Brownson's Political Providence, with Some Preliminary Comparisons with Tocqueville's Providential Statesmanship

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Abstract: An examination of Orestes Brownson's understanding of Providence suggests that, for Brownson, not only the American Founders, but also the "pagan" political philosophers—that is, the original founders of the idea of natural right—"built better than they knew." Tocqueville, in comparison, trusted less in Providence than Brownson and offers himself as a kind of mediator between reason and history, the universal and the particular.

Keywords: Brownson, federalism, Founders, political philosophy, Providence

"Truth has always been dearer to me than my own opinions."[1] So writes Orestes Brownson in his preface to *The American Republic*. Only God can search hearts, but this reader at least is convinced by Brownson's profession, and no less by his confession of "tender love" for his country. This book issues from the confluence of these two loves—for truth and for country—and anyone who shares either affection can hardly remain unmoved or unenlightened by this work. Brownson here offers us, at the end of his life, "my whole thought, in a connected form" on the principles of government in general and on the character and "destiny of the American Republic" in particular (CIX). This American destiny is a great one, for Brownson (in his introduction) ascribes to the United States the mission of continuing and surpassing the work of Rome and thus realizing "the true idea of the state, which secures at once the authority of the public and the freedom of the individual," a task he believes more important than equaling the ancient Greeks in art or surpassing them "in science and philosophy" (3).

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The task of connecting his love of America with his love of a pure and universal truth draws from Brownson an integrated, comprehensive statement on the ultimate questions of philosophy and theology, a marvelously complete, carefully elaborated, and integrated edifice. This is philosophical theology in the grandest style, and a student of the Western tradition will find here articulations of many of the major themes of that tradition in an idiom that is at once bracingly distinctive and thoroughly conversant in the most venerated Catholic teaching (Augustine, Aquinas, and Suarez are among the authorities most commonly cited). Brownson is both a sincere republican, rejecting without regret all aristocratic claims to "natural" inequality, and an uncompromising advocate of the divine source of all political authority. These commitments place him in a delicate situation in addressing the founders of his beloved republic, whose wisdom he fully appreciates but also finds it necessary to supplement. Thus Brownson stands at the head of that tradition of Catholic republicanism that holds, as John Courtney Murray would later put it, that the founders "built better than they knew"—that is, built on a real foundation of natural and divine law, and not on the groundless, at least implicitly atheistic, conventionalism the framers imbibed with the political theory of their century.

Through a consideration of Brownson's understanding of "Providence," I will try here to suggest what may be most at stake in Brownson's engagement with the Western tradition of political philosophy. For Brownson, at a deeper level beyond his settlement with the American founders, it might be said that it is the pagan political philosophers—the founders of the idea of natural right or of a basis in nature for political order and political obligation—who truly built better than they knew. Brownson agrees emphatically with the ancients concerning the elevated and irreducible character of political authority—the qualitative difference between political and merely private or conventional association.

With little regard for secular republican sensibilities, he goes so far as to proclaim that "to every true philosopher there is something divine in the state . . . the state is a more lively image of God than the individual" (50). Brownson believes, however, that he, a Christian, surpasses the ancients in understanding that this authority cannot be grounded in nature. To take nature to be self-sufficient, to understand nature as possessing a purpose within itself, is the basic error of pagan philosophy, and is therefore essentially "pantheistic." Purpose and obligation are unthinkable for Brownson without reference to a personal God, a supreme being who possesses both perfect reason and will and who creates and directs the impersonal forces of nature. To Brownson, "[a]ll government has a governing will, and without a will that commands, there is no government" (59). The dependence of nature on grace or creation is continuous and ongoing; "Providence" is another name for this continuous creative act of a personal God (82). Our obligation to the state, that is, the very lawful character of law, depends on a divine lawgiver, the creator of nature; nature is just one medium (the other is the Church) of our obligation to God.

The biblical revelation of a personal God thus supplies the ancient defect of a ground of political authority. But at the same time it points to an authority beyond the state, and thus provides a ground for modern individual rights in the idea of conscience. "Conscience is accountable to God alone," writes Brownson, and it is only because "Christianity makes the civil law, within its legitimate sphere, as obligatory on conscience as the divine law itself" that the state retains its sacred authority (77). Further, "[t]he doctrine of individual freedom before the state is due to the Christian religion, which asserts the dignity and worth of every human soul, the accountability to God of each man for himself, and lays it down for every one that God is to be obeyed rather than men" (54).

By thus grounding individual freedom in divine truth, Brownson aims to show how the American republic accomplished "the dialectic union of authority and liberty, of the natural rights of man and those of society" (3). He pointedly rejects so-called Jeffersonian democracy, as based on a "pure individualism" that amounts to a "pure egoism, which says, 'I am God'" (222). And he warns powerfully against the rise of a new socialist and "humanitarian democracy" that does the work of Satan by attempting to replace the concrete and politically grounded love of one's fellow man with the love of an abstract, undifferentiated, and finally nonexistent humanity (229–32).

But just how are the proper, rational limits of individual freedom to be understood? Of course Brownson has no confidence in any doctrine of enlightened self-interest for tracing such boundaries. And it is notable that, unlike the Catholic tradition to which he otherwise appeals, he does not develop a doctrine of virtue to govern individual freedom. This is no doubt because he insists that "the moral law is no development of nature, for it is above nature, and is imposed on nature" (60). If he can yet claim that natural reason or "science" is capable of grasping "principles and causes," this is no doubt to be understood in the sense that natural reason can know its own limits—it can know its dependency on a willed purpose beyond nature (58). The limits of individual freedom are thus found, it seems, not in some rationally intelligible natural purpose, but rather in the two authorities under which people find themselves: first, in God's revealed will as embodied in the teaching of the Church, and second, precisely in the particular political state into which humans are born or to which they otherwise belong.

This explains how in Brownson's thought a doctrine of loyalty replaces a traditional doctrine of the virtues in which virtues are understood as perfections of human nature. For Brownson, "[l]oyalty is the highest, noblest, and most generous of human virtues, and is the human element of that sublime love or charity which . . . is the fulfillment of the law" (15). Our virtues must be those that accord with our particular loyalty and need no ground beyond the historical, providential "fact" of our belonging to a given people and a given state. "Civic virtues are themselves religious virtues," and, although they are not the only religious virtues, there is no natural horizon available to reason beyond them. It is because our purpose is beyond nature that we must recognize this purpose in history, in what Brownson names the "Providential constitution," perhaps the most distinctive term in his lexicon, and the one that must bear the most weight: "The constitution of the state, or the people of the state, is, in its origin at least, providential, given by God himself, operating through historical events or natural causes" (91).

Brownson confidently asserts the concrete, factual reality of a providential constitution, a kind of synthesis of nature and history, as opposed to the unreality of mere theories (99), such as the conventionalist theory—the contract theory of government—that informed the work of the American founders. Before the written Constitution there was of necessity the unwritten constitution, the historically shaped identity of the Americans as a people. In fact every state is a gift of Providence, and so each must be respected in its own right. But somehow it seems that it is only from the vantage point of the American republic, with its unique or uniquely advanced dialectic of liberty and authority, its singular fulfillment of the civilizing work of Rome and of Christianity, that the meaning of Providence can be truly discerned.

TRINITARIAN FEDERALISM

Brownson's understanding of "Providence" and the centrality of this notion to his political theology comes most clearly into focus in his final chapter, "Destiny—Political and Religious." Here the author argues that the United States has a "special mission," which is "to continue and complete in the political order the Graeco-Roman civilization" (247). The states of Europe and their offspring in the Western hemisphere "can only develop and give a general application to the fundamental principles of the Roman constitution," especially the "great principle of the territorial constitution of power," as distinct from the "barbaric" personal or patriarchal understanding of authority (248). This development consists mainly in giving effect to the

"Christian dogma of the unity of the human race," that is, in recognizing the natural equality of men with respect to rights and thus the manifest injustice of slavery (251). But the European implementation of this dogma is bound to issue either into French centralism, either imperial or democratic, or into the so-called constitutionalism of checks and balances of the British, which, in its reliance on the mechanisms of selfishness, is in effect a "return toward barbarism" (251).

In explaining how the United States avoids these French and British extremes, Brownson attempts to ground his political theory in the most central Christian dogma:

> The human race has its life in God, and tends to realize in all orders the Divine Word or Logos, which is logic itself, and the principle of all conciliation, of the dialectic union of all opposites or extremes. . . . [T]he universe in its constitution is supremely logical, and man, individually and socially, is rational. God is the author and type of all created things; and all creatures, each in its order, imitate or copies [*sic*] the Divine Being, who is intrinsically Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, principle, medium, and end. The Son or Word is the medium, which unites the two extremes, whence God is living God—a real, active, living Being—living, concrete, not abstract or dead unity, like the unity of old Zenophanes, Plotinus, and Proclus. In the Holy Trinity is the principle and prototype of all society, and what is called solidarity of the race is only outward expression, or copy in the external order, of what theologians term the circumsession of the three Divine Persons of the Godhead. (251–52)

The rational and Trinitarian character of reality has nowhere yet been completely translated into political society, but it is "the political destiny of the United States to conform the state to the order of reality, or, so to speak, to the Divine Idea in creation" (258).

Readers not accustomed to interpreting politics in the light of the cosmos and the cosmos in the light of the Christian doctrine of the trinity will no doubt wonder in what precise way the political organization of the United States of America may be considered a reflection of Divine "circumsession," or, as I take Brownson to mean, "circumincession," a technical term for the interpenetration of the three persons of the Trinity. Brownson's answer is that it is

> the political destiny or mission of the United States . . . to realize that philosophical division of the powers of government which distinguish it from both imperial and democratic centralism on the one hand, and, on the other, from the checks and balances or organized antagonisms which seek to preserve liberty by obstructing the exercise of power. (257)

The division of powers that Brownson has in mind is especially that between the central and the state governments. This is to say that the Trinitarian genius of the United States is most fundamentally and characteristically reflected in what we would call its "federalism." For Brownson, the central fact of the "Providential constitution" of the United States of America is

> that the political or sovereign people of the United States exists as united States, and only as united States. The Union and the States are coeval, born together, and can exist only together. . . . The United States are a state, a single sovereign state, but this single sovereign state consists in the union and solidarity of States instead of individuals. The Union is in each of the States, and each of the States is in the Union. (142)

This "circumincession" of the general and the particular is, for Brownson, no matter of mere compact or convention, but a divinely authorized "fact" that precedes all human deliberation or decision:

> The union and distribution, the unity and the distinction, are both original in their constitution, and they were born United States, as much and as truly so as the son of a citizen is born a citizen, or as every one born at all is born a member of society, the family, the tribe, or the nation. The Union and the States were born together, are inseparable in their constitution, have lived and grown up together. (144)

Brownson's interpretation of American constitutionalism as an instantiation of the Holy Trinity can only appear extravagant at best to contemporary readers, at least to non-Christians or non-Trinitarians. But let us give Brownson the fullest possible hearing to learn what we can about the meaning of the answer he is convinced he has found, and even more important, about the meaning of the question that frames his argument.

Behind Brownson's account in *The American Republic* there lies a very lucid grappling with a version of the most fundamental question of political philosophy, and therefore with the most basic categories of at least Western humanity. Brownson is concerned with the very nature and meaning of political authority, which is finally inseparable from religious authority, and thus with authority itself; his thought is deeply implicated in the question of the ultimate foundation of duty or obligation or right. The question is for him structured by the alternatives of "barbarism" on the one hand and rational universalism on the other. Barbarism is the form in which authority first appears; that is, as the sheer, primitive fact of paternal authority, eventually translated into the proprietary authority of kings and feudal lords. Humanity advances decisively under the political form of the republic or commonwealth, in which the inherently public, common, nonproprietary nature of authority is recognized. In Christianity the idea of the universal brotherhood of humanity is revealed, which ultimately implies the completion of the republican idea under the aegis of the natural and equal rights of all men. But in our times this Christian idea of universal humanity threatens to detach itself from its theological context and to become an abstract and inhuman rationalistic universalism or "pantheism" that threatens to consume our concrete humanity.

Thus a true, humane, and, for Brownson, Christian understanding of the constitution of that authority that necessarily frames our humanity must lie somewhere between, or rather beyond, the alternatives of primitive barbarism and abstract or pantheistic universalism. Barbarism represents a subrational and brutish particularity; pantheism indicates an abstract and inhuman universality. Brownson believes that the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and of the Incarnation provide the only way out of this impasse, the only way to integrate the claims of reason with the brute facticity or historicity of human existence. Christ's effective mediation between divine truth and the mundane reality in which we

humans live and breathe provides Brownson with the key to correct political and cosmic order.

With this idea of mediation in mind, it is perhaps possible to appreciate the rational core of Brownson's extravagant enthusiasm for American federalism. For, although the author surely exaggerates the sheer given nature of the American synthesis of national and confederal elements, and thus underestimates the contributions of deliberate statesmanship, he does point out a unique and decisive gift of history to American constitutionalism. For it does seem to be true that Americans were prepared—and this in a way that no human being could have designed—to form a union of states in which the two authorities or objects of loyalty can truly be understood to be equally, correlatively fundamental—or, if you will, in a way "circumincessionary." It seems that Brownson is right to insist on the real sense in which the authority of the United States was embedded in loyalty to one's state, and vice versa.

I do not mean to imply any simple correspondence in Brownson's thought between the persons of the Trinity and the jurisdictions of American federalism. Obviously this does not work: the jurisdictions only add up to a dyad, and Brownson nowhere warrants our throwing in the category of localities (maybe Tocquevillean townships) as somehow correlates of the Holy Spirit to round out our threesome. If politics, like everything else, "has its origin and prototype in the Triune God," then this must be in some more subtle and indirect way (258).

Brownson's most substantial indications as to the relation of the Trinity to politics may be this next passage:

> Everything has its principle, medium, and end. Natural society is initial, civil government is medial, the church is teleological, but the three are only distinctions in one indissoluble whole. (258)

In some way, then, it appears that the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost is supposed to correspond, respectively, to nature, politics, and religion. Whatever the precise meaning of this correspondence (if indeed it has a precise meaning), it clearly attributes to politics a profoundly important mediating role in human existence and in the very structure of reality.

I am tempted to say that Brownson suggests a political and republican understanding of the Trinity as much as a Trinitarian understanding of politics. Unmediated by politics, our "nature" may come to light either as the brute fact of egoism or as the correlate abstraction of abstract humanitarian universalism. Our human participation in territorially bounded communities ordered by commonly held principles somehow mediates between egoistic/universalist naturalism and our spiritual destiny as members of the body of Christ. It seems that for Brownson the unique interpenetration or coimplication of two distinct territorial authorities (the United States and an individual state), one more "universal" and the other more "particular," represents a uniquely rich and effective figure of this fundamentally humanizing mediation. The genius of what we call "federalism" is its perfection of the implicitly "dialectical" character of human and political existence, an existence articulated in the space between the universal and the particular. American federalism is a figure or image of a federalism linking nature and history, a covenant between reason and "givenness."

Federalism holds open the space of authority in a way that allows it to avoid the one-sided extremes of egoistic individualism and pantheistic humanitarianism. Without falling back into barbaric particularism, American federalism refuses to answer rationalism's question of the source and meaning of authority in nondialectical terms. Whereas ancient rationalism projects authority and meaning on the idea of a self-sufficient essence finally beyond human concern, and modern, formalistic rationalism oscillates between egoism and pantheism, American constitutionalism frames the most perfect synthesizing of our natural with our spiritual humanity precisely because it gives no simple, unitary answer to the question of ultimate source, and therefore the ultimate purpose, of authority.[2] American constitutionalism holds open a space for a good practice irreducible to any theory.

PROVIDENCE AND STATESMANSHIP

Having grappled with the mysteries of Brownson's Trinitarian federalism, we are now prepared to consider a fundamental difficulty in his teaching concerning Providence. While calling his fellow Americans to their high, indeed world-historical task, Brownson at the same time attempts to move them in what may seem a contrary direction, warning against a too-close identification between the universal truth and the constitution of the American republic. Thus, whereas in the introduction the author writes "simply as an American, devoted to the real, living, and energizing constitution of the American republic as it is," further on we find him inveighing against all forms (except the Roman) of "political propagandism," chiding Americans for their readiness to "sympathize with any rebellion, insurrection, or movement in behalf of democracy in any part of the world, however mean or contemptible," and even asserting that choosing a form of government is a matter of fitting the "shoes" of a political constitution to the "feet" of a "providential constitution," the particular historical character of a people (119–20). To be sure, Brownson nowhere compromises the basic distinction between legitimate, very broadly "republican" or public constitutions and essentially private despotisms, but beyond this he goes so far as to say that the question of which constitution "is wisest and best for the commonwealth is, for the most part, an idle question" (119). The careful reader can only be left wondering, then, when he grants one page later that "the American system, rightly understood, is the best," though other, no less "enlightened" nations somehow "do not adopt, or cannot bear it" (120).

Clearly the concept of "Providence" operates in Brownson's treatise at two different levels. There is the general Providence that gives historical identity to a given territorial people and strictly constrains the choice of political institutions for such a people. But there is also the special Providence that has formed the historical people known as Americans and prepared them for the unique world-historical task of bringing Roman civilization to its fulfillment. The American system, rightly under-

stood, is truly best, but is not the product of human choice and should not be assumed to be a choice available to other peoples.

To be sure, Brownson's idea of a providential American destiny does not altogether override human choice as a factor in history:

> Whether the American people will prove faithful to their mission, and realize their destiny, or not, is known only to Him from whom nothing is hidden. Providence is free, and leaves always a space for human free will. (271)

Still, Brownson is decidedly optimistic, and writes that "[t]he American people can fail . . . but there is nothing in their present state or in their past history to render their failure probable" (271). But beyond the question of the probability of America's fulfilling its providential destiny lies the more difficult problem of the meaning of human choice in relation to this destiny. What, precisely, is the human meaning of the choice of the Catholic and Trinitarian destiny that Brownson proposes to us? Far from presenting this option as a pure act of submissive faith, the author of *The American Republic* appeals, apparently without reservation, to human reason:

> Under the American system, [the church] can deal with people as free men, and trust them as freemen, because free men they are. The freeman asks, why? And the reason why must be given to him, or his obedience fails to be secured. The simple reason that the church commands will rarely satisfy him; he would know why she commands this or that. The full-grown man revolts at blind obedience, and he regards all obedience as in some measure blind for which he sees only an extrinsic command. Blind obedience even to the authority of the church cannot be expected of the people reared under the American system . . . because they insist that obedience shall be rationabile obsequium, and act of the understanding, not of the will or affections alone. . . . They can obey God, but not man, and they must see that the command given has its reason in the Divine order, or the intrinsic catholic reason of things . . .
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> This trait of the American character is not uncatholic. An intelligent, free, willing obedience, yielded from personal conviction, after seeing its reasonableness, its justice, its logic, in the Divine order—the obedience of a free man, not a slave—is far more consonant to the spirit of the church, and far more acceptable to God, than simple, blind obedience . . .
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> The United States being dialectically constituted, and founded on real catholic, not sectarian or sophistical principles . . . must, in their progressive development, put an end to this warfare . . . between church and state. . . . The American state being catholic in its organic principles, as is all real religion, and the church being free, whatever is anti-catholic, or uncatholic, is without any support in either, and having none, either in reality or in itself, it must necessarily fall and gradually disappear. (264–66)

Here political progress appears irresistible, as it is identified at once with the triumph of reason and with Christian revelation.

TOCQUEVILLEAN MEDIATION

A sustained comparison with Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* promises to reveal the full significance of Brownson's joint commitments to Catholic Providence and to reason. At present I can only offer an outline or prospectus of such a comparison.

We might begin by contrasting Brownson's rather extravagant hopes for American rationalism with Tocqueville's treatment of the pretensions of "Cartesian" reason in America. Sometimes this treatment is openly dismissive, as when Tocqueville affirms categorically that no society can do without "dogmatic beliefs," that is, without prejudices that are not and cannot be grounded, or at least fully grounded, in reason. Elsewhere the treatment is more gently ironic, as when Tocqueville presents the rationalistic doctrine of "Self-Interest Well Understood" in the most favorable possible light (though of course he stops short of affirming its truth) and gives real, if qualified, praise to the practical effects of this doctrine in American society. In both cases, the difference from Brownson's enthusiastic Catholic rationalism is unmistakable and appears to be radical.

However, to refine this comparison one would have to take into account the fact that the reason Tocqueville debunks is what Brownson might call unmediated or naturalistic reason, which must resolve (as Tocqueville in his own way shows) into either egoism or pantheism, both of which are incapable of articulating our real and concrete humanity. The dialectical reason that Brownson praises is not the reason Tocqueville names but, one might venture, something more like the mediating reason that Tocqueville himself practices, just as he encourages the practical synthesis or accommodation of American particularity with the universal and abstract claim of human equality.

Tocqueville's providential rhetoric is itself grounded in a profound ambivalence toward this idea of human equality, an idea inherited from Christianity but increasingly emancipated from any divine grounding as it advances in modern philosophy and in the very movement of modern society. Tocqueville insists on the irresistibility of Providence in order to dissuade aristocrats—and in the first case, himself—from fruitless or destructive reaction against the modern revolution, but he refuses to surrender entirely to a democratic providence his natural and inherited sense of a concrete and prideful elevation. Tocqueville thus takes on the awesome responsibility of channeling or managing Providence, a task inseparable from that of achieving some equilibrium in his own soul between the claims of universal equality and those of concrete elevation.

In other words, Tocqueville undertakes the task of guiding modern peoples toward a reasonable implementation of the inexorable rationalization of the world as it advances under the abstract idea of equality. Whereas Brownson directs our confidence toward some Trinitarian logic embedded in reality, the author of *Democracy in America* takes responsibility for in some way humanizing the relentless logic of modernity. Dare I say that Tocqueville offers himself as a kind of mediator between reason and history, between the universal and the particular?

The fundamental difference between Brownson's and Tocqueville's stances is therefore clear. But it may yet be asked whether the two approaches are not in some fundamental way complementary, whether they may not share a deep and barely articulated ground. This ground would

come to light in considering, on the one hand, Brownson's theological politics as a kind of statesmanship in which the necessity of mediation is projected on ultimate reality, and, on the other, Tocqueville's statesmanship as finally dependent on some ontology that would allow for its possibility. This is to suggest that, just as Brownson cannot help but lend his own human efforts to the cause of his Catholic Providence, so Tocqueville's reliance on Providence cannot be altogether rhetorical. Human life is unintelligible without reference to something authoritative, and the concrete and finite authorities that form us and under which we live necessarily mediate our sense of the ultimate or divine authority. It is not only unlivable but therefore finally unthinkable that what is highest should be altogether indifferent to our humanity or that it should exist on a plane that never intersects with our concrete and particular experience. Because reason can never comprehensively vindicate the goodness of the authority that governs the very meaning of our humanity and can never reduce the good to conceptual abstractions, even—or especially—the most philosophically coherent among us cannot avoid attributing meaning to the particular history of which he is in part the product. This is to say that the statesman's awareness of responsibility for his community is, at its most self-conscious moment, inseparable from an awareness of or hope in a participation in some more comprehensive mediation between truth and humanity. The truest, most self-aware statesman would know himself as incomplete mediator.

There is wisdom in Brownson's affirmation that the meaning of America at least to some degree precedes and transcends anything explicitly determined in 1776 or in 1787—as is already recognized, for that matter, in *Federalist No. 2*, not to mention Lincoln's more profound anchoring of modern freedom in the spirit of the Bible. Brownson's view is thus, at the very least, a useful corrective to any purely individualist and conventionalist understanding of American constitutionalism or of political authority in general. Still, we may doubt the wisdom of Brownson's severing so stringently providential and historical "fact" from "theory," from human attempts to understand attainable purposes and to fashion order in light of these purposes. Is not Brownson perhaps too ready to reduce the American founders' self-understanding to the polemical individualism he finds characteristic of the theory of their century? In disdaining to seriously consult the articulate purposes of American constitutionalism within a larger reflection on what we can know of human nature, does he not risk falling into another, deeper conventionalism—a temptation simply to consecrate history's winners, or to obfuscate hard choices by embracing within republican Christianity "the modern doctrine of progress"? (60).

Questions such as these do not cast doubts on the pertinence of Brownson's critique of pagan political philosophy. Brownson must be right that the lawful character of law draws our minds and hearts ineluctably toward the notion of a personal Being somehow beyond nature, a notion fulfilled in the biblical revelation of a mysterious yet personal God. For how can authority not be in some way mysterious, if our ultimate purpose eludes our complete intellectual grasp? And how can what is highest not be a person, if nothing can matter more to us than love? Still, the classical political philosophers might answer: How can we escape our responsibility as rational though limited beings to seek what is best, as individuals and states, according to our best understanding? To love our providential constitution wisely might then require us not simply to accept it as a mysteriously given "fact" but to undertake as best we can to articulate its purposes for human beings in our time. To see more clearly how the American founders founded "better than they knew" we would then first have to know at least all they knew about the possibilities and limitations inherent in our human nature. And the same might be said concerning our founders' founders, those pagans who first fully called forth the natural gift of reason by calling us to articulate the purposes that somehow reside mysteriously in and beyond the law.

This essay draws on my review of Brownson's The American Republic *("A Providential Constitution?") in the* Intercollegiate Review *(Fall 2003/Spring 2004), 70–73.*

NOTES

1. Orestes A. Brownson, *The American Republic: Its Constitution, Tendencies, and Destiny*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), CIX. All parenthetical page references will refer to this book.

2. The open or unfinished quality of this "dialectical" understanding would finally distinguish it from any Hegelian system that aims to close the space between God and the state. The openness of constitutionalism would finally depend on the openness of the Christian understanding of the Good: if the ultimate Good of human beings is to love God, it is no less true that God must be understood as loving humanity.