the lawyerly ego. One telling example: in describing “the task of a theory of federalism,” he notes the fundamental importance of “developing an ideal vision of a federal system against which to compare the original constitutional design and its subsequent transformation.”

The very definition of ideological conduct is the creation of a second, false reality through abstract reasoning, then attempting to impose it upon reality. The “task” of judging, and even of criticizing judging, most assuredly cannot be to reshape the Constitution, and through it society, to fit an idealized theory—even were it one that had been shown to be critical to the framers of the document. Rather, it is to find (not conceptualize, but find) in law and tradition the internal logic as well as the evident goals of that document and interpret any ambiguous passages from the text in light thereof. The result may not be as neat as Epstein would like. It certainly will not have the modern libertarian leanings of his analysis of individual rights. But it will be far more respectful of the Constitution, of those who drafted it, and of the people who agreed to be governed by it—and not by the theories of “living constitutionalists” or Richard Epstein.

**TOCQUEVILLE AND DEMOCRACY: ENCORE**

**M. D. Aeschliman**

*Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*

by Lucien Jaume, trans. Arthur Goldhammer


*After Tocqueville: The Promise and Failure of Democracy*

by Chilton Williamson Jr.

(Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2012)

Democracy has certainly become a suitcase word (*mot valise*) into which very different, even contradictory, meanings can be inserted; in this regard, perhaps no other word except nature has ever been so protean in its meanings. Yet Tocqueville deservedly holds his place in the first rank of thinkers about it. This is partly due to his judicious conceptual and verbal precision, but also to his diffidence about the complexity and open-endedness of history itself. Now that the mono-causal tyrant dreamers and terrible simplifiers—Marx, Darwin, Freud—have lost, or are losing, their totemic authority, Tocqueville and his great topics—democracy, liberty, equality, ethics, France, the United States, modern history—remain extraordinarily fruitful, instructive, and important.

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The long dominance of the hard Left—Jacobin-Marxist—over French intellectual life lasted until Solzhenitsyn’s revelations about Soviet Communist tyranny in the 1970s, and during this period Tocqueville could not get his due in his own land. Lucien Jaume’s new book, originally published in French in 2008, won the Prix François Guizot of the Académie Francaise and is an excellent example of the high esteem and careful commentary that Tocqueville is now deservedly given in France. Jaume discusses in detail the sources of Tocqueville’s thought: contemporaries such as F.R. Chateaubriand, François Guizot, Benjamin Constant, Madame de Staël, and Louis de Bonald, and the classic writers of the French seventeenth century, particularly Pascal and Bossuet. He also discusses his inheritance and qualified intellectual loyalty to his own aristocratic family, his priest tutor, and his great eighteenth-century ancestor Chrétien Malesherbes, guillotined by the Jacobins.

As Tocqueville pointed out satirically in his last book, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), he had a low opinion of almost all the eighteenth-century *hommes de lettres* or *philosophes* or *Encyclopédistes* of the so-called Enlightenment, seeing these intellectuals as glib, superficial, and destructive. His laconic, mordant chapter on them in *The Old Regime* was entitled: “How towards the middle of the 18th century men of letters took the lead in politics and the consequences of this new development” (III, i). He admired Voltaire for his style, but to the volatile, tormented outsider Rousseau he was more indebted for the latter’s radical analysis of “amour propre,” or competitive envy, in modern Western societies.

Jaume usefully shows Tocqueville’s lineage in the tradition of French literary *moralistes*, deriving from Montaigne and then the great French seventeenth century, and a summary or distillation of much of his argument would be to say that Tocqueville came to see the human person in his own age and the foreseeable future as inevitably living both a conditioned and a conditional existence: neither completely determined (as both Marxism and positivism were saying) nor as radically free as Promethean Romanticism and the Napoleon cult (and Carlyle and Emerson in the English-speaking world) were asserting. Conditioned *and* conditional liberty: Tocqueville was enough of a Christian “providentialist”—an adherent of Bossuet and Pascal, and his own older contemporaries Chateaubriand and Bonald—to conceive of the individual as ultimately morally responsible for his actions in a moral universe. Jaume argues that Tocqueville’s fundamental religious-moral coordinates came from the great Augustinian Christian Pascal, whose austere, unflattering but eloquent assessment of human weakness, vice, illusion, and folly stayed with Tocqueville—despite his own oscillations between orthodox Catholicism and pessimism—throughout his life.

Aware of the pervasive effects of “amour propre,” not least in the often bombastic (boursouflé—a wonderful word for Walt Whitman), vulgar, democratic society of the new United States, he doggedly adhered to the *moraliste* insight of La Rochefoucauld that even “hypocrisy is the compliment that vice pays to virtue.” “Self-interest rightly understood,” prudent self-regard, might be the best that bourgeois, democratic eras could manage. He also believed that many of the contemporary spokesmen for monarchical “legitimism,” aristocracy, and Catholicism were tainted by hypocrisy and Pharisaism. As the great Franco-American historian Jacques Barzun once pointed out, spokesmen for aristocratic noblesse oblige after 1815 seem to have forgotten how little practiced it was before 1789. Tocqueville did
not deny the feckless, libertine, aristocratic, and bourgeois corruption of pre-Revolutionary France and had a sharp intuition of the dead-end moral nihilism that intellectual French naturalism had reached in the “Enlightenment.” (Lester G. Crocker’s *Nature and Culture: Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* [1963] and Roger Shattuck’s *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* [1996] powerfully document the argument.)

Two great twentieth-century conservative thinkers in the English-speaking world, the literary critic Irving Babbitt (1865–1933) and the sociologist Robert Nisbet (1913–1996), drew heavily on conservative nineteenth-century French intellectuals to critique Romanticism and statism, respectively, and Babbitt’s student T. S. Eliot was a patron and ally of Jacques Maritain. In our time, the scholar Christopher O. Blum has very usefully translated three volumes of French traditionalists: one of Bossuet’s sermons (2012); a volume of *Critics of the Enlightenment: Readings in the French Counter-Revolutionary Tradition* (2004)—Chateaubriand, Bonald, de Maistre, Le Play, Keller, and La Tour du Pin; and a separate volume of selections from Bonald, *The True and Only Wealth of Nations: Essays on Family, Economy, and Society* (2006). It is no detraction from Tocqueville to put him among these other noble thinkers, which Lucien Jaume’s book also helps us to do. Not all the counterrevolutionaries were hypocrites or Pharisees. (Incidentally, twentieth-century French fascists such as the non-Catholic Maurras hated Tocqueville, as Jaume points out.)

In perhaps the most important, positive American educational development of our time, the great scholar E. D. Hirsch Jr. has over the last thirty years developed a K–8 curriculum for public schools (the “Core Knowledge” curriculum, now in use in more than one thousand schools) and simultaneously conducted a sustained critique of the damaging but dominant educational “Progressivism” of American public schooling whose roots are in Rousseau and the Romantic movement deriving from him. Hirsch has explicitly critiqued Rousseau and Dewey, and “the perils of Romanticism,” most eloquently in *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them* (1996) but also in the pages of the bilingual *Tocqueville Review*. He has even had the temerity to quote with approval the contemptuous characterization of sentimental Romanticism as “spilt religion” by that scourge of the intellectual-academic Left the English neo-classicist T. E. Hulme (*Speculations*, posthumously published in 1924), who studied in Paris under Bergson before being killed in World War I.

It is the “spilt religion” of a sentimental, Romantic cult of democracy that is the target of Chilton Williamson’s new book, a book that very much resembles—but updates—the critiques of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More seventy-five years ago. *After Democracy: The Promise and Failure of Democracy* is a wide-ranging, polemical, learned Jeremiad of a book from the pen of a renegade conservative man of letters—novelist, travel writer, historian, once senior literary editor of *National Review*, singer of classical, operatic, and sacred music, horseman, and hunter. Although nowhere quoting Russell Kirk, Robert Nisbet, or Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn—the first and third frequently published in *National Review*—Williamson is a conservative in their mode and a very good example of what Kirk famously called “the conservative mind.”

Tocqueville was concerned with democracy, liberty, and the idea of “the equality of men,” and he asserted regarding the latter that “it is Christianity that brought it into the world.” Dissenting from the numerous,
deterministic/fatalistic heresies of his time—communist, positivist, racialist (Marx, Comte, Gobineau)—he insisted that “proselytism does not arise simply from the sincerity of belief, but from the idea of the equality of men and especially the unity of the human race.” But he was worried that egalitarianism without a Christian basis would turn into sentimental pantheism, a “spilt religion.”

Williamson sees evidence of this development all about us today in the self-contradictory, multicultural progressivism, the episodic moralism, and the repulsively vulgar Hollywood/pop/rock culture of late modernity. It is both sentimental and scientific, evincing an intense “dissociation of sensibility” and issuing in what Williamson quotes Jürgen Habermas as calling “the scientization of politics.” As Neil Coughlan put it in writing about Dewey, he was “the philosopher par excellence of American liberalism” because “he shared with it the root conviction that we can have both self-defined self-fulfillment and social justice for all”: a glaring contradiction.

It is a disappointing weakness that Williamson has nothing to say about Lincoln’s great critique of Stephen Douglas’s amoral democratism or majoritarianism in the 1858 Illinois debates, about which Harry V. Jaffa has written so authoritatively. And both The Federalist Papers and Tocqueville knew that the “voice of the people” was not necessarily the voice of God. But Williamson is in dialogue with several key English and American thinkers, as well as with a series of modern and contemporary French thinkers who provide him with points of triangulation and perspective on the social psychology and politics of late modernity in Western Europe and the United States—Jacques Ellul, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Pierre Manent, Claude Polin.

These French thinkers, along with Raymond Aron and Maritain, are a salutary, sobering contrast to the self-indulgent, hysterical fecklessness of so many modern and contemporary French intellectuals—descendants of the eighteenth-century philosophes whom Burke and Tocqueville mocked. In spite of the celebrity intellectual Bernard-Henri Levy’s own histrionic vanity, the modern French trahison des clercs was made amazingly, damningly evident in his Adventures on the Freedom Road: The French Intellectuals in the 20th Century (English translation, 1995).

If Williamson’s book has the character of a jeremiad and a polemic, it is, nonetheless, a rich one. He is rightly indignant about the looseness and glibness with which our dominant intellectual, political, and journalistic elites use the words democracy and liberalism as suitcase words. His own chapters sometimes seem “raids on the unspeakable,” but they often have antiseptic force: the contemporary liberal program, he writes, has “served as the means by which the upper stratum of society, including the intellectual class, has sought to escape the authority of religion while establishing itself as a secular church to which the lower orders are made subservient.”

A lover of the mountain West where he lives, Williamson also echoes the conservative, Christian environmental tradition of Ruskin, T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, E.F. Schumacher, Kirk, and Wendell Berry (whom in some respects he resembles) when he writes of the Baconian, Faustian, utilitarian, modern industrial-commercial project: this “system of rationalized mechanical production on a large scale . . . does not answer in any way to nature, human nature, or the laws of natural or political sustainability.”

Williamson writes against the contradictory, secular-humanist democratism and scientism of H.G. Wells, John Dewey, our resulting ramshackle educational system, and
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, Tocquevillian 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

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