

# A Review of *The Virtue of Nationalism*

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## **The Virtue of Nationalism**

By Yoram Hazony. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2018. Pp. 304. \$30.

Reading Yoram Hazony's erudite and cogently argued book reminded me of another similarly iconoclastic work of political philosophy published forty odd years ago. As does Hazony's, it too challenged a prevailing orthodoxy. In its case, that orthodoxy was support for social democracy in some form. Today's orthodoxy that Hazony seeks to challenge is the current widespread disparagement of nation-states in favor of supranational governance, be this by international bodies such as the International Criminal Court, the European Union, or by U.S.-led coalitions effecting regime change.

Both books have the same publisher, and their authors, as well as being Jewish, both studied at American universities, one of these being Princeton in both cases. Each author presents the alternative political arrangements between which he seeks to adjudicate through offering trifold political taxonomies: Hazony's being that of anarchy, national state, and empire, and that of the earlier book being anarchy, state, and utopia, a taxonomy which provides that book's title. Its author was, of course, Robert Nozick, who in it argued for a form of state he called the "minimum" or "night-watchman" state on account of the functions of government being confined there to maintaining a monopoly in the use of force in the territory over which it exercised authority. One benefit of this form of state, Nozick argued, was its offering maximum scope for people to live in whatever arrangements might best suit their particular

outlook and temperament. Given people's differences in taste and outlooks, he claimed the minimal state offered a framework for utopia—or rather for a plethora of utopias.

Hazony similarly argues for a system of states above the other two alternative arrangements he identifies. In his case, the states most favored are national states, which he claims form the best possible political arrangements human beings can live within. They are said to offer greater security than anarchy, in which tribes and clans are the largest social glomerations, as well as a greater scope for social experimentation and diversity than do empires. The resemblance between the two books stops here. As well as sharing several points in common, the two books are marked by several equally profound differences, especially in terms of their respective sources of inspiration.

Nozick develops his case for the minimal state by postulating a set of Lockean natural rights—to life, liberty, and property—plus a right to use force in defense of those rights against those intent on violating them. Hazony expressly repudiates this entire manner of political theorizing, which, as well as positing these rights, locates the origin of political society in how it surmises individuals would seek to safeguard these rights in the absence of any form of state, in the so-called “state of nature.” In such anarchic conditions, it claims, people would choose to exit them by mutually contracting to obey some common authority created to protect their rights. Hazony will have none of this, writing:

In fashioning his theory, Locke downplayed or entirely omitted essential aspects of human nature and motivation without which no political philosophy can make sense ... [He] offers a rationalist view of human political life that has abstracted away every bond that ties human beings to one another other than consent ... [T]he individual becomes a member of a human collective only because he has agreed to it, and has obligations towards such collectives only if he has accepted them. ...

However ... [in] the empirical political world ... mutual loyalties bind human beings into families, tribes and nations [the members of which have mutual] ... responsibilities ... that do not arise as a result of consent. ... No intelligent account of politics, or of political obligation, can be derived that does not give great weight to these factors, and Locke's account ... elides them ... a far-reaching depreciation of the most basic bonds that hold society together. (30–31)

In marked contrast with Nozick as well as with practically all other contemporary political theorists of repute, Hazony draws his intellectual and moral inspiration from Hebrew scripture, in which he finds propounded a pair of political principles that jointly underwrite and legitimize the system of nation-states he favors. The first principle stipulates what Hazony calls “the moral minimum required for legitimate government” and is said to comprise the protection of the people and their life, family, and property; justice in the courts; maintenance of the Sabbath; and public recognition of one God. The second principle posits a “right of national self-determination,” meaning that “nations ... cohesive enough to secure their political independence ... possess ... a right to govern themselves ... [Hence] while ... natural minimum requirements ... bind ... all governments, it was not [to be] expected that all nations would become as one in their thoughts, laws, or way of life” (25).

For several centuries following the Reformation until comparatively recently (shortly after 1945), virtually all European nations subscribed to these two principles. During that period, despite having a Hebraic provenance and being originally articulated only with Israel in mind, the principles were widely understood as having universal applicability and validity. As Hazony is only too acutely aware, the light from that Jewish beacon has long been eclipsed by the glare of modern technology.

Among the ranks of latter-day Western elites, God's Holy Writ has for the most part long been consigned to the dustbin of intellectual history as a source of political guidance. As Hazony puts it:

[S]ince the end of the Second World War ... we can see ... the progressive abandonment of the view that family, Sabbath, and public recognition of God are institutions [to be] upheld by legitimate government and minimum requirements of a just society. ... And we can see ... [equally] sharp decline of concern for safeguarding the political independence of nations as the most effective barriers to the tyranny of universal empire, culminating in the reconstitution of Europe under a multinational regime, and the increasing tendency to identify American power with a new world order that will supersede the independence of nations. (29–30)

One notable casualty of this shift from support for nationalism to opposition to it has been the state of which Hazony is a citizen, Israel. Created in 1948 with United Nations (UN) approval as a home for the Jewish people and in the shadow of the death camps of Auschwitz, today Israel is increasingly vilified by postnationalist organizations for exhibiting what they claim are the very same xenophobic and particularistic proclivities that gave rise to those camps. Only now the former inmates are the guards. Foremost among those who now increasingly view Israel so are many of the ruling elite of the European Union (EU) who have turned their backs on nationalism that they view as having been the motivating force behind National Socialism and its aggressive foreign policy and genocidal racism.

Hazony will rightly have none of this. In reality, he correctly points out, behind all international and supranational forms of governance, be these the UN or the EU, is some specific core hegemonic nation whose interests these forms of governance advance, no matter how much they might seek to disguise their imperial power and aspirations with supranational or international institutions and rhetoric. As Hazony remarks: “Established by the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht, the EU joins together dozens of formerly independent nations ... [over which] the EU bureaucracy, backed by federal European courts, has consistently extended its

power. ... The European principle of subsidiarity is ... nothing other than a euphemism for empire” (131–132). He concludes: “The European Union is a German imperial state in all but name” (154). Much the same holds true, argues Hazony, of international bodies such as the UN and the International Criminal Court, which as yet lack the means to enforce their will save such as is voluntarily accorded them by member states. He writes:

When a nation state transfers powers of government to ... [an international body], it not only renounces its own national freedom. ... It also participates in the destruction of independent national states... [For all these bodies] will work to delegitimize and undermine the independence of all remaining national states, declaring them to be a holdover from a savage and primitive age. ... This is true not only of the European Union, but also of all other schemes for the establishment of a coercive international order – including attempts to establish the Security Council of the United Nations as having the authority to make binding determinations for all nations in matters of war and peace. (185–186)

All this, and much more for which Hazony argues in his book, seems eminently sane and very much worth saying. As someone who over several decades has also argued in favor of the nation-state, including Israel, and against the illiberal aspirations and structure of the EU, I find myself wholly at one with Hazony and grateful for his clear and forceful exposition of the case for many of the things in which I believe. On only one relatively small but important matter would I take issue with what Hazony argues in his book. I think him quite wrong to assign any responsibility for today’s flight from nationalism to John Locke, whom I would place squarely among those aligned with the two constitutive principles that created the national state order Hazony favors. The particular form of contractarianism Locke developed is wholly compatible with recognizing nonchosen obligations people have toward groups

to which they belong otherwise than by choice, such as family and nation. No one recognized the moral and political importance of such ties as providing a basis for political affiliation and loyalty better than Locke. To see this, consider what he wrote to his close friend Philip van Limborch on leaving for England in 1689 after a five-year exile in Holland: “In going away, I almost feel as if were leaving my own country and my own kinsfolk; for everything that belongs to kinship, goodwill, love, kindness – everything that binds men together with ties stronger than blood – I have found in you in abundance.”<sup>1</sup>

Again, consider what Locke writes about other nonvoluntarily incurred obligations in the *Second Treatise*:

Though I have said ... that all men by nature are equal, I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of equality: age or virtue may give men a just precedency: excellency of parts [i.e. attributes] may place others above the common level: birth may subject some, and ... benefits others, to pay an observance to those to whom nature, gratitude or other respects may have made it due: and yet all this consists [i.e., is consistent] with the equality ... in respect of jurisdiction and dominion one over another, which ... every man hath. (para. 54)

Hazony claims: “Locke was ... one of the few political writers of his time who did not argue on the basis of historical experience. ... The *Second Treatise* begins with a series of axioms without any evident connection to what can be known from the historical and empirical study of the state” (245–246, fn 36). Yet Locke was fully alert to the civic importance for Englishmen of studying England’s history as enabling them to understand how and why the natural rights he had posited had become embodied there within positive law, thereby rendering its political institutions and traditions worthy of veneration. He wrote: “[A] gentleman ... ought ... to apply himself to that wherein he may be serviceable to his country. And to that purpose ... [he should] read our history and with it join

in every king's reign the *laws* then made. This will give an insight into the reason of our statutes, and show the true ground upon which they came to be made and what weight they ought to have."<sup>2</sup> In claiming otherwise about Locke, Hazony does him and the cause of *liberal* nationalism a disservice.

#### Notes

1. Quoted in H. R. Fox Bourne, *The Life of John Locke in Two Volumes* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1876), Vol. 2, p. 85
2. Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (§. 187). Italics in the original.