

Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England, c. 1640–1700. Dmitri Levitin.

Ideas in Context 113. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xii + 670 pp. \$140.

This is a highly important, scholarly, and provocative book. It is clearly written and impressively researched, drawing on a vast range of manuscript and printed primary sources, as well as on modern works about early modern intellectual history. It discusses

many well-known figures — Hobbes, Locke, Jean Le Clerc, Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, Samuel Parker — as well as more obscure ones such as Samuel Gardiner, rector of Eckington in Derbyshire, whom scholarship has hitherto neglected. The main focus of the book is on writings produced in mid- and late seventeenth-century England concerning ancient thinking on philosophy, religion, and related matters, and on connections between the ancients and Christianity. Among much else, it discusses Zoroaster and the Chaldeans, the links between Judaism and ancient Egypt and Greece, and the impact of Platonism on the early church. It convincingly argues that English intellectual debates must be placed in a wider European context. Levitin contends that humanist scholarly work on the ancients grew increasingly subtle and sophisticated from the late sixteenth century onward. “The true revolution in attitudes to paganism and its relationship to Judaism and Christianity occurred not at the end of the seventeenth century, but at the end of the sixteenth” (8), in the writings of Joseph Scaliger and, later, John Selden, G. J. Vossius, and others. The book argues that this critical and historically contextualizing humanist tradition exercised a profound influence over many aspects of intellectual life, and expresses skepticism about the idea that key changes resulted from the advent of an early Enlightenment around 1680.

The main argument of the book is that research on ancient wisdom stimulated thought on a wide variety of matters, including science and medicine as well as religion and philosophy. Levitin challenges common thinking on a number of significant points. He contends that although Gassendi’s philosophy had a considerable impact in England, Epicureanism exercised relatively little influence. It is often supposed that seventeenth-century England was a battleground between those who looked back on the ancients as the best of all philosophers, and those who by contrast favored the moderns. Levitin trenchantly argues that the war of the “Ancients versus moderns” “was an irrelevant side issue that flared up for a short time in the 1690s” (545). It is sometimes said that the principles of the New Science conflicted with those of humanist scholarship. This book insists that “humanist culture was not replaced or defeated by ‘science’ or any other shibboleth of a nebulous ‘modernity’” (545).

Levitin argues eloquently for the importance to early modern English intellectual history of scholarship on ancient philosophy. Undoubtedly, this serves as a useful corrective to more traditional accounts, which largely neglect much of his chosen material. Perhaps, however, he presses the claim rather too far. For example, it is difficult to see what essential principle of Hobbes’s political theory depended on anything said by the ancients or those who commented on them. Hobbes held that his own *De Cive* was the first book to talk sense about politics, and patently believed that (at least in his own case) the moderns had outstripped the ancients. *De Cive* receives little discussion here — perhaps not surprisingly, as it has little to say about ancient wisdom. The same more oddly goes for John Selden’s *De Synedriis*, a vast work on ancient Judaism by a major humanist and Hebraist (some of whose other writings are considered here). *De Synedriis* argued for Erastian answers to questions of church-state relations. Levitin claims that

political goals played little role in guiding the scholarship of the authors he considers. Selden's book manifestly had objectives connected to the politics of church-state relations — a subject that could have been considered at greater length.

The book stresses “the uselessness of reified ‘isms’” (546) and is especially critical of Cambridge Platonism. But general categories are handy in coaxing readers toward understanding, and the author does not eschew them all. There are radicals, for example, and members of the Great Tew Circle, though the qualifications for entry to these groups are left obscure. Despite a few problems, this is an excellent, scholarly, and stimulating book.

Johann P. Sommerville, *University of Wisconsin–Madison*.