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QUENTIN SKINNER AND THE HEYDAY OF HOBBES THE HUMANIST

Quentin Skinner (2002): Visions of politics, volume III, Hobbes and the Civil Science. Cambridge: CUP.

The year 2002 was a splendid year for Hobbes studies. The research community was cosset, one could say, when two major scholars, Professor Quentin Skinner and Doctor Noel Malcolm, reissued a set of their earlier essays with the addition of several new ones. In this review, I will concentrate to the former work, i.e. *Visions of politics, Volume III, Hobbes and the Civil Science*.

Skinner's work is charming and precise. The quality of his expertise is demonstrated, for example, in his discussion of the second edition of *De Cive* (p. 16). His essays comment on all the major puzzles of "Hobbesiology", e.g. the authenticity of *Horae Subsecivae* (p.46, p. 55) and the scepticism/humanism -debate (pp. 77-79). The editorial work is of a high standard; however, I have assumed that the ninth essay was originally published in 1966, not 1996. As you can expect, everything is well documented; the total number of footnotes is over 2200. Even so, if we raise our heads out of the labyrinth of details, we find a Socratic lesson in this book and in Skinner's work in general. Instead of an impatient desire to say what

something is, we should start from a look at what it is not. This is especially true with Hobbes.

The last decades have proved that Hobbes has become the pet child of intellectual history. A number of reasons exist for why historians are assumed to be those who say the most interesting things about Hobbes. To name the principal reason, for philosophers, Hobbes appears to be a toy-boy, or 'a whipping boy', to borrow from Doctor Malcolm's vocabulary, and thereupon, a philosophical study of Hobbes is in the state of nature. I think that there are at least two reasons for this. The first is that it has become a standard to study Hobbes having one's eye on some present purposes or political and philosophical currents, not from his own footing. Although this is a quiet normal practice in Anglo-American political philosophy, it does not advance our understanding of Hobbes or help to us to see our own political reality – a promise often given, but less frequently kept. Secondly, philosophical interpretations appear to be written, for a reason unknown to me, with a modern assumption that Hobbes had one, solid doctrine. Both presuppositions are, I believe, mistaken, and against this background Professor Skinner's essays are a welcome reminder. Yet it should be underlined that even our knowledge of the early modern political thought, and especially of Hobbes, has grown and will grow; the table has not been cleared to make way for the instant remedies for the political inconveniences that we face today.

In what follows, I have chosen, instead of an inclusive analysis, issues that I found interesting while reading the book. The first is the status of the book, which is not such a simple question, after all. In the general preface Skinner explains some of the major changes made and clarifies what is the role of the third volume in the trilogy. All the essays have been revised in a way that does not alter the original ideas, as the author himself writes, "one ought not to start moving targets" (p. vii). The text has, naturally, encountered changes, especially in relation to factual mistakes and secondary literary, and we do not hear of so many "noisy polemics" or struggle with "the long sentences" (p. vii). It is, certainly, in the eye of the beholder whether or not the simplification and softening of the text provides a *vision* of politics, and, personally, I had enjoyed the noisy polemics. Parenthetically, Hobbes himself moved from rather moderate texts to the furious and baroque style of his most visionary work, *Leviathan*. Along

the way he acquired enemies as well as a few friends and admirers (see essay eleven), but, above all, a lasting concern.

The inner dynamic of the trilogy is pointed out in a helpful way. Skinner explains it by the following trails of thought. "As we turn from Renaissance theories of civic virtue to Hobbes's civil science, we turn at the same time from the ideal of republican self-government to its greatest philosophical adversary", and methodologically speaking, "I seek to trace between the philosophical argument of volume I and the historical materials presented in volumes 2 and 3" (p. viii-ix). After this, a full stop? Not necessarily, for sometimes it turns out to be valuable to speculate on what is not explicated. More precisely, we may ask two questions: what is the relationship between other areas of Skinner's work and Hobbes? How does his *Reason and Rhetoric in the philosophy of Hobbes* communicate with these essays?

Broadly speaking, Skinner's interest in Hobbes concentrates on the origins, development and nature of Hobbes's thought on the one hand, and his conceptions of state, liberty and political obligation on the other hand. *Reason and Rhetoric* mapped, principally, the origins, development and nature of Hobbes's idea of civil science. The central idea was that Hobbes has been depicted as too modern a thinker, a proponent of the brave new science of politics. The collection consolidates Skinner's idea that perhaps Hobbes was eager to give the impression that he is a maverick on the steppes of scientific politics and that in some ways, he was. However, we should not see this change as dramatic and without predecessors, as it has been sometimes understood to be. In brief, Hobbes was "a product of the literary culture of humanism" (p. 3).

Essays three and four, as earlier drafts of *Reason and Rhetoric*, echo its thesis. Essay two is written after the publication of *Reason and Rhetoric*, but does not provide any new, substantial information. The repetition makes one's mind wander, and, to flirt with an idea, those who do not see Hobbes predominantly as a humanist political thinker, but are aware of Professor Skinner's profound knowledge of rhetoric, feel that he enforces the theoretical insights at issue. Purely pragmatically, the solution is user-friendly. Instead of reading a long monograph, the civilised academic public can enjoy one of the compact essays.

It can be stated that Skinner defends his central tenet also indirectly. For example, he gives the impression that Hobbes's adventures in theoretical philosophy is not so pleasant chapter to read and that "[a]t some stage Hobbes decided to stop banging his head against this particular wall and returned to the study of civil science" (p. 11, see also p. 17). Luckily, we learn, the intellectually annoying personal odyssey was supplanted by the translation of the Greek original (see fn. 205 in p. 65). Another instance, and not fully independent, relates to the role of *De Cive*. To Skinner this first published work, the one that was widely known, especially in the Continent and considered there to be his principal work for a substantial period, is a "*rupture*" (p. 65). The collection shows that, especially in Skinner's late work, *De Cive* is used instrumentally, as an interlude, not an independent work. In short, Skinner is primarily interested in what influenced Hobbes, not so much in what his influence was. Related to this one may raise objections (see below).

Even though Hobbes has been a central interest of Skinner from the beginning of his intellectual career, he has been occupied more and more with three other themes: renaissance, republicanism and, in particular, rhetoric. This shift can be found also in this book. I believe that there is a unifying idea. Skinner's early essays on Hobbes concentrate on demonstrating that he was not without predecessors or contemporaries in the storms of mid-17th century English politics and more into down-to-earth historical analysis. The later writings concentrate on the clarification of this general conviction. The outcome can seem different, especially when connected to other fields Skinner has studied.

Regarding the very composition of the book, it contains three types of essays, if the fifth essay is understood as a hop to the history of civilisation process. The first, essays reflected on above, seek to show how Hobbes's thinking can be seen as a continuation and reaction to renaissance humanism in the spirit of Cicero. The second group, including essays eight and ten above all, investigate broad historical developments that surfaced in the nuances of the turbulent political climate of the age. The third group of essays relate more straightforwardly to political theory and analyse Hobbes's conceptions of state, liberty and political obligation.

Essays concentrating on political arguments are, roughly speaking, the most un-historical ones. I do, however, believe that their value lies in the synchronic analysis of politics. Essay six, which studies the complexities between natural and artificial persons, state, authorisation and representation, is an awakening in many respects and indicates Skinner's growing engagement to the present political problems and debates. The entry into the slippery world of interpretation ("To construe. [...] and [...] to construe again" (p. 181, 185)) is usually well established, but we do not meet the same success everywhere in the book. That Cicero and Quintilian ("deliberative oratory" (p. 70)) could contribute the problems of modern politics and to enlighten some contemporary core problems of metaethics with a piece of classical rhetoric (see pp. p. 122) are in principle good and welcome, but when these possibilities are simply alluded to and left to the level of remark, they lose some of their force.

Furthermore, there are a number of general issues that may strike the reader. Skinner's enthusiasm for Latin leaps out of the pages of the book. If we put aside the most obvious influence of Thucydides and Aristotle, the influences of Greek thinkers and heritage are somewhat embedded. What could also count as imperfection is the fact that in Skinner's works on Hobbes during the last decades the influence of strictly medieval thought, scholasticism have had always small role. Yet another unilateralism is the claim that Hobbes's theory of state (see the General Preface and essays six and seven) is the most enduring piece of his political thinking. This is an exaggeration. Surely Hobbes was the first to articulate clearly the modern notion of state, but he was also among the first who realised the cultural and symbolic dimensions of politics and its purely artificial and visionary nature. This aspect is present in his analyses of faith, church and religion. Skinner's Hobbes is rather secular, although he was, to an increasing degree, interested in religion, especially in such phenomena as fanaticism and superstition. To Hobbes, politics was about vision, which is defined in OED as "something which is apparently seen otherwise than by ordinary sight; esp. an appearance of a prophetic or mystical character, or having the nature of a revelation, supernaturally presented to the mind either in sleep or in an abnormal state". The trick was how to tame this in a way that security and

commodious living would possible. Thanks to Professor Skinner, we have made some, and not minor, steps in understanding this process.

Notes

- 1 Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002).
- 2 Noel Malcolm, 'Thomas Hobbes and Voluntarist Theology', (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1983), p. 202
- 3 For a how-to-read-this-book, see the first essay.
- 4 Some developments see Malcolm 2002, essay fourteen.
- 5 See, for example, Quentin Skinner, 'On Justice, the Common Good and the Priority of Liberty', in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, (Verso, London 1992, pp. 211-224). It should, however, be noted that Skinner is not offering the past as a ready-made solution to the present problems. His inaugural lecture (published as *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998) is illuminating, and especially the third part gives some guidelines for this widely debated issue concerning the relationships between political theory, political practice and history of political thought.
- 6 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition, 1989.