our current masters. Like the late American historian John Patrick Diggins in his final, noble book *Why Niebuhr Now?* (2011), Williamson wisely and eloquently concludes with the great Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian, Tocquevillean perspective on modernity: “history is not meaningless because it cannot complete itself; though it cannot be denied that it is tragic because men always seek prematurely to conclude it.” Shot through with irony, tragedy, and absurdity, history is nonetheless open; and that goes for democracy too.

**REASON, RESPONSIBILITY, AND SPIRITUAL CRISIS**

Steven McGuire

*The Responsibility of Reason: Theory and Practice in a Liberal-Democratic Age* by Ralph C. Hancock

(Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011)

Ralph Hancock’s *The Responsibility of Reason: Theory and Practice in a Liberal-Democratic Age* represents an impressive effort to unearth and counter the deep source of the nihilism toward which our society continues to propel itself. In essence, he argues that modernity is characterized by both a failure to take a balanced stance toward transcendence and a parallel misconception of the relationship between theory and practice. Having immanentized the transcendent and asserted the absolute priority of theory to practice, we moderns attempt to master nature (including ourselves) according to autonomous reason. But by turning ourselves over to reason so conceived in the name of freedom, we neglect to take moral and political responsibility for ourselves and thus become subject to the whims of power.

The solution, Hancock proposes, is to take on the responsibility of reason, that is, to recognize the limits of reason and to accept that our efforts to theorize are always tied to our practical inheritances. He weaves this argument through interpretive chapters on Martin Heidegger, Leo Strauss, and Alexis de Tocqueville, ultimately arguing that the last best understood—and practiced best—the art of responsible reason in response to the crisis of modernity. Finally, following Tocqueville’s example, Hancock advises us to be friends of liberal democracy—not flatterers, but good and wise friends, who recognize that liberal democracy partakes of something deeply true about the human condition while also understanding that it must be managed lest it undermine our humanity.

At the core of his analysis Hancock couples the recognition that we can never develop an unadulterated understanding of the good with an acknowledgement that the human condition is moral through and through. Paradoxically, this means that “the rule of simple reason is as impossible as it is inevitable” (1): we cannot rule ourselves according to pure reason because “the good or goods to which reason is necessarily oriented cannot be produced by reason itself,” but we must rule ourselves according to reason “because this rule follows from our nature as speaking

*Steven McGuire* is assistant professor of political science at Eastern University and research director of the Agora Institute for Civic Virtue and the Common Good.
and political beings” (2). Although we cannot discern the good with absolute clarity and certainty because it transcends the horizon of our existence, we must nevertheless rely on what we can or do know because we must act.

This means that human thought is always dependent on inherited practices, since it emerges from but can never utterly transcend prejudice, opinion, and tradition: “the bondage of the mind is the natural and inevitable condition of humanity” (257). Yet practice is always guided by theory, since the mind is capable of transcending particular prejudices, opinions, and traditions: “we humans are also beings capable of reflection, of standing back from (which does not mean achieving a standpoint altogether apart from) the common or public world in order to examine and to question what is generally taken for granted in practice” (16).

The situation so described explains the need for what Hancock calls “responsible reason”: those who engage in reasoning (everyone, but especially, for Hancock, would-be “Legislators”) must attend to the nature of the human condition as they pursue theory and relate it to practice. We must recognize that “responsible reason necessarily stands ambivalently in relation to commonly held beliefs and assumptions: it negates or questions them at the same time as it depends upon and reinforces them” (2). Thus, we must reason responsibly, which suggests at the very least that we should not pursue purely rational practices without regard for the existing practices of our society, although it also suggests that we should not simply accept the practices of society without reasoning about them. In fact, we can do neither, since we are always both political and rational animals. The responsibility of reason, then, requires us to balance both aspects of our nature in light of transcendence.

Hancock argues that the nihilistic woes of modernity stem from a failure to maintain such a balance. More specifically, moderns have failed to maintain an important distinction between two forms of transcendence: the “vertical” and the “horizontal.” Vertical transcendence is the pagan or aristocratic mode of representing the transcendent in the “higher” and the “noble”; horizontal transcendence is the Christian and post-Christian form that places the transcendent beyond human reach while also pointing to future fulfillment. According to Hancock, modern thinkers collapse these two modes of transcendence into one and pursue the end of horizontal transcendence with the pride of vertical transcendence.

The French Revolution in particular exhibits the resulting impetus to universalize everything according to autonomous reason without regard for the limits of our practical nature. Hancock argues that, even as confidence in reason has faded in the wake of the ideological mass movements of the last century, the theory behind the French Revolution still undergirds our own commitments to liberal democracy, especially insofar as we attempt to dominate practice with theory. Today we worship the twin gods of freedom and science, and, while renouncing responsibility in the name of the former, we allow the void to be filled by the latter. In the name of freedom, we subject ourselves blindly to the tyranny of science (or those who direct it, whatever their ends might be).

In order to find a way beyond this situation, Hancock studies three of the most profound thinkers to work through the problem of the relationship between theory and practice in modernity: Heidegger, Strauss, and Tocqueville. Each of these thinkers recognizes in his own way that the misconceived transcendence and the concomitant confusion about the relation between theory and practice characterize the source of modernity’s problems, but Hancock distinguishes
Tocqueville as the one who reasons most responsibly.

Hancock credits Heidegger with pursuing the common root of theory and practice more resolutely than any other modern thinker. It is Heidegger who recognizes the crushing weight of the modern attempt to dominate practice with theory and responds by articulating the necessarily practical nature of thinking. But in so doing he refuses to take responsibility for the practical, choosing instead to practice a radically aloof mode of theory. Heidegger thus exacerbates the radical collapse “between extreme transcendence and radical immanence” in modernity, and with disastrous consequences.

Strauss, in contrast to Heidegger, stresses the political nature of philosophy by recognizing that philosophy is always tied to political existence. In response to the modern evacuation of the space between immanence and transcendence, Strauss aims to reassert vertical transcendence after the model of classical Greek philosophy. Yet, Hancock suggests, Strauss (or at least Strauss as he is interpreted by some prominent students of his thought) undermines the efficacy of his own attempt because he does not adequately respond to the nature of liberal democracy. Strauss’s proposal fails to gain traction because it does not attend to horizontal transcendence but simply attempts to counter it with a reassertion of vertical transcendence.

This is problematic because, as Strauss himself seems to recognize, vertical transcendence on its own is not radical enough for Christians or post-Christians. It does not adequately attend to the Christian and modern demand for redemption or “purity of heart.” Thus, Strauss’s juxtaposition of Athens and Jerusalem—specifically the claim that one can be partisan to either one or the other—does not ring true to modern ears: “The effectual truth of either/or is neither/and: neither simply one nor the other, and yet somehow both” (220). Thus, Strauss’s profound attempt to reconcile the practical and the theoretical undermines itself because he fails to grasp just how complete their mutual influence is.

Having shown the efforts of Heidegger and Strauss to be profound but ultimately insufficient, Hancock finally returns to Tocqueville, arguing that he most thoroughly exhibits the responsibility of reason, since he is most successful at distinguishing between the two axes of transcendence while also holding them together. Through a subtle and perceptive reading of Democracy in America, Hancock shows us how Tocqueville grasps the tension between liberal democratic theory and practice in the United States. Somehow, Tocqueville realizes, America has become democratic without going through a “democratic revolution”: “Americans succeed in their practice of modern, democratic individualism because they have not mastered its theory—or (what comes to the same thing) because its theory has not mastered them” (255).

Rather than correct this inconsistency, Tocqueville nurtures it, for he sees that Americans have found a way to express horizontal transcendence without wholly giving themselves over to it. He realizes that Americans have become modern while holding on to a more traditional form of Christianity that elevates them above the modern tendency toward dissipation into the nothingness of universal materialism. And, according to Hancock, this is how Tocqueville succeeds where Strauss does not: “he contrives to employ the universalizing movement of democracy against itself” (268). Thus, he does not just seek to reincorporate the vertical so as to lead Americans toward a sense of greatness; he also recognizes and accepts that horizontal transcendence is a
legitimate, if problematic, development in Western civilization.

In the end Hancock follows Tocqueville and concludes that responsible reason means that we must accept “democracy’s irreversibility” (32). We should admit, in the case of the United States, that “the American Founding must be understood as a synthesis of prudence and modern individual rights, a combination of classical reason with modern rationalism” (314). Rather than railing against liberal democracy wholesale, such an admission would mean seeing the possibility of balance within it. It would mean striving to be true friends of liberal democracy by exercising “a kind of meta-prudence, a second-order self-awareness regarding the problematic status of the liberalizing claims of modern rationalism as well as of the modern conservative denial of such claims” (314).

This directive is issued on the basis of Hancock’s profoundest insight, that “thinking is always preceded and exceeded by being” (75). It is no easy task to accept this point; even Hancock’s hold on it appears to slip periodically. For instance, does referring to Tocqueville’s “rhetorical strategy” (268) not suggest the aloof vantage point of some transcendent theory? Or, can we continue to speak of nature and human nature as if we simply grasp their meaning? These, however, are brief moments in an otherwise steady and profound account. Ultimately, Hancock claims “there can be no such theory, for exhaustively to explain human agency theoretically would be to deny it” (273). The absence of a complete theory opens a space for human responsibility.

The Responsibility of Reason is not an easy read, but it is well worth the effort. Hancock has made an impressive contribution to the literature on the spiritual crisis of our time. It is evident that he has thought deeply about the sources of modernity’s problems, and he has developed an ingenious and original response to those problems. In the final chapter of the book, he surveys and critiques various other attempts to theorize about modernity, including those of John Rawls, Charles Taylor, Michael Gillespie, and Rémi Brague. Hancock deserves to be read alongside any one of them.

DICKENS,
CHRISTIANITY, AND REVOLUTION

Virgil Nemoianu

A Tale of Two Cities
by Charles Dickens, ed. M. D. Aeschliman
(1859; San Francisco: Ignatius Critical Editions, 2012)

Nowadays few are those (even academic specialists) who read or have read the Edinburgh Review. This distinguished and influential quarterly was published from 1802 to 1929, but its high point was the early nineteenth century. In 1809 Sir Walter Scott, a staunch Burkean conservative he, initiated a rival for it, coming out of Edinburgh also, the Quarterly Review (1809–1967, led first by the satirist Gifford and by Scott’s son-in-law, Lockhart).

It was an appropriate parallelism, expressing the nation’s mixed responses to the

Virgil Nemoianu is William J. Byron Distinguished Professor of Literature at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.