A New Lens on Liberal Modernization: The Influence of Benedict de Spinoza on John Locke's Political Philosophy

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This essay will argue that there is an intellectual link between the philosophies of Benedict de Spinoza and John Locke. When one examines their major works and Spinoza’s letters with Henry Oldenburg, there is strong evidence that Spinoza influenced Locke. While the essay will address their epistemologies, primary emphasis will be on their political philosophies in order to address the thesis of Jonathan Israel that Spinoza’s political works had a direct influence on modern democratic institutions. By influencing Locke, and Locke in turn influencing the American Revolution, Spinoza has left a mark on American democracy, providing a new perspective on the development of political theory.

A great deal of progress in Western society can be traced to the Age of Enlightenment, which has been strongly argued by many historians. Peter Gay’s work, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, goes to great lengths to show the advances in humanities, sciences, social perspectives, and politics that were made in 18th century Europe, leading to major revolutions in North America and France. Jonathan Israel’s work on the Enlightenment is vast and defends Gay’s modernization thesis, beginning with *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* in 2001 and followed by two more works in 2006 and 2011 which trace the origins of modern democracy to the radical strain of philosophers in the 17th and 18th centuries. However, the impact of these philosophers on political conditions both in their time and on ours has been hotly debated among Enlightenment scholars.

The central figure in Israel’s interpretation is Baruch Spinoza. Simply put, Spinoza’s radical philosophy is more responsible for the shift in Western philosophy towards secularism and democratic ideas than other European philosophers, whom Israel designates as more moderate by contemporary standards. While no one doubts that Spinoza’s philosophy was considered radical during his time, or that it caused responses of strong praise and condemnation, critics of Israel’s thesis have questioned whether Spinoza’s political philosophy was really as influential at its time and as relevant to modern democracy as Israel claims.
The guiding questions for this essay are whether Spinoza really made such a drastic impact on political philosophy, and whether Spinoza can actually be linked to modern democracy. Wim Klever, a Dutch scholar on Spinoza, argues in “Locke’s Disguised Spinozism” that he did: Locke’s own philosophy was profoundly shaped by Spinoza’s works. Klever points to the evidence that Locke possessed and read Spinoza’s major works and borrowed many of Spinoza’s ideas which show up in Locke’s work.

Klever then shows direct textual similarities in their works and letters, and similarities in their ideas regarding epistemology, secularism, and political theory. This essay will evaluate the validity of these similarities with emphasis on the political theories of Spinoza and Locke. Intellectual connections between Spinoza and Locke will be established, followed by textual similarities. Then, their epistemologies will be compared and used to explain their similar stances on secularism and political structure. Finally, the connection between Locke and the American Revolution will be explored.

Moreover, this essay will evaluate Klever’s argument by examining the same sources: namely Spinoza’s Principles of Cartesian Philosophy (1663), Ethics (1677), Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (1670), Tractatus Politicus (1676), and Spinoza’s letters, alongside Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), Reasonableness of Christianity (1695), Second Treatise on Government (1689), and Letter Concerning Toleration (1689). From this, the connection between the political ideas of Locke and the American Revolution will be examined to determine whether Spinoza, through Locke, made an impact on modern democratic ideas and institutions.

These investigations will reveal that Spinoza had a credible influence on Locke, and Locke on the American Revolution, which supports Israel’s claim that Spinoza influenced the
establishment of modern democracy by using the United States as the example. Supporting this interpretation offers a new perspective on the development of philosophy in Age of Enlightenment and its culmination in modernity today. However, there are some caveats: these influences must not be overstated.

Klever goes so far to call Spinoza the “philosophical master of Locke,”\(^1\) and this essay will argue that Klever’s interpretation ignores significant differences in their philosophies, primarily their epistemologies. While Spinoza and Locke did differ on specific points, the chronology of their work and the similarity in their political philosophies support the thesis that Spinoza had a direct influence on Locke's political thought. Both arrived to the same point from their epistemologies that human beings have natural rights based upon their natural faculties. Furthermore, though Locke went on to substantially influence the American Revolution, it would be wrong to behold him as the sole ideological father of the Revolution in the context of colonial politics and history at the time. The connection is there, but it is subtle and complex.

Klever first places Spinoza in the context of 17\(^{th}\) century philosophy. René Descartes’ philosophy made a significant impact on academia at the time, but many thinkers had objections. One such thinker was Spinoza, who outlined his understanding and objections to Cartesianism in his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*. Spinoza’s main objections regarded substance duality, Descartes’ treatment of the will and intellect, and free will.\(^2\) Some scholars at the time were impressed with Spinoza’s work and were very curious about his own views.\(^3\) The three that are most important to this discourse were Henry Oldenburg, Robert Boyle, and John Locke, who were colleagues at the Royal Society of London. Boyle and Spinoza had regular discourse with

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3 Klever, “Disguised,” 1 and 1n5.
each other through Henry Oldenburg, and this is where Locke – a friend and colleague to Boyle – became exposed to Spinoza.4

“It is well established” that Locke obtained Spinoza’s subsequent works “immediately after their publication,”5 Klever demonstrates. Locke had Spinoza’s work in his library, not only exposing himself to Spinoza’s literary works but also to the discussions of Spinozist ideas during his time in Amsterdam between 1683 and 1688 – during which he composed most of his major publications. There is even material evidence in Locke’s annotated King James Bible where he makes note of Spinoza’s claim in the first chapter of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (henceforth referred to as TTP) that the Jews attribute God as the cause of things occurring.6 Furthermore, Klever points to contemporaries of Locke who made note of the Englishman’s agreements and similarities with Spinoza; particularly Pierre Des Maizeaux’s letter to Jean Barbeyrac in 1706 and William Carroll’s dissertation in the same year.7 In sum: it can be demonstrated that, on a material and social level, Locke knew of Spinoza, both reading and reflecting upon Spinoza’s philosophy while in England and Amsterdam.

It should also be noted that the time frame of Locke’s writing is disputed among scholars. Locke asserted that he began writing his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (henceforth referred to as ECHU) in 1671, which would mean Spinoza’s major works could not have reached him yet. However, Klever notes G.A.J Rogers, an editor of Locke’s *Essay*, who points to a particular letter Locke had written which changes his timeframe. In correspondence to Edward Clarke in 1686, Locke wrote that he was finishing the fourth and fifth books of ECHU after “five

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4 Ibid., 15. See also: Letter 25 in *Complete Works*, wherein Oldenburg notes the interest that the Royal Society had in Spinoza’s notions.
5 Ibid., 1.
or six years”8 of working on the entire project – which places his starting point as 1680-1681, in line with the chronology of Spinoza’s influence. Klever does note Mark Goldie’s insistence that Locke made an error in his letter, but finds this unconvincing.9

Klever then proceeds to demonstrate the intellectual and textual similarities shared between Spinoza and Locke by providing an exhaustive number of examples underscoring the influence of Spinoza’s epistemology and politics on those of Locke. For instance, the discussions about innate motion between Spinoza and Oldenburg in Letters 6, 11, 13, and 32 seem to show up in certain places in Locke’s ECHU.10

When Spinoza criticizes Boyle for seeking “cause from purpose,”11 Oldenburg replies that Boyle “made use of the Epicurean principles” of “innate motion in particles.”12 Klever argues that Locke, intimate with this correspondence, addresses Boyle’s error as an assumption and makes a direct note of the Epicureans in the ECHU;13 innate motion was “a mortal sin in the new science.”14 In Letter 13, discourse on an “experiment… to measure an eventual difference between horizontal and vertical air pressure,”15 shows up later in ECHU.16 An example of a woodworm in a letter concerning human perspective, which appears in Letter 3217, also reappears in ECHU.18

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8 Ibid., 23.
10 Ibid., 4-7.
11 Spinoza, Letter 6, Complete Works, 774.
12 Henry Oldenburg, Letter 11, Ibid., 786.
15 Ibid., 6.
16 Locke, Essay, 2.23.24.
18 Locke, Essay, 2.2.3.
Perhaps one of the most striking similarities is that regarding the different kinds, or degrees, of knowledge. In ECHU, Locke seems to borrow heavily from Spinoza’s *Ethics*. In it, Locke agrees with Spinoza that intuitive knowledge is the highest of all and lists the same lower degrees of knowledge that Spinoza outlines: reasoned knowledge based on empirical observation and mental deliberation, faith and opinion, and random sense information.\(^ {19}\)

Another instance of Locke learning from the correspondence is that of a discussion regarding the reliability of probable knowledge. Spinoza says that probability is reliable and that demonstrations not always necessary; a man does not need demonstration that he will die without nourishment.\(^ {20}\) Locke uses this example in the ECHU on the same subject of probability.\(^ {21}\) While these examples may seem minute in comparison to Locke’s mammoth *Essay*, their similarities with the correspondence between Spinoza and Boyle through Oldenburg are striking.

While this essay strongly disagrees with Klever’s interpretation of Spinoza’s epistemology as “radical empiricism,”\(^ {22}\) there are still strong similarities in both systems that suggest an intellectual relationship that goes on to influence their political theories in very similar ways. While the similarities are extensive, Klever interprets both Spinoza and Locke as empiricists, which this essay disagrees with.

Klever goes so far as to claim that the typical rationalist view of Spinoza is wrong. Instead, both Spinoza and Locke advocated “radical empiricism,”\(^ {23}\) according to Klever’s interpretation of their epistemologies. To him, “Spinoza… asserts that all our thoughts are either sensations or perceptions of these sensations.”\(^ {24}\) What Klever ultimately wants to draw attention

\(^ {20}\) Spinoza, Letter 56, from *Complete Works*, 904.
\(^ {21}\) Locke, *Essay*, 4.11.10.
\(^ {22}\) Klever, “Disguised,” 16.
\(^ {23}\) Ibid.
\(^ {24}\) Ibid., 15. Italics are directly quote.
to is that Spinoza offered an epistemological alternative to Descartes’ dualism which better explained the unity of the mind and body and the formation of ideas. Rather than seeing mind and matter as two distinct substances, Spinoza offered an alternative which Locke picked up on: that we can indeed ascertain truth from material reality, which does influence the realm of the mind. Locke adopted this, but distinguished himself from Spinoza by pushing stronger empiricism which placed human understanding around material reality.

In a nutshell, Klever argues that Spinoza’s system ultimately argues that our mind is the product of affects which impress upon the body (specifically the mind) to produce sensation and ideas, pointing all throughout Part II of the *Ethics* to support his claims. This theory of the human mind is important as it unites it with the body and material reality. This presented an alternative to Cartesian dualism, as some (such as Spinoza) found it difficult to understand how two distinct substances (mind and body) could interact. Klever then points to similarities between Spinoza’s *Ethics* and Locke’s *ECHU* where Locke has a similar, empiricist epistemology of sensations giving rise to complex thought. Klever argues that Spinoza’s ideas regarding affects directly influenced Locke’s ideas of perception arising from sensation and reflection. Ultimately, the human mind was presented as being fused to material reality, which allows human beings to adequately understand it and placed them on equal intellectual footing.

Klever makes a strong argument that Spinoza’s new, radical philosophy influenced the ideas of Locke and the chronology supports his claims. However, his assertions do not deconstruct the rationalist view of Spinoza’s philosophy. Locke makes it clear that all thoughts

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25 Ibid. This subject is covered throughout Klever’s paper, but is made most explicit in his discourse on pages 15-18.
26 Ibid., 16. The most important parts of the *Ethics* for Klever’s arguments are: Part II, Axiom 4, Propositions 7, 13, 17-23, and 26.
27 Ibid., 17.
28 Ibid., 15-18 and 20-21. The most important parts of the *Essay* which Klever notes for this thesis are 2.1, 9-11, and 4.1.
29 Ibid., 16.
derive form sensation or the perception of sensation, and that the common notions from these simple ideas from sensation are the truest.\textsuperscript{30} This stands in contrast to textual evidence in Spinoza’s \textit{Ethics} which heavily support a more rationalist view. Spinoza makes it clear that common notions derived from sense knowledge pale in comparison to abstract, essential knowledge of God.\textsuperscript{31} For Klever to say that Spinoza “seems to exclude the possibility of any adequate knowledge of the essence of things”\textsuperscript{32} is utterly false in the face of direct text dealing explicitly with the understanding of formal essences.\textsuperscript{33} On top of this, Spinoza directly proposes that “the body cannot determine the mind to think.”\textsuperscript{34} Thought and extension are parallel and neither holds dominion, or is foundational, over the other.

For Spinoza, humans receive both sense experience and their correlated ideas, but this information is not received in a complete fashion. Error is simply caused by a lack of knowledge which arises from incomplete understanding, not from an innate lack of intellectual ability. The most important thing to note here is that humans are capable of utilizing their rational agency – their minds – to determine and undoubtedly ascertain truth from affects which come from God to cause mental and sensual experiences. Truth can be intuitively known without solely empirical observation or affects alone, since the mind is active and not simply passive.\textsuperscript{35} Spinoza makes it clear that pure sensation is random, determined by external causes, and provides no essential truth.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{30}Locke, \textit{Essay}, 2.8.9.
\textsuperscript{32}Klever, “Disguised,” 18.
\textsuperscript{33}Spinoza, \textit{Ethics}, in \textit{Complete Works}. See Part I, Axioms 4-5, Propositions 11, 15, 20, and 25; Part II, Propositions 25, 40, and 45. In these axioms and propositions, Spinoza explicitly details how the mind understands the abstract essences of things, which are the truest forms of knowledge.
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., Part III, Proposition 2. See also the Scholium.
\textsuperscript{35}Spinoza, \textit{Ethics}, in \textit{Complete Works}. See Part I, Definitions 1-6 and Propositions 5-8, 11, 14-20, and 33; Part II, Propositions 1-2, 7, 19, 22, 27-28, 35, 40, 43, and 47; and Part IV, Propositions 2 and 4.
Locke’s theory, on the other hand, is more empirical. While Spinoza does agree that we get ideas and sensations through affects, or experience,\(^{37}\) Locke is far more explicit that all human ideas derive strictly from empirical sense knowledge which generates further complex ideas within the mind through internal reflection.\(^ {38}\) Human beings first receive simple ideas, which are external to the human mind and produce sensation. While Spinoza would say that the mind best knows intuitive truth separate from sense knowledge,\(^ {39}\) Locke makes it clear that we can only ascertain certain truth through “observation and experiment” which derives from sense perception.\(^ {40}\) Essences and abstract ideas do not derive from God, but are rather formed in the human mind based on sensation.\(^ {41}\) Sensation is the foundation of the mind and its complex ideas, which cannot be known to be true without empirical observation.

For Spinoza, the mind is receptive in the arrangement of externals which contain pure ideas as part of their nature. The mind does not just receive sense data, but the ideas which correspond. For Locke, the mind is receptive in making complex ideas out of simple ideas in its own operations from foundational sensations and affects. This is where Spinoza differs from Locke: he disagrees that the mind is so passive and does not think that the mind receives ideas from extension, but rather from God.

Because human beings are naturally capable of rational inquiry, and one person is only superior to another in their wealth of knowledge (which all are capable of acquiring), people have the same basic natural functions and liberties. In their views, humans generally seek consensus to minimize civil conflict. The exclusive aristocratic circles of Europe do not

\(^{37}\) Ibid., see Part II, Propositions 23 and 26.
\(^{38}\) Locke, *Essay*, 2.1.2.
\(^{39}\) Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *Complete Works*. See Part II, Proposition 40, including Scholium 1 and 2. Here, Spinoza makes it clear that the greatest degree of knowledge is that which the mind actively understands of its own accord. Knowledge which is based on pure observation is not generated by the mind but impressed upon it, and thus not an object of the mind’s own understanding.
\(^{40}\) Locke, *Essay*, 4.3.28.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 3.4.3 and 4.2.14.
represent this general view. Rather, these aristocrats and absolute monarchs were outliers that unfairly subjugated the majority for their own selfish purposes. Innately, monarchs were no different than beggars. By identifying the human mind as an entity which is tied to the natural world and putting all people on the same natural footing, Spinoza and Locke proceed towards republican political theory based on equal natural rights.

Spinoza’s political writings were radical for his time. He provided a more benevolent depiction than Hobbes of man’s natural rights, social contract, and the state of nature, which depicted men as selfish and dangerous without the threat of punishment upheld by an absolute ruler. Spinoza condemned absolute rule in favor of republicanism based on majority rule and common law. Most importantly, Spinoza pushed for a greater degree of religious and philosophic toleration at a time when such differences were a regular source of social and political strife. Klever’s argument that Locke was influenced by Spinoza is very strong when one examines the similarities in their ideas and the novelty of Spinoza’s thought at the time. In particular, Klever focuses on their strong similarities regarding natural rights, the state of nature, majority rule common law, secularism, and religious toleration. 

To both Spinoza and Locke, human beings are endowed with certain natural rights which give them inalienable agency in knowing and pursuing what is best for them. Unlike Hobbes, Spinoza (and then Locke) argued that these rights never cease, as men are always in a state of nature. Separate political bodies will always compete with one another so long as they are separate. Spinoza and Locke both agreed that self-preservation – the cornerstone and

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42 Klever, “Disguised,” 37-38 (natural rights), 39 (the state of nature), 36-37 (majority rule and common law), and 40-41 (secularism and religious toleration). This essay presents them in a different order than Klever because it seems more appropriate to begin with natural rights and states following from epistemology, then onto the ideal structure and functions of the state.

impetus behind all human understanding, endeavoring, and rational agency – was a natural right for all humans.

Not only do most humans know what is best for them, but they distinguish themselves in their rational agency. Rather than requiring brute force, which people will oppose when it threatens their self-preservation, people are smart enough to know that a cooperative commonwealth, where everyone is equal, is the most conducive to human survival as whole. For both, one’s endeavoring towards self-preservation is determined by nature. For Spinoza and Locke, there might be someone who is poor, impulsive, and ignorant, but they have the same natural faculty of understanding as their neighbor who is rich, prudent, and educated.

For Spinoza, the state of nature is obviously violent and unstable, which is due to men’s passions. Yet, even the uneducated person is smart enough to know that it is far better to live in a civil society – not out of any external fears, but internal instincts of self-preservation. Rational people internalize the Golden Rule, and even fools understand reciprocity well enough to remain civil. Locke agrees that the state of nature is governed by self-preservation, and that people enter a civil state which preserves common rights because people are naturally reasonable and know it best to live together as equals.

Spinoza breaks from Hobbes in that people are more benevolent and intelligent in their nature, which Locke picks up on. Since humans are not governed by brutish desires, they do not

44 Spinoza, Ethics, in Complete Works, Definitions of the Emotions 1, 311. Here, Spinoza proposes that self-preservation is the essence of humanity.
45 Locke, Second Treatise, in Political Writings, § 128-129 and 135.
46 See Spinoza, Tractatus Politicus, in Complete Works, Chapter 3 § 9; and Lock, Second Treatise, in Political Writings, § 222 and 224-227.
47 Ibid., Chapter 7 § 4 (Spinoza) and § 4-8 (Locke). See also: Spinoza, Theologico-Politicus, in Complete Works, 527, where Spinoza makes it clear that humans have this right to self-preservation as they are “naturally determined” by Nature.
48 Ibid., Spinoza, Theologico-Politicus, in Complete Works, 567; and Locke, Second Treatise, in Political Writings, § 8.
49 Spinoza, Theologico-Politicus, in Complete Works, 527-529.
50 Locke, Second Treatise, in Political Writings, § 6-7.
require fear to be kept in check. In the TTP, as well as his *Tractatus Politicus* (henceforth TP), Spinoza heavily emphasizes the importance of common consent by the majority. Klever points to this similarity with Locke’s *Second Treatises on Government* (henceforth STG).  

Fear only drives men to accept out of necessity, not utility, and is a counter-productive measure of enforcing the rule of law. On this point, Locke seems to borrow another example from Spinoza: that of the man who accepts the stipulations of the robber by fear, only to go back on his word later.  

Instead of founding the political atmosphere on a more Hobbesian basis of a Leviathan preserving power and keeping the populace obedient, Spinoza argued that obedience was useless because it destroys the natural right of preservation which is bestowed in all human beings. It is more conducive to a working civil order for all men to be regarded as equal in opinion and contribution. Because people are rational, not brutish, they know how to guide themselves in a peaceful order. Changes can be made as necessary, and majority rule is more effective in determining what is best than an aristocratic or absolutist government.  

Locke agrees with this: it is far preferable to have the state be led by the common will of the people than a singular person or select few, as people will check themselves more effectively than an absolute ruler checks himself. The common will of the people is far more effective in guiding the political body. Rather than giving up all of their natural rights in the civil state, people merely give up the ones which are harmful to it and mutually uphold the others for the

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51 Klever, “Disguised,” 36.  
54 Ibid., 571.  
betterment of the community. The civil relationship is based upon mutual consent and ownership of civil affairs, which best determines what is good for the community as a whole.\footnote{56 See Spinoza, \textit{Theologico-Politicus}, in \textit{Complete Works}, 529 and Locke, \textit{Second Treatise}, in \textit{Political Works}, § 96.}

To Spinoza and Locke, a sovereign with absolute rule is not effective. The alternative, which Spinoza proposes and Locke adopts, is a commonwealth with common law which is upheld by consensus of the community. In short, Spinoza thought that the best form of government was a republic. When sovereign power rests with the whole community, people’s interests are best preserved and they are more invested in political discourse. When it rests with an aristocracy or monarchy, it is easily abused. An absolutist regime is completely abhorrent as it denies the natural rights of the populace, reducing to the state of nature. This state, then, does not serve their interests, but the arbitrary interests of the ruler.\footnote{57 Spinoza, \textit{Tractatus Politicus}, in \textit{Complete Works}, Chapter 2 § 17 and \textit{Theologico-Politicus}, in \textit{Complete Works}, 531-532.} Laws work best when based on utility, as decided by the people, because democratic rule is far more balanced and responsive than any other form of government.\footnote{58 Spinoza, \textit{Theologico-Politicus}, in \textit{Complete Works}, 529-531.}

Locke’s politics are largely the same, Klever argues.\footnote{59 Klever, “Disguised,” 37.} The “force of community”\footnote{60 Locke, \textit{Second Treatise}, in \textit{Political Writings}, § 3.} is far more effective in upholding the common sovereign law than any singular or aristocratic ruler, as the laws of a commonwealth respect every member. There are no special powers that are not consented to by the majority, which is a legislative body in the case of Locke.\footnote{61 Ibid., § 130-132.} Absolute power is just as anathema to the good of the people to Locke as it is to Spinoza for the same reason – it denies people’s natural rights and returns to a state of nature dictated by the caprice of its ruler.\footnote{62 Ibid., § 89-90 and 93.}

Another outstanding similarity between Spinoza and Locke is their rather radical treatment of secularism and religious toleration. Although their reasons are slightly different, the
result is the same: that religion has absolutely no place in politics, and that the latter takes precedence when managing the practical civil affairs of human beings. Klever points to several similarities in how they treat the matters of civic government with pragmatism,⁶³ but does not acknowledge the distinction between Spinoza and Locke in that religious communities are given more specific rights and responsibilities in the case of the Locke.

Klever draws attention to Spinoza’s TTP, where he uses his natural rights theory to argue that religious decrees are ultimately dangerous because they attempt to control how a person thinks. Spinoza points to several Biblical passages to show how the relationship between political and civil authorities is volatile at best, such as the feuds that occurred between the priests and rulers of the Hebrews and the constant civil war during Israel’s divided kingdom.⁶⁴

For Spinoza, people cannot stop thinking as they have been naturally determined, so they will act treacherous when forced to speak and act differently than they think. This is the basis of his theory on free thought and speech. It is every person’s right to speak their mind if they see it as positive for the community. So long as the religious community is not posing a clear threat to the civic order, there is nothing dangerous in their religious professions. If the religion shows justice and charity, it ought to be accepted. Likewise, actions speak louder than thoughts or words, says Spinoza – and this is how groups and individuals ought to be judged.⁶⁵ If one person says or believes something that the entire community finds appalling, but commits no act that infringes another, there is only respectful disagreement.

In Locke’s Letter Concerning Toleration, he likewise argues that people cannot help but think as they do, and that the civil authorities ought to be to be separate from religious community for matters of government. Simply out of practicality, a civil community is safer and

⁶⁴ Spinoza, Theologico-Politicus, in Complete Works, 552-555.
⁶⁵ Ibid., 568-569, and 571-572.
has fewer problems when it keeps religion out of its laws – unless, of course, the religion is somehow dangerous to the civic order, in which case the civic body must step in to preserve order. Because religions are ultimately concerned with the salvation of souls, not earthly needs, they are distinct from the state. The earthly decrees of governments can hardly persuade men in their religious pursuits and, since two religious communities are distinct, one has absolutely no jurisdiction over any other.\(^{66}\)

The main differences between Spinoza and Locke lie in the limits of their toleration, Locke’s specification of salvation, and the depth of their political structures. The powers bestowed upon Spinoza’s commonwealth seem to more easily control the affairs of churches; indeed, the sovereign has the right to enact any laws it sees fit regarding religious matters (ideally for a good reason).\(^{67}\) On the other hand, Locke’s religious communities are given a greater distinction from civil authority because the religion is dealing with salvation. This has no bearing on earthly matters and there is nothing that can change their minds. Furthermore, the structure of Locke’s commonwealth has a bit more detail than that of Spinoza, adding in the division and separation of civil powers.\(^{68}\) Spinoza unexpectedly died before he could fully articulate his thoughts on political theory.

Considering the similarities of their ideas, the chronology of political thought at the time, and Locke’s exposure to Spinoza’s work, it seems clear that Locke’s intellectual development was influenced and shaped by Spinoza’s ideas – more so in politics, where they shared the same ideas of republicanism and secularism. One should not go so far as to call Locke a plagiarist, but


\(^{68}\) Locke, *Second Treatise*, § 143-158. While Spinoza and Locke relegated essentially the same powers to their ideal commonwealth, Locke divided the powers and gave more depth to them.
presenting the influence of Spinoza helps understand Locke’s intellectual development and changes how one views not only the development of philosophy in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Although Spinoza went on to become the intellectual bogeyman for over 2 centuries,洛克’s works profoundly shaped British thought for decades to come – especially in political thought. It is no surprise that many of the American founding fathers, well-educated Englishman, were knowledgeable of Locke, and were influenced by him on an intellectual level in the same way that Spinoza had influenced Locke. Locke’s ideas of natural rights predicating a republican, secular government with divided powers to maintain balance would reshape political thought for centuries to come. Although colonial Americans were not standing on soapboxes and giving lectures on Locke, and colonial America’s political atmosphere and history seem more significant in shaping the fledgling nation, it is clear that Locke – and, ergo, Spinoza – had a profound influence on the intellectual development of the United States and, thus, modern democratic institutions.

Gordon Wood, in his extensive work on the American Revolution, notes how revolutionaries “cited and borrowed promiscuously” from a multitude British writers, including Locke, to justify their actions as those which any proper Englishman would take in the face of (what they considered) political abuses. Pauline Maier, another significant scholar of the Revolution, points to William Henry Drayton’s espousing of Locke’s contractual theory in his

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69 Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Israel reserves a great deal of space detailing how Spinoza’s ideas were harshly (and ultimately failed to be) suppressed.

opposition to Britain’s measures. Thomas Jefferson almost cited Locke as an influence, among many others.

Wood also explains that, at the time, those who were educated were very much influenced by Locke’s democratic ideas and equality of natural rights. The idea that “all men were born equal and that only the environment working on their senses made them different” was very prevalent in their intellectual development. Here, again, is where the epistemology is important: to Spinoza and Locke, there is nothing innately different between two people. Elitism among the educated began to diminish as these egalitarian ideas rose to prominence, allowing them to welcome the idea of democratic government and its inclusion of the common people in the political process. Benjamin Rush and John Adams were two particularly strong proponents of this equality, the latter going so far as to identify himself more with common people than the educated and wealthy.

Another important concept brought to the fore by Americans to justify their actions was that of “self-preservation” as a “natural instinct.” It went that that British were infringing upon their civic rights to an unacceptable degree. Inequality threatens the common will, and the people are not obliged to stand for abuses. If the current government refuses to cooperate or no longer serves the people’s interests, it ought to be modified.

Bernard Bailyn brings attention to Revolutionary pamphlets, which often cited Locke and his ideas regarding natural rights and social contract to explain and gather support for the

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72 Ibid., 135.
73 Wood. Radicalism, 236.
74 Ibid., 235-236.
75 Ibid., 237.
76 Maier. American Scripture, 86-88.
77 Locke, Second Treatise, in Political Writings, § 157-158 and 222.
78 Ibid., § 224-227.
cause. Although some pamphlets were “superficial,” many showed profound understanding of Locke, explaining and defending his ideas. Bailyn agrees with Wood and Maier that Locke made an impact on the ideas of the Revolution, whose political theories were mentioned frequently by a wide array of pro-Revolutionaries – as well as Royalists. It also seems that the American rebels were aware of their intellectual origins, or else Richard Henry Lee, a signatory of Declaration of Independence, would not have commented that the Declaration was “copied from Locke’s treatise on government.”

Even after the British were defeated, Locke’s ideas – particularly the social contract – continued to crop up in debates over the structure and content of the Constitution. Wood notes that this was in part due to the Americans closely examining the contractual language and obligations in the document. Many representatives would cite Locke, among many others, in defense of their particular positions. One of the most prominent was William Paca, a representative of Maryland, when he stressing the importance of representatives serving their constituents by loudly and directly quoting Locke in a debate with his opponent.

Understanding the intellectual history of the American Revolution is important for historians, as it allows them to better interpret the ideas and opinions of significant historical figures of the time. Had political thought not developed as it had, history would have turned out very differently. Ideas are powerful things. Although Locke’s connection to the American Revolution is only at an intellectual level, this is nonetheless integral to Anglo-American

80 Ibid., 28.
81 Ibid., 36 and 44-45.
85 Ibid., 283 and 290-291.
ideology at the time. It can be demonstrated that Locke’s ideas influenced the founding fathers and the development of the American political structure. Locke is very important in British and Anglo-American political thought and helps provide a solid context for America’s colonial history, the Revolution, and its aftermath.

The connections between Spinoza and Locke, and Locke and the American Revolution, are connections that can be defended and provides a different perspective on how one views their intellectual development and impact. With his epistemology defending natural human rights, and his political theory emphasizing liberalism, Spinoza left a lasting impact on Locke. Klever does not undo the rationalist interpretation of Spinoza, but he presents strong material, textual, and ideological connections between Spinoza and Locke that change how one views the impact of Spinoza and the development of Locke’s thought. Considering the strong connections between Spinoza’s political thought and that of Locke, there is a valid connection between Spinoza and the American Revolution.

Spinoza’s political work is incomplete and Locke provided more detail, but the foundational ideas surrounding natural rights of human beings, republicanism, lateral common rule and law, secularism, egalitarianism, religious toleration, free thought, and free expression are all markedly modern ideas that were argued by the former and influential on the latter. This broke from existing political thought which justified elitism, absolutism, theocracy, and top down government. Understanding the education of Locke, just as one might try to understand the education of the American Founding Fathers, can help one better understand them as people as well as their impacts on history. By making these connections, Jonathan Israel’s thesis that Spinoza’s political thought changed the face of Western society can be defended – albeit with some discretion.


http://www.benedictusdespinoza.nl/lit/Locke%27s_Disguised_Spinozism.pdf.


