intellectual cost of ceasing such thought seemed a small price to pay. The question of human nature was abandoned because it is too perilous a question to debate.

## John Locke: The American Compromise

The new science of economics and the practice of capitalism filled the vacuum created by the abandonment of the older tradition. That new science found its most important proponent in John Locke and its greatest practical success in the United States, a nation whose conception owed so much to Locke that one exaggerates only slightly to describe him as its definitive founder.

We must return to the eighteenth century to appreciate the tremendous change Locke wrought. Revolutionary America was haunted by the fear of religious war and the fanatical imposition of virtue on the entire state. The Declaration of Independence's evocation of "the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" had a counterpoint in the older tradition, in which the first two had not existed and the pursuit of happiness would have seemed inferior to (and certainly much more subjective than) the virtuous life. When one fast-forwards to the America of the 1990s, the larger context of the Founding had been forgotten: America had proved so successful in shaping the modern world that most Americans could no longer recognize the originality and strangeness of its founding conception.

Locke's personal example is instructive of the subtle path toward the liberalism of the American Revolution. Locke's argument proceeds in an understated manner; he does not wish to inflame passions by taking sides in the contentious debates of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But since it would be offensive to suggest that the things that matter most to people are silly or irrelevant, he also must avoid inflaming passions by openly denigrating all those who do take sides. In no place is there a greater need for sensitivity than on the question of religion. Religious passions had led to religious wars, but a passionate repudiation of religion (and of Christianity in particular) did not promise peace. Locke did not need the examples of the French or Russian Revolutions to know this.

And so the philosopher takes a seemingly moderate path. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity,* the philosopher sets out to denounce those "justly decried" atheists who have openly questioned the importance of the rules set for mortals by the deity.[6] But in the process of this denunciation, we learn many new things about those rules. Locke teaches us that the command

for children to honor their parents does not apply if the parents have been "unnaturally careless."[7] Marriage remains an important compact, but "the Wife has, in many cases, a Liberty to separate from [the husband],"[8] and "[t]he first and strongest desire God planted in men" is not love of God or others but a healthy concern with one's self-preservation.[9] Unfortunately, the state of nature is an "ill condition," so that those living in it are "needy and wretched"; the escape from nature, however, provides the path to self-preservation and happiness.[10] It follows from this that humans are not stewards of nature (for God has provided very little to start with), but are themselves the creators of wealth and property: "[L]abor makes the far greatest part of the value of things we enjoy in this world."[11] From there, the stretch to capitalist basics is modest. Avarice is no longer a mortal sin, and there is nothing wrong with the infinite accumulation of wealth;[12] it follows quite naturally that "the law of God and nature" says that government "must not raise taxes on the property of the people without the consent of the people, given by themselves, or their deputies."[13]

As for the person of Christ, Locke informs us that Jesus's words were not to be taken plainly. If Jesus had told people exactly what he was up to, the Jewish and Roman authorities "would have taken away his life; at least they would have . . . hindered the work he was about," for his teachings would have threatened the civic order and functioning of government. And so Christ concealed his meaning so that he might live and teach.[14] Locke's conception of Christ is a world removed from that of the medieval passion plays or *The Passion* of Mel Gibson; still, the character Locke attributes to Christ comports rather well with the character that one reasonably might attribute to Locke himself and the passionless world he set out to create.

Over time, the country founded by Locke would do away with Christian religiosity even as it maintained many outward appearances of it. The United States eventually would become more secular and materialist, though most of its citizens would continue to call themselves "Christians."[15] There would be no catastrophic war against religion of the sort one had in France or Russia, but there would be no counterrevolution either. Only occasionally would conservative moralists express their perplexity at how a nation ostensibly founded on Christian principles ever could have drifted so far from its original conception; never would it cross their minds to think that this process of gradual drift had been a part of that original conception.

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In a capitalist world, violent debates about truth—whether they concern questions of religion and virtue or questions about the nature of humanity—interfere with the productive conduct of commerce. It is therefore best for such questions to be eliminated or obscured. Thus, in Hobbes, all human complexity is reduced to the desire for power:

> The passions that most of all cause the difference of wit, are principally, the more or less desire of power, of riches, of knowledge, and of honour. All which may be reduced to the first, that is, desire of power. For riches, knowledge, and honour, are but several sorts of power.[16]

In Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* the author elaborates the conception of power, while stripping it even further of anything that is specifically human: the will is the power to prefer one action over another; liberty is the power to act on this preference; the understanding is a power; a substance is merely the power to produce certain empirical effects, but these effects tell us nothing of the nature of the underlying substance.[17]

Once again, Locke proceeds cautiously. He does not directly tell us that human nature does not exist or that the older tradition of Aristotle or Aquinas is definitively wrong; he does not seek that clear a break with the past,[18] but he undermines the older tradition relentlessly, for when we observe things (and these things include other people), we can see only their secondary effects as manifested by their various powers.[19] We cannot know anything about their true natures or substances; it is an irreducible part of the human condition for humans to be limited, so that they can never know anything about the nature of humanity.[20] To ask a question about human substance, or the teleology of humanity's power, leads to debates as meaningless as "whether the best Relish were to be found in Apples, Plumbs, or Nuts."[21]

In the place of human nature, Locke leaves us with an unknowable "X."[22] This awareness of ignorance provides the low but solid ground on which the American Founding takes place. The human "X" may have certain wants and preferences, but nobody is in an authoritative position from which to challenge those desires.[23] And so, in a somewhat paradoxical manner, the unknowability of "X" leads to classic liberalism and the very strong assertion of the different rights that belong to that unknowable "X": the freedom of religion, for we cannot ever know what people are truly thinking in the temple of their minds; the freedom of speech, for we cannot irrefutably criticize the way people express themselves; the right to property and commerce, for we cannot second-guess what people will do with the things

they possess.[24] "Capitalism," concludes Nobel laureate Milton Friedman, "is simply what humans do when they are left alone."

Of course, there are all sorts of hard boundary cases. One might wonder about what a libertarian framework has to say about the rights of children or criminals or insane people, or the limits of commodification (extortionate interest rates, indentured servitude, prostitution, sale of body parts, and so forth). But for Locke and the other American founders, these exceptional cases could be deferred for later consideration; in any event, the general principle of the unknowability of the human "X" would encourage a gradual expansion, over time, of the field of human freedom.[25]

There is one especially important category of boundary cases, and that concerns the question of origins. We shall return to that broader question later, but here it is worth noting one specific variant: even though we should not interfere with people disposing of their property as they see fit, how do we know that the property was acquired justly in the first place? The great importance of strong property rights would seem to force us to ask some hard questions about the origins of the property itself.

Once again, however, Locke urges us not to worry too much: there is very little value in the state of nature, and most value has been added by human work or intellect.[26] As a result, we need not reflect on the past and can focus on the future: Most new wealth will be created by the strong enforcement of property rights going forward and will be enjoyed by those who play by the capitalist rules.[27] Those who acquired their property through violence will not be capable of growing their fortunes, and in time will possess only a small and uninfluential fraction of the world's wealth. Locke would dismiss out of hand Balzac's sweeping and subversive notion that "behind every great fortune there lies a crime." We need not heed Brecht's call for more inspectors and inquisitors. Nothing should stop us from enjoying the prosperous tranquility of the capitalist paradise we have built for ourselves.

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Since September 11, our peace has been broken. For there remains another very important boundary whose existence the American people had forgotten. They had forgotten about the rest of the world and its deep division from the West. The non-Western world had not yet seen the Peace of Westphalia. The progress of the Enlightenment has occurred at different rates in different parts of the world. And in that world outside the West, questions of religion and the purpose of humanity remained central; even in 2001 the greatest fear

was not the fear of a painful death but the fear of what would happen to one in the life after that death.

And so, a religious war has been brought to a land that no longer cares for religious wars. Even President Bush, who styles himself a religious conservative, cannot bring himself to believe that it is religion that really matters: "[T]his great nation of many religions understands our war is not against Islam or against the faith practiced by the Muslim people."[28]

Where Bush downplays the differences, bin Laden emphasizes them, contrasting the world of pure Islam and the world of the decadent West in the most extreme way imaginable: "[T]he love of this world is wrong. You should love the other world . . . die in the right cause and go to the other world."[29]

Unfortunately, bin Laden is not simply an irrelevant crackpot of the sort that one might find screaming at the bemused spectators in Hyde Park. For bin Laden, unlike Locke, hard questions of morality and conduct need no postponement; their answers are clear and resolution cannot be delayed. Bin Laden is a passionate man of wealth and power, so that his personal example reminds us of the boundary cases Locke so readily dismissed.

Indeed, the oil industry, the source of bin Laden's wealth, presents one of the most glaring examples that run counter to Locke's felicitous generalizations. For most of the value of oil exists simply in nature, so that the "labor" that humans add by extracting and refining this oil is proportionately quite small. At the same time, however, economies rise and fall on the price of crude oil, so that it represents a significant share of the world's wealth. Indeed, the original expropriation of that oil built as many as half of the greatest fortunes of the twentieth century. And so the development of the oil industry, presided over by autocrats and despots from Asia to the Middle East and Africa, is the not-so-hidden story of crime on a scale so grand that the proceeds of that crime sufficed to purchase respectability and almost everything else. In helping to craft the post–World War II centrist economic policy consensus, the Rockefellers had forgotten their own family history.

Of course, in the long run, it may well be that power and prosperity go to those who follow Locke's capitalist rules, so that in the long run, the religious fanatics who have so violently and suddenly interposed themselves will eventually lack the wealth and the technology needed to threaten the nonreligious world the Enlightenment has built in the West; but none of this will matter if we are all dead in the short run.

Today, mere self-preservation forces all of us to look at the world anew, to think strange new thoughts, and thereby to awaken from that very long and profitable period of intellectual slumber and amnesia that is so misleadingly called the Enlightenment.

## Carl Schmitt: The Persistence of the Political

But why should one return to the older tradition, when the newer world of commerce and capitalism at every point seems so much simpler and happier and more pragmatic? The German legal scholar Carl Schmitt offers an extreme alternative to Locke and all the thinkers of the Enlightenment. He concedes with the signatories of Westphalia that there never will be any agreement on the most important things, on questions of religion and virtue and the nature of humanity.[30] But where Locke says that it is in humanity's nature to know nothing about the nature of humanity, Schmitt responds that it is equally a part of the human condition to be divided by such questions and to be forced to take sides.[31]

Politics is the field of battle in which that division takes place, in which humans are forced to choose between friends and enemies. "The high points of politics," declares Schmitt, "are the moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy."[32] The enemy is the one whose very presence forces us to confront the foundational questions about human nature anew; "the enemy is our own question as a figure."[33] Because of the permanence of these always contentious questions, one cannot unilaterally escape from all politics; those who attempt to do so are suffering from moments of supreme self-delusion; these include the signatories of the Kellogg Pact of 1928, which outlawed all war.[34]

Indeed, it is even worse: "[I]f a part of the population declares that it no longer recognizes enemies, then, depending on the circumstance, it joins their side and aids them."[35] There is no safety in unilateral disarmament. When one chooses not to decide, one still has a made a choice—invariably a mistaken choice, which implicitly assumes that humankind is fundamentally good or unproblematic.[36] For Schmitt, "it is a symptom of the political end":

> In Russia, before the Revolution, the doomed classes romanticized the Russian peasant as a good, brave, and Christian muzhik. . . . The aristocratic society of France before the Revolution of 1789 sentimentalized "man who is by nature good" and the virtue of the masses. . . . Nobody scented the revolution; it is incredible to see the security and unsuspiciousness with which these privileged spoke of the goodness, mildness, and innocence of the people when 1793 was already upon them—*spectacle ridicule et terrible*.[37]

Absent an invasion by aliens from outer space, there never can be a world state that politically unites all of humanity. It is a logical impossibility: