

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 2021

Volume 48 Issue 1

- 3 Iraj Azarfaza Overcoming the Powerful Prejudice against Xenophon:
A Debate between Leo Strauss and Friedrich Schleiermacher
- 27 John F. Cornell *Sanza Mezzo: A Reading of Dante's Paradiso Cantos 5-7*
- 51 Thomas L. Pangle The Unfolding Plan of "Maxims and Arrows" in
Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*
- Book Reviews**
- 71 Francis J. Beckwith *Crisis of the Two Constitutions* by Charles R. Kesler
- 77 Shilo Brooks *Warspeak: Nietzsche's Victory over Nihilism* by Lise van Boxel
- 85 Steven H. Frankel *Founding God's Nation: Reading Exodus* by Leon R. Kass
- 97 Eli Friedland *De Anima (On Soul)* by Aristotle, Translated by David Bolotin
- 103 Christopher Kelly *Hypocrisy and the Philosophical Intentions of Rousseau*
by Matthew D. Mendham
- 109 Marco Menon *Una filosofia in esilio* by Carlo Altini
- 115 Miguel Morgado *A Political Philosophy of Conservatism* by Ferenc Hörcher
- 121 Travis Mulroy *The Music of Reason* by Michael Davis
- 127 April Dawn Olsen *Reason and Character* by Lorraine Smith Pangle
- 133 Joshua Parens *Nature, Law, and the Sacred* by Evanthia Speliotis
- 137 Oliver Precht *Theory and Practice* by Jacques Derrida
- 143 Charles T. Rubin *Learning One's Native Tongue* by Tracy B. Strong
- 151 David Lewis Schaefer *Montaigne and the Tolerance of Politics* by Douglas I. Thompson
- 159 Thomas E. Schneider *Property and the Pursuit of Happiness* by Edward J. Erler and
An Anti-Federalist Constitution by Michael J. Faber
- 165 Lee Ward *America's Revolutionary Mind* by C. Bradley Thompson
- 171 Jacob C. J. Wolf *Recovering the Liberal Spirit* by Steven F. Pittz

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University
- General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns
- General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)
- Consulting Editors* David Lowenthal • Harvey C. Mansfield • Thomas L.
Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth W. Thompson
- Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)
- International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
- Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Lorraine Pangle • Charles T.
Rubin • Leslie G. Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld
Shell • Geoffrey T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer
• Bradford P. Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe
• Catherine H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert
- Copy Editor* Les Harris
- Designer* Sarah Teutschel
- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798
- email* interpretation@baylor.edu

C. Bradley Thompson, *America's Revolutionary Mind: A Moral History of the American Revolution and the Declaration That Defined It*. New York: Encounter Books, 2019, xiv + 447 pp., \$32.99 (cloth).

LEE WARD

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

Lee_A_Ward@baylor.edu

Each chapter of C. Bradley Thompson's thoughtful and important new book examines a passage from, or major principle in, the Declaration of Independence. Serious books about the Declaration are seldom just about the Declaration, and Thompson's book fits this profile. From the progressive-era triumphalism of Louis Becker's *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (Harcourt, Brace, 1922), to the post-Vietnam-era malaise and communitarian introspection of Gary Wills's *Inventing America* (Doubleday, 1978), through to the first hopeful moments of the post-Cold War *pax Americana* embossed in Pauline Maier's *American Scripture* (Vintage Books, 1997), major studies of the Declaration of Independence have often assumed a totemic quality channeling the zeitgeist of their time.

Thompson's offering appears at arguably another salient moment in American political history, one marked by perhaps unprecedented ideological polarization in which the intellectual reputation of the classical liberal philosophy of the Founders seems to have reached its nadir. Members of today's progressive American Left tend to dismiss the Declaration and its naturalistic moral philosophy as the products of a benighted past blighted by slavery, patriarchy, and the attempted genocide of America's indigenous peoples, which all occurred with great aplomb under the hypocritical banner of natural rights and the slogan "All men are created equal." On the other side of the ideological spectrum, some critics of liberalism, inspired either by gauzy nostalgia

for the pre-Vatican II liturgy or by theocratic fervor, demand that Americans abandon the failed liberal project of the Founders even as many erstwhile defenders of the importance of traditional “classical virtue” in American political life have devolved into apologists for *völkish* nationalism and cynical B-list celebrity demagoguery. In this context, Thompson restores a much-needed Archimedean point for serious reflection about the American liberal tradition enshrined in the Declaration of Independence.

The central character in Thompson’s American Revolution narrative is the seventeenth-century English political philosopher John Locke. Strangely, Locke—long viewed as the arch-apostle of acquisitive capitalism by many of the Old Left such as C. B. Macpherson—has also become something of a pantomime villain in recent times among certain religious critics of the American liberal tradition. This is curious, indeed, given that, as Jeremy Waldron relates, it was not so very long ago that no less a figure than neo-Thomist philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre declared (only half jokingly) that Locke’s political theory is so imbued with religious content that it is constitutionally unfit to be taught in American public schools! But for Thompson, “America’s revolutionary mind is virtually synonymous with John Locke’s mind” (32, 232). He firmly situates Locke, and thus the founding of the American regime, in the tradition of Enlightenment rationalism, according to which human nature, and the axiom of natural equality in particular, is knowable by means of inductive reason and empirical observation (6, 50, 88). Thompson proclaims that far from being merely inheritors of an intellectual tradition, the American revolutionaries were innovators who “radicalized the Enlightenment theory of natural rights” handed down from Locke, Pufendorf, and others (185). Thompson persuasively argues that Locke’s rationalist metaphysics and epistemology appealed to the American revolutionaries precisely because it projected an intelligible moral order compatible with a range of religious and ethical dispensations, but crucially was also not in principle logically or ontologically dependent on any particular orthodoxy.

Perhaps the main highlights of Thompson’s analysis of Locke’s influence in revolutionary America are his first-rate discussion of what it means in Lockean terms to identify “certain truths” as “self-evident” (71–74) and the excellent and original account explaining why and how the Lockean state of nature motif was so easily and effectively adaptable

to the perceived “lived experience” of colonial Americans in the revolutionary period (223, 257–62). However, it would have been helpful to have seen a good deal more treatment of the list of grievances in the Declaration. Thompson deals with them only briefly in passing (40–41, 110), and yet given the clear Lockean resonance in many of the grievances, he perhaps missed an opportunity to elucidate the philosophical *nous* informing the major part of the actual text of the Declaration, which often seems anachronistic and irrelevant to the current generation of Americans.

Thompson's careful scholarship tracks Locke's philosophical influence through the diverse array of earlier colonial pamphlets, sermons, and political tracts that acted as a kind of palimpsest for the Declaration, leaving their traces on the document that would in Thomas Jefferson's words eventually come to express the “American Mind” at the outbreak of the Revolution. In response to progressive critics of the natural rights tradition, Thompson offers a compelling case that ideas matter historically; in other words, the American revolutionaries were not simply cynical pragmatists driven by their material self-interest who rationalized hypocrisy in the face of flagrant injustice and inequality. The men who drafted and ratified the Declaration, Thompson demonstrates, genuinely struggled to reconcile the horrors of slavery and their own moral failings with their ideals of human equality (chap. 5). To others celebrating the putative demise of liberalism, Thompson's theoretical reconstruction of the Lockean American mind delivers a timely reminder of the moral seriousness demanded by the principle of natural liberty as well as the muscular intellectualism of the Founders, who crafted a public philosophy grounded upon reason and individual freedom that inaugurated a democratic constitutional experiment that would come to assume world-historical significance.

One of the defining features of this book is the characterization of it in the subtitle as a “moral history of the American Revolution.” Thompson's focus on moral philosophy is a deliberate and sophisticated hermeneutical strategy designed to highlight Locke's rationalist influence on the Declaration, while also trying to avoid becoming ensnared in endless and irresolvable speculative and theological controversies about the meaning of its references to the “Creator” and “Nature's God.” The emphasis on moral philosophy reflects both a strength and potentially a weakness in Thompson's methodology. Identifying one factor

as a key part of civic discourse and normative reasoning does not, of course, logically require the exclusion of other influential ideas as well. Along these lines, Thompson does well to highlight the rationalist and individualist moral philosophy à la Locke as one supremely important source of unity and intellectual inspiration among the American colonists. However, the danger in Thompson's methodological approach lies in the problem of defining a complex intellectual tradition so narrowly that important elements of it that are in tension with the supposedly superintending position are rendered largely invisible.

For example, while one may gladly grant that Lockean natural rights theory is deeply individualistic (6, 8, 101), one also cannot help but notice that there are also perhaps recessive, but nonetheless significant, traits in the Lockean orientation predisposed toward the common good, as evidenced for example in his controversial "public safety" argument for executive prerogative in chapter 14 of the *Second Treatise of Government*, and the pronounced claims for distributive justice in his monetary writings. This is not meant to minimize the profound individualism of Locke's moral philosophy, but rather to acknowledge a quasi-collectivist dimension even in Locke's version of liberalism—and by extension the American Founders—that held important political and constitutional implications. Another aspect of the American revolutionary mind that cannot be completely subsumed in Thompson's treatment of moral philosophy is the founding generation's posture towards intellectual, as opposed to strictly moral, virtue. He seems to concur with Alexis de Tocqueville's observation that the American mind instinctively turns away from general ideas and abstract theorizing such that, as Thompson puts it, "the whole purpose of the Declaration's ideas was to liberate men to *act*" (352, italics in the original). Fair enough, but the difficulty with focusing almost exclusively on the practical, moral side of the American revolutionary intellectual milieu is that it leaves the other hemisphere of the American mind largely unexplored. The speculative bent and scientific talents of such founding-era luminaries as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Rush receive little notice (but see the reference to George Washington's almost Jeffersonian condemnation of "the gloomy age of ignorance and superstition" in the past [183]). It is perfectly understandable that a book about the American Revolution would have a practical and moral focus, but it is probably fair

to acknowledge that this reflects only a part of the multiplex Lockean legacy in America.

Locke's philosophy is notoriously complex, especially with respect to the difficulty involved in reconciling the empiricist epistemology of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* with the rationalist, transcendent natural law rhetoric of his most important political work, *Two Treatises of Government*. To his credit, Thompson recognizes that there appear to be "certain flaws and contradictions" in Locke's epistemology, and that the philosopher's claims about the possibility of a demonstrative moral science are "elusive" and "less than one might hope for" (18, 19, 21). It is clearly beyond the scope of this review to explain adequately Locke's complicated attempts to fuse empiricist and rationalist idioms in a single coherent philosophical vision. But it may not be amiss to recognize that even on Thompson's terms, Locke's moral philosophy points beyond itself to an internal mental domain marked by speculation about both material causation (natural science) and soteriological concerns about personal identity and the immortality of soul (religion). That is to say, there is a "Red State" Locke who supports traditional religious values, upholds the sanctity of private property, exudes an ethic of rugged individualism, and exhibits profound distrust of political elites. But there is also a "Blue State" Locke animated by a commitment to science, a posture of intellectual skepticism, and a secular worldview marked by religious and cultural pluralism and banal consumerist hedonism. The Texas cattle rancher and the coastal bourgeois bohemian are both Lockean, even though they reflect different aspects of America's complex Lockean inheritance. Perhaps recognizing the creative tension between these two wings of Lockeanism may help to explain both America's historic political, economic, and cultural dynamism and the internal conflicts and social divisions that continue to challenge the American liberal order.

Whereas most of this book is marked by nuanced and careful scholarship and a measured and deliberate tone, the epilogue, "Has America Lost Its American Mind?" is somewhat prone to sweeping generalizations and dubious claims about malevolent and insidious (mainly foreign) philosophical influences that have supposedly corrupted the American political and moral imagination over the past two centuries or so. However, I do not believe the epilogue is integral to this treatment of the Declaration of Independence, and therefore I leave it to the

reader's judgment whether to engage seriously with the final section of the book. At any rate, to the extent that Thompson sheds real and original light on the philosophical foundations and moral meaning of the Declaration—itself an enormous task—it will likely remain an important book for some time to come.