begun to question the assumption that Hobbes meant little to Locke. An early mover on this front was Richard Tuck, who was among the first within the Cambridge School to challenge Laslett's key claim. As early as 1990, Tuck wrote of the need "to revise Laslett's views in this area," and supplied an aspect of that revision by arguing that Hobbes was more favorable to religious toleration than previously supposed and thus a precursor in this regard to Locke.⁵⁸ Other scholars trained at Cambridge, such as Ian Harris⁵⁹ and John Marshall,⁶⁰ indicated reservations about Laslett's claim in the 1990s. Both suggest that Locke accepted certain aspects of Hobbes's thought, such as his critique of traditional natural law and his denial of innate moral principles, while rejecting others. But the dam really began to crack with the work of Jon Parkin, Jacqueline Rose, and Collins.

Parkin's *Taming of Leviathan* studies the reception of Hobbes in the second half of the seventeenth century, and groups Locke with others whose sincerity in attempting to exonerate themselves from the charge of Hobbism is called into question. In questioning Locke's sincerity, Parkin challenges the judgment of those who accept Locke's professions of ignorance of Hobbes at

⁵⁷See, e.g., Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of John Locke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 129–251; Michael Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 82–128.

⁵⁸Richard Tuck, "Hobbes and Locke on Toleration," in *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory*, ed. Mary Dietz (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), esp. 153–55, 168–70.

⁵⁹Ian Harris, *The Mind of John Locke: A Study of Political Theory in Its Intellectual Setting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 93–95, 101–5.

⁶⁰John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion, and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 31–32.

face value.⁶¹ Rose, too, argues that scholars have failed to detect Locke's Hobbism because they have not paid enough attention to his disingenuous manner of writing.⁶² Collins, however, has made the most extensive effort yet to reestablish the close connection between Locke and Hobbes. His *In the Shadow of Leviathan* challenges the "Cambridge dogma" that Hobbes was unimportant to Locke by using a variant of the Cambridge mode of historical contextualization.⁶³ Collins puts an emphasis on political contextualization, which he uses to situate Locke in the battles over ecclesiology and religious toleration during the Interregnum and the Restoration. He provides copious evidence that Locke swam in waters made turbulent by Hobbes's controversial influence, and argues that Locke's disingenuous denial of familiarity with Hobbes has obscured the extent of his engagement with Hobbes in the early stage of his career. Although Collins's Locke eventually moved away from Hobbes as he shifted from a *politique* to a principled approach to religious toleration, he remained determined by the terms of debates that had been decisively shaped by Hobbes.

Collins's work, especially as it extends that of Tuck, Parkin, and Rose, provides an important supplement to Waldmann's discovery. Both Waldmann and Collins acknowledge the synergy: Waldmann discusses the harmony between his discovery and Collins's work, although, as he explains, *In the Shadow of Leviathan* appeared "late in the drafting process" of his own article.⁶⁴ Collins mentions that Waldmann communicated his corroborating discovery to him as he was making final revisions to his book.⁶⁵ Together, Collins and Waldmann, building on the work of Tuck, Parkin, and Rose, form a formidable front challenging the Cambridge orthodoxy on the basis of its own contextualist methods.

Still, in one important respect, none of these scholars has fully broken free of the Cambridge view they call into question. In his account of the emergence of the "Cambridge dogma," Collins notes that one of the incentives for downplaying the connection between Hobbes and Locke was that Strauss and his students had emphasized it. "Suspicions were elevated," he explains, "by the tendency of Straussian interpreters to associate Hobbes and Locke as fellow travelers on the low road from ancient political philosophy to modern political science."⁶⁶ He is right about that dynamic. But he could have gone a step further, because the desire to steer clear of Strauss went together with a

⁶¹Jon Parkin, *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England, 1640–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 209–10, 397–402.

⁶²Jacqueline Rose, "John Locke, 'Matters Indifferent,' and the Restoration of the Church of England," *The Historical Journal* 48, no. 3 (2005): 611–15.

⁶³Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 2. See also 3–7.

⁶⁴Waldmann, "Locke as a Reader," 266–68, esp. n103.

⁶⁵Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 5; see also 28–29, 54.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 2.

propensity to distort his interpretation of Locke. Skinner, for instance, portrayed Strauss as defending the view that Locke “followed the lead given by Hobbes” even as he supposedly conceded that Locke was not “closely familiar” with Hobbes’s works, although a careful reading of the passage Skinner cites reveals that Strauss makes no such concession.⁶⁷ This tendency to distort Strauss’s interpretation has unfortunately not abated even as Strauss’s much-maligned insistence on a connection between Hobbes and Locke has been vindicated. Even Waldmann writes: “The idealized dialogue between two canonical figures had a great attraction for a certain mode in the history of philosophy. But it was purely conjectural. In the hands of Leo Strauss, it was framed in the tendentious mode of interpretation through which every ‘great man’ in philosophy inevitably confronted every other ‘great man,’ no matter the absence of evidence for any such confrontation.”⁶⁸ Collins, while not descending quite so far into caricature, nevertheless saw no need to discuss the actual substance of Strauss’s interpretation of Locke beyond the dismissive assertion that Strauss’s account of the Hobbesian basis of Locke’s view of natural law is “untenable.”⁶⁹

Had these scholars taken a deeper look at Strauss’s interpretation, they would have had to ponder the evidence that led Strauss to make the correct inference about Locke’s engagement with Hobbes. The first thing to note about Strauss’s discussion of Locke in *Natural Right and History*, however, is its thematic focus: Strauss’s objective is to uncover the genuine basis of Locke’s natural right teaching. All questions of influence are subordinated to that goal. The evidence that he relies on comes from a close reading of Locke’s texts coupled with contextual considerations that are broader and less directly political than those typical of contextualist historians.

Strauss begins by noting a puzzle regarding Locke’s presentation of his thought, especially in the *Second Treatise*. Locke seems to bow to the authority of Hooker, the Anglican divine, who held a Thomistic conception of natural right. “But the moment we take the trouble to confront Locke’s teaching as a whole with Hooker’s teaching as a whole,” Strauss notes, “we become aware that, in spite of a certain agreement between Locke and Hooker, Locke’s conception of natural right is fundamentally different from Hooker’s.”⁷⁰ Strauss then raises a contextual consideration that indicates why Locke’s disagreement with Hooker is unsurprising: “The period between Hooker and Locke had witnessed the emergence of modern

⁶⁷Compare Skinner, “Limits of Historical Explanations,” 211 with Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 210–11. For a similar distortion of Strauss’s claims in the service of a disparagement of his arguments, see Yolton, “Locke on the Law of Nature,” 483–84.

⁶⁸Felix Waldmann, “Level Unlocked: A Manuscript Discovery Confirms John Locke’s Reading of Hobbes,” *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 6168 (2021): 11.

⁶⁹Collins, *In the Shadow of Leviathan*, 177; see also 6, 10–11, 46.

⁷⁰Strauss, *Natural Right*, 165. See also Rose on Locke’s silent subversion of Hooker, in “John Locke, ‘Matters Indifferent,’” 614–15.

natural science, of nonteleological natural science, and therewith the destruction of the basis of traditional natural right."⁷¹ Strauss's would-be contextualist critics do not sufficiently take into account this important contextual consideration, which is both broader and more fundamental than those on which they rely. In thinking about Locke's context, it is important to assess the scope of his own concerns. As Strauss put it in his criticism of J. W. Gough's interpretation of Locke:

"Political Philosophy" is an ambiguous term, but certainly when speaking of the political philosophy of a man like Locke, one must assume that political philosophy is a branch of philosophy. Accordingly, the context within which Locke's political philosophy must be seen primarily is not the political scene of seventeenth century England, but the state of philosophy in seventeenth century Europe. If I am not mistaken, Gough does not even allude to the names of Bacon, Galileo, Descartes and Newton.⁷²

Strauss's own focus in *Natural Right and History* on the political and moral implications of the emergence of modern natural science led him to Hobbes, who was "the first to draw the consequences for natural right from this momentous change."⁷³ Prior to his discussion of Locke, Strauss devoted a long section to Hobbes,⁷⁴ focusing on this very issue, a discussion neglected by contextualist critics of Strauss's interpretation of Locke.

If Locke's natural right teaching is fundamentally different from Hooker's, that raises the question of why Locke gave the impression that he took Hooker as his authority. We have already touched on that question, but a fuller account is necessary for understanding Strauss's approach to Locke in *Natural Right and History*. Strauss argues that Locke "was an eminently prudent man," who "had the good sense to quote only the right kind of writers and to be silent about the wrong kind, although he had more in common, in the last analysis, with the wrong kind than with the right."⁷⁵ A substantial part of Strauss's Locke subchapter is an analysis of Locke's prudence or what he calls, since Locke himself calls attention to it, his "obtrusive" caution.⁷⁶ Strauss notes the difference and tension between the caution required of a theoretician, who must make all aspects of his thinking manifest, and that demanded of a political actor, for whom such transparency would at times be reckless.⁷⁷ Locke, he suggests, displayed the caution of

⁷¹Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 166.

⁷²Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 303.

⁷³Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 166.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 166–202.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 165.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 206–7.

⁷⁷The distinction between "civic" and "philosophical" writing is Locke's own. See *Essay*, III.9.2–5. "The fact that [Locke] is generally known as a cautious writer shows . . . that his caution is obtrusive, and therefore perhaps not what is ordinarily understood as caution" (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 206).

a political actor in his writings. Most important, Strauss derives his account of Locke's caution, not from conjecture or imagination, but from a close look at what Locke himself says about the circumstances in which it is permissible to conceal one's thoughts, which Strauss summarizes as follows: "Cautious speech is legitimate if unqualified frankness would hinder a noble work one is trying to achieve or expose one to persecution or endanger the public peace."⁷⁸ Locke's own denial of close familiarity and substantial agreement with Hobbes would fit some, and perhaps all, of these conditions. He certainly would have endangered the widespread acceptance of his distinctively liberal interpretation of the Glorious Revolution had he acknowledged any affinity with Hobbes, whose principles were morally and religiously offensive to many of Locke's contemporaries.

Strauss offers two lines of argument to establish Locke's debt to Hobbes. First, he argues that the traditional natural law teaching as Locke understood it presupposes theology as a demonstrative science, that is, a demonstrative knowledge of God's existence, his laws, and punishments in the afterlife. Strauss examines Locke's arguments for such a natural law teaching, providing evidence that Locke could not have accepted the demonstrative character of such a theology.⁷⁹ For example, Locke allows that natural reason cannot know the existence of an afterlife nor therefore of rewards and punishments in that life, but he argues that reason can know for certain that the New Testament is divinely revealed and, since the New Testament vouches for the afterlife, we can be certain of its existence. We can know the divinely revealed character of the New Testament by the testimony of Jesus's miracles, which "never were, nor could be denied by any of the enemies or opposers of Christianity."⁸⁰ But Strauss argues that Locke, "a most competent contemporary of Hobbes and Spinoza" who knew "that there were men familiar with the New Testament without being believing Christians," could not possibly have believed that no one had ever denied the miracles of Jesus.⁸¹

Strauss's second line of argument involves a summary comparison of the teaching of the *Second Treatise* with the teachings of Hooker and Hobbes which shows that "Locke deviated considerably from the traditional natural law teaching and followed the lead given by Hobbes."⁸² Strauss

⁷⁸Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 208. Strauss points to Locke's own claim in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* that even Jesus "perplexed his meaning" to avoid entrapment by the Pharisees and immediate persecution by the Roman political authorities. See John Locke, *The Works of John Locke*, vol.7 (London: Thomas Tegg, 1823), 59. See also Michael S. Rabieh, "The Reasonableness of Locke, or the Questionableness of Christianity," *Journal of Politics* 53, no. 4 (1991): 934-35.

⁷⁹Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 202-20.

⁸⁰Locke, *Works*, 7:135; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 210.

⁸¹Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 211.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 221.

calls attention to Locke's own indication that he deviates from Hooker. The deviation is not on a minor point. As Strauss puts it, "the whole doctrine of the state of nature is based on a break with Hooker's principles, i.e., with the principles of the traditional natural law doctrine."⁸³ It is not the mere fact of beginning from the state of nature that distinguishes Locke from Hooker and connects him with Hobbes. Strauss also takes up the particular features of Locke's doctrine of the state of nature. According to Locke, each man in the state of nature has the executive power of the law of nature, and this, coupled with the inefficacy of individual consciences and the overriding power of the desire for self-preservation, means that Locke's law of nature lacks adequate sanctions prior to the establishment of governments. His law of nature, like Hobbes's, needs to be backed by the sovereign's sword to be effective. Now, it is true that Locke's state of nature seems to be quite different from Hobbes's. Locke describes it as "a state of peace, good-will, mutual assistance and preservation," and, as we have seen, insists that the state of nature is not to be confounded, as "some men" would have it, with the state of war (§19). But this kinder, gentler state of nature is an initial presentation, Strauss argues, that Locke dispels or "demolishes" as his argument proceeds.⁸⁴

Strauss's claim that Locke's initial picture proves to be a mirage is not a mere assertion; he cites chapter and verse from *Two Treatises*, as well as from his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, to show the various ways in which Locke consciously undermines his own initial arguments. We limit ourselves to three examples from Strauss's complicated account of Locke's indications that his position is far closer to Hobbes's than first meets the eye. First, Locke speaks of the "inconveniences" of the state of nature, describes it as an "ill condition" that is "not to be endured," and ultimately acknowledges that it is "full of fears and continual dangers."⁸⁵ Second, Locke, every bit as much as Hobbes, if somewhat less obviously, asserts the precedence of the right of self-preservation to any and all moral duties, and does so for a Hobbesian reason: "man must be allowed to defend his life against violent death because he is driven to do so by some natural necessity which is not less than that by which a stone is carried downward."⁸⁶ While this statement by Strauss is drawn more directly from Hobbes than from Locke,⁸⁷ here are Locke's own words: "the first and strongest desire God planted in men, and wrought into the very principles of their nature, is that of self-preservation."⁸⁸ Because Locke agrees with Hobbes that our primary and strongest natural desire is for self-preservation, he does not think that

⁸³Ibid., 222.

⁸⁴Ibid., 224.

⁸⁵Locke, *Second Treatise*, §§13, 101, 123, 127, 136.

⁸⁶Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 227, quoting Locke, *First Treatise*, §88.

⁸⁷See Hobbes, *De Cive*, I.7.

⁸⁸Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 227.

there are duties antecedent or superior to the right to pursue one's own preservation by whatever means one judges necessary. And the primacy of the right of self-preservation for Locke leads to the third point: "Locke's natural law teaching can then be understood perfectly if one assumes that the laws of nature which he admits are, as Hobbes put it, 'but conclusions, or theorems concerning what conduces to the conservation and defense' of man over against other men."⁸⁹

Although Locke's position, as Strauss presents it, comes quite close to Hobbes's in its fundamentals, Strauss does not turn Locke, as Waldmann claims, into "Hobbes in Stuart dress."⁹⁰ This oversimplifies Strauss's interpretation because, as much as Strauss emphasizes the connection between Hobbes and Locke, he does not deny Locke's partial but important departures from Hobbes. The most prominent of these is Locke's doctrine of property, which, Strauss contends, is "almost literally the central part of his political teaching" and "certainly its most characteristic part."⁹¹ Locke's doctrine "distinguishes his political teaching most clearly not only from that of Hobbes but from the traditional teachings as well."⁹² And then, of course, there is Locke's case for limited government over and against Hobbes's absolutism: "It is on the basis of Hobbes's view of the law of nature that Locke opposes Hobbes's conclusions. He tries to show that Hobbes's principle—the right of self-preservation—far from favoring absolute government, requires limited government."⁹³ But even on this question Strauss does not assert a simple opposition between Locke and Hobbes: Strauss's Hobbes is not the simple, unmitigated absolutist he is often taken to be.⁹⁴ Still, Strauss is so far from ignoring or obscuring the important differences between Hobbes and Locke that he devotes a significant portion of his discussion of Locke to spelling them out. And at least on the question of limited government, he indicates his sympathy with Locke's side of the argument: "Locke would . . . have been justified in contending that the mighty Leviathan, as he had constructed it, offered a greater guarantee for the individual's self-preservation than Hobbes's Leviathan."⁹⁵

Conclusion: Strauss and the Future of Locke Studies

According to Waldmann, the discovery of Des Maizeaux's memoir gives "a new and clarifying confidence: Locke was a reader—an obsessive reader—of Hobbes's *Leviathan*."⁹⁶ Waldmann thus implies that any

⁸⁹Ibid., 229.

⁹⁰Waldmann, "John Locke as a Reader," 264.

⁹¹Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 234.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid., 231.

⁹⁴Ibid., 181–83, 231–32.

⁹⁵Ibid., 233.

⁹⁶Waldmann, "John Locke as a Reader," 271.

reading of Locke's political philosophy that ignores or denies Locke's serious engagement with Hobbes is flawed. But the fortuitous discovery of Des Maizeaux's memoir was not necessary to draw a conclusion to which Strauss came nearly seventy years ago. Waldmann's discovery is an important development in Locke studies, but it will have an even more positive impact if it provides an impetus to revisit Strauss's work to understand how he managed to arrive at the correct conclusion based on Locke's published works.

Strauss's interpretation is part of a book whose primary aim is to explore the possibility of natural right, a possibility called into question by the historicist contention that all human thought is determined and limited by changing historical circumstances. Unlike many historical studies, which take for granted the truth of historicism, Strauss embarked on his historical study to examine the dispute between historicism and non-historicist philosophy. His work was animated by an unusual philosophic openness. He did not deny the obvious truth that one cannot understand an author without understanding his context, but his philosophic concern drove him to search for the most important aspects of that context. By paying close attention to Locke's own indications of the context that mattered most to him, Strauss was led to the question of Locke's position in the quarrel between the traditional natural law doctrine of those like Hooker and the modern natural law doctrine of Hobbes. His answer to that question was guided by a consideration of the often subtle implications of Locke's most relevant statements, as well as by reflections on the bearings of the contradictions between some of them.

Strauss could make illuminating use of such textual details because he was careful to avoid importing twentieth-century presuppositions. He could grasp the prudential reasons for Locke's decision to defend the revolution of 1688 by appealing to the widely respected authority of "the judicious Hooker," because he had thought through the rhetorical and political challenges Locke faced. By the twentieth century, Hobbes had already become an accepted and respected member of the canon of political philosophers. This allowed many scholars to forget or downplay the moral and religious revulsion he provoked among many of his contemporaries.⁹⁷ Strauss avoided that pitfall by means of his own version of contextualism, and thus could immediately grasp why the judicious Locke wanted to distance himself from the "justly decried" Hobbes.

Strauss was prepared to appreciate Locke's rhetorical strategy also by his earlier rediscovery of esoteric writing. No small part of the opposition to Strauss's reading of Locke stems from the denial of such a mode of writing,⁹⁸ a denial that is becoming increasingly untenable as evidence

⁹⁷Leo Strauss, "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 170–71.

⁹⁸See, e.g., Yolton, "Locke on the Law of Nature"; John Yolton, review of *Locke on War and Peace*, by Richard H. Cox, *Philosophical Review* 71, no. 2 (1962): 269–71;

continues to mount that many great thinkers wrote between the lines.⁹⁹ Strauss never assumed that esoteric writing was a universal practice among the great philosophers or that those who employed the art all did so in the same way. For instance, Hobbes did not express his views with unqualified frankness. Compared to Locke, however, he was bold to the point of recklessness.¹⁰⁰ Most important, Strauss did not bring to Locke the assumption that he was an esoteric writer or a template of what it would mean if he was. He discovered Locke's modes of writing, as he discovered his context, from Locke's own indications. This included paying close attention to what Locke says about certain ancient philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle, who, having witnessed the fate of Socrates, refrained from openly expressing their opinions about the religion of their times, and even to what he says about Jesus, who withheld his claim to be the Messiah from many people.¹⁰¹ From a consideration of these statements, Strauss drew out Locke's view of the conditions that warrant modes of concealment and indirection. He could not have discovered Locke's esotericism had he not dug into and thought along with Locke's own texts. Here, too, he did not stop with Locke's explicit statements, but also reflected on the contradictions between some of them.

In defense of his approach, Strauss asks readers to consider the implications of the alternative: "The accepted interpretation of Locke's teaching leads to the consequence that 'Locke is full of illogical flaws and inconsistencies,' of inconsistencies, we add, which are so obvious that they cannot have escaped the notice of a man of his rank and sobriety."¹⁰² If Strauss began from any assumption about Locke, it was that he was a great thinker. Laslett, by contrast, assumed, or at any rate implied, that there are no truly great thinkers but only great influencers who were themselves greatly influenced. Strauss's assumption is superior not simply because it is more generous to Locke, but because it opens up the possibility of a fuller engagement with Locke's thought and demands that any criticism of Locke be on the basis of a confrontation with his position on its own terms and in its full strength.

Waldmann's discovery is likely to make an increasing number of scholars consider the implications of Locke's now undeniable engagement with

Dunn, "Justice and the Interpretation of Locke's Political Theory"; Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding"; Hans Aarsleff, "Some Observations on Recent Locke Scholarship," in Yolton, *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives*, 264–71.

⁹⁹For the most important synthesis of the mounting evidence, see Arthur Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁰See Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 165–66.

¹⁰¹Locke, *Works*, 7:59, 64.

¹⁰²Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 220. The quotation within Strauss's remark is from J. W. Gough, *John Locke's Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950), 123.

Hobbes and his likely adoption of some of Hobbes's principles. The precise nature of Locke's debt to Hobbes will continue to be a subject of debate. But it should no longer be possible to dismiss out of hand Strauss's contention that Locke's political philosophy is, at its core, a more advanced attempt to solve a political problem that Hobbes had failed to solve, but on the basis of a lead that Hobbes himself provided. It is not our contention that Strauss's interpretation of Locke has been vindicated in all its details or even in all of its major claims. That Locke was deeply familiar with Hobbes and that he intentionally hid the extent of his debt to him are facts compatible with a wide range of views regarding Locke's foundational premises and guiding intentions. These facts are compatible, for instance, with the views that Locke had a theistic conception of natural law and that he moved over the course of his career from a more Hobbesian outlook—whether on natural law, religious toleration, or other matters—to a less Hobbesian one. Waldmann's discovery does not mean that all Locke scholars must suddenly become Straussians. But Strauss's interpretation should at least and at last get the full hearing it deserves. One of the leading possibilities that should now be squarely on the table, in what we hope will prove to be a new, less sectarian era of Locke studies, is that Locke developed his political philosophy as a fundamentally this-worldly attempt to channel self-interested passions to create order in a world that is not well designed for peaceful relations among human beings. Such a Locke, Strauss's Hobbesian Locke, may be the true Locke, and, if so, Locke may be especially important, as Strauss also contended, for understanding the Hobbesian roots of liberalism.