

Book Review

Monica Garcia-Salmones Rovira: *The Necessity of Nature: God, Science and Money in the 17th Century English Law of Nature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xiv + 461.)

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The purpose of this ambitious book is to throw light upon “current world crises” by exploring the origins of the world system of money and nature upon which modern society rests. It argues for the existence of a watershed in natural-law theory in seventeenth-century England, at the hands of Hobbes, Locke, and Boyle, which forms the remnant that remains relevant today. It is from this remnant that key economic concepts duly emerged: abundance and scarcity, health and body, household *oeconomy* and utility. These concepts are, of course, not merely economic, but form part of a larger political and ethical problem which is probably incapable of resolution but only management.

The author spent some time at Cambridge and “gravitate[d] around” that institution (xii), and its imprint lies heavily on the text and its basic ideas. It is the Cambridge of Skinner, Brett, et al., for whom ideas are to be set in historical context, which is to say, in other books. Ideas do not, as it were, have an independent existence but are intimately tied to the circumstances of time and place. Cambridge scholars (particularly political historians) are well represented in the footnotes, reflected in the text’s division of intellectual periods which tend to bleed into one another. The book is not a mere retread through that familiar landscape, however, but an intricately researched study that takes established scholarship onto new ground. There are some nice details, such as the mishap that led to the publication of Bramhall’s impolite rejoinders to Hobbes in place of his first, more academic ones (55), and surveys of lesser-known figures such as Worsley and Sanderson (105ff., 136ff.).

The book has three “interwoven theses”: (1) the history of natural law and its influence on the development of Europe in the so-called anthropocene era; (2) the metaphysics of human nature and skeptical denials of its sacredness; (3) the conversion of natural-law theory and the development of science in the seventeenth century to underpin the doctrines of liberalism. The last of these themes is pursued through the writings of Robert Boyle, which sought to understand “nature” as a treasure house to be plundered and “mastered.” At the same time, questions about such nature were deemed to be incapable of rational comprehension and could only be the product of

revelation (15). The writings of Hobbes and Locke on the other hand laid emphasis on the necessity of nature, but far from Boyle's irrationalism, believed that a reconstituted concept of science would reveal new truths concerning nature (7, 10–11). Hobbes in particular asks no longer "what is good?" but "what is necessary?" (11). This is doubtful, however: much of the *Leviathan's* most famous passages concern what is required for the *good* life and avoidance of the *bad*: necessity plays only a subordinate role. Nor is it true to say that Hobbes inverts traditional natural-law theory (49), for many of his pronouncements, shorn of their polemical nature, are disguised Aristotelian doctrines hiding in plain sight. For example, the "right of nature" is *not* "the right to *everything* in the material world" (86) but the right that each person has, in virtue of being a creature of will and *reason*, of "doing anything which, *in his own judgment and reason*, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto" (*Leviathan*, chap. 14). Furthermore the degree of wisdom required mutually to divest ourselves of our "right of nature" and to set up a sovereign power betrays the existence of rationality in the natural condition of a more full-blooded character than Hobbes suggests.

It is not up to the author, but to the scholarly community, to decide whether a philosopher's juvenile works hold less value than their mature work (this seems to be the presumption here: 71). But that presumption need not be automatic, and there is room to argue that Hobbes's earlier, less (but not non-) polemical essays contain more of interest than his later broadsides. This sense of the historical progress of ideas permeates the remainder of the book. The sequence of ideas explored therein is almost entirely Protestant, though the author earlier asserts that Aquinas is a "silent discussing partner" who "remain[s] in the background" (10). In fact, Aquinas surfaces at numerous points of the argument, notably in chapters 5 and 6. Yet she appears to give Aquinas a Protestant flavor as if discussing the same faith/moral/necessity problem in the terms set by Boyle and his intellectual circle. In particular, the suggested contrast of intellect and body (150) would not have been Aquinas's preferred way of treating the problem, for it borders on Gnosticism. Elsewhere, the author maintains that Aquinas's theology is a "theology of *use*" (191), that is, that the good of and for the human being is understood to be "the use with a good will of anything in the world . . . in which God also participates." But this is starkly at odds with Aquinas's Aristotelianism, for which the good of the person is nothing other than contemplation, in accordance with the virtues. One could make the case that some virtues do indicate the terms on which worldly resources are to be used: for example, moderation, justice, prudence. But this is not the focus of any of the specifically *theological* virtues of faith, hope, and charity (the greatest of all: see 1 Corinthians 13), and fails to explain how the virtues are perfective of the human being (other than by bringing their will into accordance with God's law) in a way discernible by *reason*.

The full argument of the remainder of the book cannot be summarized in the limits of a short review. However, the efforts of Boyle, Locke, and others to articulate the relationship of God's will and law to the mundane physical and chemical laws of the sublunar world, and to the strictures of conscience, is meticulously and informatively observed: all falling under distinct yet perhaps related senses of necessity (see, e.g., 221–27, 234, and 238). For Locke, meanwhile, “a conscience informed by reason—and in this sense subjected to reason—was no longer the watchdog and guardian of reason cherished by Christian tradition” (253). The “necessary” remedies of social problems, created by public officials, were severed from the private remedies necessary for salvation. Locke is thus the precursor of legal positivists who believed that legal thought had to be removed from the stream of moral thought defined by its complexity and unendingness, and instead given incontestable authority.

Chapters 9–12 explore the above themes in the contexts of medicine and the *oeconomy* of needs, the significance and problems of money, and the invention of economics as a science of money. The final chapter is perhaps the most important: the question of the public good.

In summary, this is a rich and engaging book which will repay close study across a number of related fields, a key merit of the book being its timely reminder that those fields are in fact related.

–Sean Coyle

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