



Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought

Julie E. Cooper

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Secularism is usually thought to contain the project of self-deification, in which humans attack God's authority in order to take his place, freed from all constraints. Julie E. Cooper overturns this conception through an incisive analysis of the early modern justifications for secular politics. While she agrees that secularism is a means of empowerment, she argues that we have misunderstood the sources of secular empowerment and the kinds of strength to which it aspires.

Contemporary understandings of secularism, Cooper contends, have been shaped by a limited understanding of it as a shift from vulnerability to power. But the works of the foundational thinkers of secularism tell a different story. Analyzing the writings of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Rousseau at the moment of secularity's inception, she shows that all three understood that acknowledging one's limitations was a condition of successful self-rule. And while all three invited humans to collectively build and sustain a political world, their invitations did not amount to self-deification. Cooper establishes that secular politics as originally conceived does not require a choice between power and vulnerability. Rather, it challenges us—today as then—to reconcile them both as essential components of our humanity.

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