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Michael Hawley

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A SYMPOSIUM ON AARON HEROLD'S THE DEMOCRATIC SOUL:
SPINOZA, TOCQUEVILLE, AND ENLIGHTENMENT THEOLOGY



Locke or Spinoza: Who's better in a Crisis (of Modernity)?

Michael Hawley

University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

The American Founding seems to reflect Spinozist principles, despite the fact that few of the Founders evince any real engagement with Spinoza's ideas. I argue that the surface-level similarities between the American regime and Spinoza's political ideal mask deep disagreements. The Lockeanism of the American Founding may in fact contain resources to ameliorate the crisis of modern liberal democracy that Spinoza would only intensify.

Tocqueville said of America that it was the nation on earth where the ideas of Descartes “are least studied and best followed.”¹ To what extent might we say the same thing of Spinoza? Is the American democratic republic Spinozist despite not being informed directly by Spinoza? I suggest the answer is “no”—but interestingly “no”—for though there are a number of apparent similarities between Spinoza and the principles of the American regime, those similarities mask profound philosophic differences. If Herold is right that understanding Spinoza can help us diagnose some of the problems and crises of modern liberal democracy, then it may be illuminating to see where the liberal democracy *par excellence*—the first one founded explicitly on the principles of the Enlightenment—diverges from the most trenchant exponent of liberal secular modernity (6–8).

Spinoza might be the first thinker of the first rank to openly endorse and lay out an explicit theory for a democratic republic as the best form of government. As the exemplary democratic republic, the American regime might be expected to bear the mark of Spinoza's thought. Yet, there is almost no evidence that any of the major American Founding Fathers read Spinoza closely or at all.² At most, a few—Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin—make a passing reference to him or had at least a copy of one of Spinoza's works in their library.³ And, yet, the United States—especially at its founding—was a nation that seemed to fit Spinoza's notions of the best regime remarkably well. It was a federation of smaller republics rather than one large one, in which (as Herold

notes was central to Spinoza's own doctrine) the democratic element was subordinate to the liberal. Grounded on the free consent of self-interested rights-bearers, it was a regime that centrally enshrined both freedom of property and freedom of thought in its constitution. Its constitution also acknowledged the cultivation of intellectual development and the sciences to be a legitimate function of government, and many of the nation's leading statesmen established or reinvigorated institutions of higher learning. The “spirit of the nation” (to borrow Montesquieu's notion) also exhibited the civic virtues of the republican tradition. As evidenced by the War of Independence, where individuals found glory and honor in the sacrifices made to establish a free republic, the virtues of patriotic loyalty were highly valued. Addison's *Cato* was popular for a reason. True, the regime lacked an explicit civil religion, but in so many respects, the salient features of the American regime match the broad outlines of Spinoza's ideal.

It is of course fraught to imagine that a regime which emerged from compromise and conflict was animated by a single philosophic vision the way a text can be. Nevertheless, we might follow Lincoln in treating the Declaration of Independence as the American regime's philosophic creed. If, as Jefferson suggested, the Declaration was but the distillation of the American mind, we may turn to Spinoza and ask: would he be able to agree with the notions that “all men are created equal,” that their creator endowed them with such inalienable rights as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” that governments exist to protect these

rights, and that defense of such rights justifies the risk of one's life, fortune, and sacred honor? Spinoza might well answer yes to all of these, and yet his affirmation of these principles would be for substantially different reasons than those of the Founders.

Neither Spinoza nor the American Founders are thoroughgoing egalitarians, who believe that human beings are equal in all relevant ways. As Herold argues, Spinoza believes in a hierarchy of human types, with a minority of philosophers at one end, and the great mass of people unable to break free from superstition and their own passions and desires on the other.⁴ Similarly, Madison is representative of the Founders' assumption of the naturally "different and unequal faculties" of men.⁵ Nevertheless, they both endorse a principle of universal *moral* equality. At first glance, it might even seem as though Spinoza's vision raises human beings to a higher dignity than does the American/Lockean vision. For Locke and the Americans, our equality comes from our being creations (and thus property) of God, whereas for Spinoza, it comes from our equal participation in God himself. But, in fact, the reverse is the case. For Spinoza, God is the interconnected web of determined causes-and-effects. Therefore, human beings partake of him in the same way that a rock or a leaf does.⁶ We are cosmically nothing special.

This metaphysical difference proves decisive and determines how Spinoza conceives of the specific rights enumerated in the Declaration. It is true that we seek to preserve our lives, retain our freedom of motion, and acquire the good things that conduce to comfort. But these things have no grounding in the universal order. All right is coextensive with power, and since power is itself identical with the deterministic laws of the universe: "it follows that the right...prohibits nothing but what no one desires or no one can do; it does not prohibit strife or hatred or anger or fraud... since nature is not bound by the laws of human reason."⁷ As Herold illustrates, the Spinozist world is in no way anthropocentric. There is no special status for justice or the human good. Neither nature nor God offers any special support to human affairs.

For the Lockeans, however we are a *unique* species of God's property, for whose sake the rest of the natural world exists. We have a natural right to make use of nature for our own purposes.⁸ The Lockean-American world is morally anthropocentric. Therefore, for human beings, violations of their rights—to life, liberty, and property (or the free pursuit of happiness)—are genuine wrongs; whereas in a certain sense, there is no such thing as a wrong in the Spinozist world, since there is no 'ought' which is not also an 'is.' Consequently, Spinozist governments do protect the Lockean rights

of their citizens. Though they would go further in recognizing rights to speech and worship than Locke demanded, this is only a doctrine of human prudence. As a matter of fact, sovereigns of states—whether a monarch or the people or some other body—have as much actual right as they do power.⁹ Most importantly, this means that revolutions are only justified when they succeed—there is no noble failure.

How does this then illuminate the contemporary crisis of the democratic soul, which arises in large measure, according to Herold, from an attempt to resuscitate feelings of duty, obligation, and civic friendship in what appears to be an atomized liberal world of rampant individualism (3–8)? Spinoza might also have endorsed the notion that citizens of a democratic republic ought to devote their "lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor" in the cause of their freedom. Yet, Herold notes that Spinoza's philosophy denigrates devotion for the truly philosophic, and the logic of inspiring self-sacrifice in ordinary citizens that he offers is rather pitiful: that commercial democratic citizens would feel such self-respect that they would sacrifice their lives for their prosperity (113–114). But who indeed would die for their purse?

Given the divergent moral and metaphysical outlooks of the architects of the American regime and Spinoza, perhaps the crisis of the democratic soul is not so much something we can understand directly by thinking through the logic of Spinoza's argument. Rather than see America as the expression of Spinozistic liberalism, perhaps we might see America's relative success as a liberal regime as a consequence of *not* following Spinoza. The sense of groundlessness that afflicts the contemporary democratic soul may not be so inevitable a consequence of liberalism as its harshest critics suppose. Maybe it is true that any version of liberalism will eventually run into the spiritual crisis that Tocqueville diagnoses: we cannot have individual freedom without individual isolation. But the Lockean version, which gives our souls some of what they long for—a sense of a universe in which we *matter*—may present a more stable compromise than the one offered by Spinoza's rather harsh and demanding vision of austere resignation in the face of an indifferent cosmos. Lockean liberalism suggests a God who has a special care for human beings. In turn, human beings can take comfort that oppressive conditions are not by right.

This does nothing to change the facts of our present spiritual malaise. Nor does it suggest a hidden philosophic resource for establishing a thick sense of duties in self-interested citizens. Nevertheless, the Lockean schema does not rest on a fundamental disjunction between the good of the individual and the

community. Nor does Locke's theory (at least as it was appropriated in America) have—as Spinoza's does—such a high standard for true liberation that it can only be achieved by a few lucky philosophers, who will be free while the rest of us must remain at least partially enslaved to superstition (and thus incurably unhappy). In sum, while Spinoza's philosophic defense of liberalism may have a greater internal theoretical consistency, Locke's liberalism proves in practice to have resources to delay or ameliorate the crisis that Herold identifies. Whereas Spinozistic rigor would only intensify our crisis, Locke offers room for a more moderate compromise with politically salutary customs and traditions. Perhaps the lesson to be drawn from the fact that the American Founding is Lockean rather Spinozist is a simple one: things could have been worse.

Notes

1. DA 2.1.1
2. R. Ramazani and Robert Fatton, *Religion, State, and Society: Jefferson's Wall of Separation in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Springer, 2008), 52.
3. See also the absence of references found by Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Book, 1993) and *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998).
4. TPT, preface, 33.
5. *Federalist* 10.
6. TPT 3.4, 16.4.
7. TPT 16.9.
8. *Second Treatise*, II.6.
9. TPT 19.1