



2015

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Recommended Citation

Hancock, Ralph C. (2015) "Between Materialism and the Metaphysics of Eternity: A Reply to Joseph M. Spencer's Review of *Responsibility of Reason*," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 54 : Iss. 2 , Article 12. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol54/iss2/12>

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Between Materialism and the Metaphysics of Eternity

A Reply to Joseph M. Spencer's Review of *Responsibility of Reason*

Ralph C. Hancock

BYU Studies strives to involve readers in the LDS academic experience. In that spirit, we offer this scholarly exchange between Ralph C. Hancock and Joseph M. Spencer based on Spencer's "Goodness and Truth: An Essay on Ralph Hancock's The Responsibility of Reason," found in BYU Studies Quarterly 53, no. 4 (2014): 61–73.

It is a blessing to have Joseph Spencer's serious reading of my book from a Latter-day Saint perspective. *Responsibility of Reason* is about what the title says, but since it addresses fundamental questions about the world and our place in it, and since a Mormon wrote it, I would certainly hope that at some level it would shed light on concerns fundamental to Mormonism and, indeed, suggest a Mormon contribution to the pivotal questions of the Western tradition. I am glad Spencer finds it to be a step in that direction.

Spencer and I seem to agree, largely, on the problem, which is a certain approach to modern materialism. The problem lies not so much in elevating the status of the material, natural, or physical, but rather in a theoretical framing of the natural as an open field of human mastery. The problem, as Spencer notices, is a privileging of the theoretical over the practical. There is a paradox here (which I explore in my book at some length) in that this extreme theoretical rationalism (which has shown its political face most clearly first in the Jacobinism of the French Revolution and then in Marxist-Leninism) is driven by aims in one sense very "practical," that is, to transform the world—"the mastery and

possession of nature for the relief of the human condition” was the formula dear to early moderns such as Francis Bacon and René Descartes. This modern materialism is at the same time a secular-humanist idealism, but an idealism that has abandoned responsibility for its action because it has lost touch with the practical and concrete sense of the human good. Deeper than any metaphysical or theoretical doctrine lies the endless and thus rudderless modern project of mastery, the spirit of what Heidegger called “technology”—by which he meant not an assortment of powerful machines but the very ontology, the very orientation toward being, that underlies the deployment of those machines. Human power is everywhere, Heidegger observed, but humanity, or some distinctively human meaning, is nowhere to be found. Thus modernity, as Leo Strauss once wrote, is a blindly advancing colossus: all power and no purpose. Modern progressivism, I submit, is a milder, self-disguised version of this blind colossus, although in the American version it is fortunately tempered, as Tocqueville understood so well, by Christian and other premodern admixtures.

Spencer and I seem to go this far together in our critique of extreme modern rationalism, this idealistic materialism whose effectual truth is Technology—but then one of us somehow loses the thread. Our parting company seems to be owing to two main thrusts of my argument that I may not have made clear enough or that were lost in a long and complicated text in which I contend with various philosophical adversaries and rivals from various angles. These overlooked main points are: (1) my argument is not metaphysical but practical (in a way that is inseparable from reflexive examination); and (2) I do not appeal to a premodern Platonic totalizing cosmology (if indeed the ancients can be accused of such) but rather to a Tocquevillean balancing of ancient and modern responses to the Truth and to the openness of the human spirit.

Nowhere do I affirm the availability of a “morally ordered cosmos” that is “total and consistent,” as Spencer writes (68). My Platonism, as he at first seems to notice, is more open-ended or aporetic: I take my bearings from Plato’s wonder about the elusive order of a cosmos that escapes us and not from any completed metaphysics that might cash out in a full and determinate system of natural law. (If I had wanted to defend the idea of natural law, I would have done so somewhere in my 300-plus page book.) Spencer himself notices that for me “*the good* is inevitably experienced indirectly, always in the form of derivative [I would say practical] *goods*, emphatically in the plural” (65). Here is

my attempt, from the book, to articulate a Platonic response to human wonder before the elusive order of the whole, the common yet mysterious fittedness of mind to thing:

This awareness of the goodness of thinking cannot fail to issue into the thinking of goodness. The primitive discovery of the immediate evidence of some order and goodness connecting mind and being does not of course give anything like a complete understanding of the order of this whole. The whole and the good that yokes it, that makes it a whole, remain elusive—a mysterious something that, as Plato says, every soul pursues whatever it is pursuing, but without being able to grasp what it is. But every soul already participates, already is part of some larger whole and is subordinate to some “higher” authority—political, moral, religious, or rather, originally, all these at once, indistinguishably. The “soul” or “the human spirit” comes to self-awareness as a part of a larger whole, a particular whole with a particular history.¹

It should be clear, then, that while I appeal to a certain intimation of order, I am very far from invoking a totalizing system of metaphysics and natural law. Rather, I call upon reason to acknowledge its limitations and to accept responsibility for the imperfect traces of order implicit in the practical experience of an actual community, with its own history, institutions, and practices. In doing so, I recognize the validity of not only “vertical” (aristocratic) but also “horizontal” (Christian-democratic-progressive) figures of transcendence and thus dissent pointedly from Leo Strauss’s fundamentally aristocratic strategy of classical “natural right”:

Strauss’s deliberately aristocratic proposal of the lofty autonomy of philosophy as a stable ground of practical elevation is already proving implausible and unstable, even or especially in the hands of Strauss’s most ardent or high-minded disciples. . . . [Strauss’s] project of recovering the elevation of philosophy as the highest good compels him to deny the legitimacy of human longings for a liberation or salvation that addresses the whole of our humanity, our fulfillment in love as well as in knowledge.²

Thus the more conservative part of my argument, which indeed points up the importance of reason’s deferring to practical intimations

1. Ralph C. Hancock, *The Responsibility of Reason: Theory and Practice in a Liberal-Democratic Age* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), 61.

2. Hancock, *Responsibility of Reason*, 26.

of an order that constrains human power, is only the first half of my project (though admittedly the most prominent and emphatic through much of the text). The other half—and here is where the example of Alexis de Tocqueville is crucially important—emphasizes the modern aspect of the Truth, that is, human freedom, or a human openness to possibility never fully realized or represented in any community or even any cosmos. Like Tocqueville, I want to hold together aristocratic “elevation” or excellence with democratic “justice” (and thus openness to a future of possibility).

The irreversible Western inheritance of an eternity not indifferent to time implies a more elusive, if arguably also richer and dynamic, sense of the meaning of human existence than can be contained in the classical ruling idea of reason. It therefore also implies a more hazardous horizon for practical reason, in effect a resignation to the impossibility of containing the soul’s longings within a specific, substantive understanding of the nobility of the good. The illusion of the simple superiority of “theory” to “practice” (or vice versa) cannot be sustained. . . .

Practical reason today must be attuned to the truth of the fundamental aporia that is the deep spring of Western dynamism, the aporia defined by alternatives of, on the one hand, a horizon of knowable goodness above ordinary human concerns [ancient moral order, if you will] and, on the other, by the Christian and revolutionary promise of the regeneration of all humanity [modern freedom].³

Thus, if there is something distinctly Mormon in my practical or moral metaphysics, I hope it is just this: I try to attend both to the truth of eternal moral law and to the truth of open-ended human freedom.

And this takes us to the theme of LDS “materialism,” which is central to Spencer’s essay. I do not think it is very helpful to assimilate a poetic and in some ways inchoate LDS cosmology to modern materialism, precisely because modern materialism is just a face of the technological project I sketched above. Mormon materialism seems to me to be poised precisely between an ancient metaphysics of eternal order and a modern metaphysics of the will to power. (Terryll Givens’s “Romantic” reading of early LDS thought often captures this equipoise, I think, although, like Romanticism itself, it risks going off the rails of eternal progress and veering into technological power. See my interviews with

3. Hancock, *Responsibility of Reason*, 27.

Givens online at *Meridian Magazine Expand*.⁴) Spencer himself grants the Mormon cosmos “an inherent moral ordering,” which is enough to distinguish it radically from anything truly modern.

This moral ordering inherent in Mormon materialism seems to put it in a different category from Alain Badiou’s metaphysics of “inherent multiplicity.” I have only a secondary familiarity with Badiou’s metaphysics, I admit, but his well-known “Pauline” communism explicitly excludes a consistent or unified moral order and seems to be fully implicated in the anti-metaphysics of modern mastery, the idealistic materialism I thought Spencer disliked. In his *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Badiou follows the modern recipe to the letter: the Truth is stripped of all authoritative good, and so revolutionary human action (allegedly Pauline “universalization”) can proceed without any particular moral or religious restraints. Badiou’s atheistic appropriation of Pauline universalism is the purest formalism, a splendid example of modern theory’s utter subjugation of actual human practice, the apotheosis of technology in the name of a humanity with no human content. Such sweeping secular appropriation of Christian idealism is quite an old story (going back, as a matter of fact, to Bacon and Descartes—and even to Machiavelli), and I think Badiou’s “metaphysics of multiplicity” is finally driven by, or at least aligned with, this totalizing secular political project.

But let me conclude on what seems to be a large measure of agreement between Joseph Spencer and me: Mormon poetic theology seems to point to some dynamic eternal materialism consistent with inherent moral order. By way of suggestion, my account of reason, which is at once reflexively critical and aware of its responsibility to the best of inherited and culturally embedded authority, might point to a meeting ground between two of the most impressive enterprises in contemporary Mormon theology: Terryl Givens’s Romantic moral dynamism and James Faulconer’s anti-metaphysical openness to the Other. *The Responsibility of Reason* might also serve as a caution to both modern and postmodern theologies not to succumb to progressive enthusiasm or to anti-metaphysical ire.

4. Ralph C. Hancock, “Terryl Givens’ Foundations: Wrestling with History and Theology,” *Meridian Magazine Expand*, November 11, 2014, <http://ldsmag.com/terryl-givens-foundations-wrestling-with-history-and-theology/>.

A Reply to “Between Materialism and the Metaphysics of Eternity” Joseph M. Spencer

In his response to my review of *The Responsibility of Reason*, Ralph Hancock suggests that I have missed two essential points of his argument. First, he believes I have missed the essentially *practical*—rather than *metaphysical*—basis of his argument. Second, he believes I have wrongly attributed to him the view that the moral order of the world is *total* and *consistent*. I appreciate his further explanations and clarifications, but he has not as yet convinced me on either of these points. It seems, though, that I need to clarify my critique of his position. I would like to address these two points briefly and then add a word or two in defense of my interest in Alain Badiou.

Regarding the first point, I recognize that Hancock’s argument is practical rather than metaphysical. The difficulty is found in the practical bearings of Hancock’s argument that seem to presuppose, however subtly, a metaphysics. Hancock makes clear in what sense he takes reason to bear an irremediable responsibility to real goods. But it must be asked *how* one goes about knowing the goods in question—that is, knowing goods *as goods*. An epistemological question of fundamental importance goes unasked and, therefore, unanswered in Hancock’s work. Or rather, to the extent that there *is* an answer to this question in *The Responsibility of Reason*, it is to be found implicitly packed into the notion of the Good, the fittedness between human intelligences and the contours of the real. There, in the (implicit) dependence of the knowability of practical goods on the knowledge-granting existence of the Good, I find a set of metaphysical commitments.

The second point mentioned above concerns the nature of those metaphysical commitments. I fail to see how to distinguish between commitment to the existence of the Good and commitment to a moral order that is both total and consistent. To make this point clear, let me insist that by “total” I do not in any way mean—as, I think, Hancock assumes—“totalizing,” where this last word would bear within itself certain political echoes. When I speak of a total moral order, I mean just that it is all-encompassing, that its extension or its scope is total, that it forms—in Hancock’s own consistent words—a whole. If that much is clear, perhaps it can be seen why any insistence on the knowability of goods as goods, inasmuch as this knowability (however limited it may be) is predicated on the existence of the Good, appears to be wedded to an insistence on a moral order both total and consistent. The mysterious fittedness between human intelligence and the existence of real goods

depends on a certain wholeness and consistency in the moral ordering of the real.

If this is right, then I remain convinced that Hancock paints a picture that, even as it nicely fixes the boundaries of the questions that need asking, does not quite match up with what I find operative in Mormonism—as I have already argued in my review of *The Responsibility of Reason*.

Regarding my use of Badiou's thought in attempting to outline—far too briefly!—a repositioning of *truth* rather than *goodness* at the heart of Mormonism, I find Hancock's dismissal somewhat confusing. He recommends pursuing something positioned “between an ancient metaphysics of eternal order and a modern metaphysics of the will to power,” but this seems to me a beautiful encapsulation of Badiou's very thought, and it serves as the motivation for my interest in the work of Badiou (and similar thinkers). At any rate, everything in Badiou that supposedly *does* follow what Hancock calls “the modern recipe” can be found in Joseph Smith himself, who ignored the institutional authority of established religion, questioned the canonical boundaries of scripture, troubled prevailing conceptions of sexuality, refused to countenance the contours of contemporary politics, and calculated to lay a foundation that would revolutionize the world. I find it significant that he did all this in the name of truth.

A Modernizing Rhetoric in a Modern Context: A Final Reply **Ralph C. Hancock**

I thank Joseph Spencer for his thoughtful and pertinent reply, as I do for his original review. I take heart from the narrowing of any substantial disagreement between us to two fundamental questions. The first, which concerns the relation between theory and practice, or between knowing and doing, is as elusive as a question can be; there will never be one right way to say (theory) what cannot be said (practice). So philosophy necessarily shades into poetry or into theology when such basic intuitions or orientations are at stake. In this sense, I think Spencer is asking for too much when he asks for an answer to the “epistemological” question: as befits an author whose sympathies seem to be more “modern” than mine, he asks that I decide in advance just what can be known (concerning the Good, notably), before claiming to take practical responsibility for any goods. He thinks I make but do not justify a Platonic claim regarding the cognitive apprehension of the total Good, a justification he thinks would be needed to ground my practical (moral and political) position.

But I am trying to evoke a position in which any attempt to ground practice in theory (or vice versa) is seen to be misguided and potentially dangerous; my whole purpose is to point to a moment prior to the distinction between theory and practice. The very apprehension of the Good translates into an attunement between our human existence and some larger reality. But this attunement can never be reducible to a purely theoretical, “metaphysical” apprehension; it cannot exist apart from an interpretation inevitably affected by our moral-political condition as human beings—and this condition is always in some way particular, never simply universal, though it is open to what is highest. So my whole argument—perhaps itself elusive, even chimerical—is that there is no metaphysics that lies deeper than this attunement to a larger order, which is always a moral-political attunement. In other words, the ultimate rightness of the practical whole, the realm in which we undertake meaningful actions, can never be fully distinguished from our ultimate philosophical or religious orientation. Though I derived this notion of the mutual implication of humanity and divinity from rigorous readings of the likes of Heidegger and Leo Strauss, it might well be considered a deeply Mormon feature of my project to articulate the meaning of reason’s responsibility.

Where the rubber of this argument hits the road, at least as concerns the discussion between Spencer and me, concerns the relation of Mormonism to some ancient/modern polarity. Despite my explicit Tocquevillian stance of equilibrium between these poles, Spencer thinks I lean too much toward the ancients (the moral authority of a Platonic total Good). Well, I certainly lean that way when I push back against what I regard as ill-advised enthusiasm for a one-sided “modern” (progressive, anti-traditionalist) view of our Mormonism. (And I certainly do not think Spencer is the most appropriate example of this modernizing Mormonism.) I do think that the different conditions of the world, and of the Church in relation to the world today, call for a different rhetoric than might have been dominant in the first generations of the Church.

For instance, Spencer claims that Joseph Smith “troubled prevailing conceptions of sexuality,” but in the present modern context, such troubling looks very different. It also looks very different from anything Spencer would espouse. Such misdirections can easily arise among audiences who find modernist rhetoric attractive but overlook context. The language of Joseph’s revelation on marriage abounds in legalistic restrictions that place sexuality squarely within the bonds of marriage between a man and a woman (though a plurality of marriages might exist), which is a conception that harks back to an ancient order more

than looking forward to modernity. To be clear even at the risk of being simple, I think the ongoing contemporary liquidation of traditional norms and bonds requires that we Latter-day Saints recognize the continuity of our most fundamental goods with those “traditional” goods (such as marital fidelity) now being dissolved. “Metaphysically,” I appreciate what I see as a marvelous Mormon equipoise between (ancient) eternal norms and (modern) free possibility. But there is no question for me concerning which of these poles is now more under attack, and thus more in need of emphasis, both in theory and in practice.

Ralph C. Hancock is Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University, receiving his MA and PhD in political science from Harvard University. Besides writing *The Responsibility of Reason* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), he is the editor of *America, the West, and Liberal Education* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), which includes his own writings as well as essays by influential scholars such as Allan Bloom and Stanley Rosen. He has also written articles for *First Things*, *Square Two*, *Political Science Reviewer*, and *FARMS Review*.

Joseph M. Spencer recently earned his PhD in philosophy from the University of New Mexico, and he is currently teaching as an instructor in Brigham Young University’s Department of Ancient Scripture. His recent works include *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope* (Greg Kofford, 2014). He is the associate director of the Mormon Theology Seminar and an associate editor of *The Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*.