

## REVIEW

**Quentin Skinner 2008.** *Hobbes And Republican Liberty*.  
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One might like to think that somewhere, in the enormous bulk of scholarship on Hobbes's theory of liberty, the final word on the matter surely must lie. What of significant importance can possibly remain to be said, given that the philosopher in question was more particular than most about defining his concepts? The answer is, as it turns out, a great deal. In *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* Quentin Skinner adds to the bulk of Hobbes scholarship and, specifically, to his own already formidable contribution to it, by tracing the development of Hobbes's thoughts on liberty from their earliest formulation in *The Elements of Law* to their most familiar form in *Leviathan*. In so doing, Skinner wishes to convince the reader of two things. First, and contrary to what has been claimed by a number of commentators, Skinner argues convincingly that there is a radical shift in Hobbes's thoughts on liberty to the effect that *Leviathan*, rather than representing a matured form of earlier ideas, in fact repudiates the description of liberty found in *The Elements of Law*. Second, Skinner wants to convince us that republican ideas about liberty are a major theme of *Leviathan*. Thus, the change in Hobbes's position cannot be understood without grasping the importance of republican ideas in Anglophone political theory in the run-up to the Civil War and the significance that Hobbes attached

to attacking them. More than anything else, though, it is a detailed interpretation of a philosophical enterprise.

Before I engage with Skinner's arguments, it seems apt to say a few words about the Skinnerian way of doing things. Any assessment of a work by Skinner will partly be an assessment of the Cambridge approach, an approach which I, as a political philosopher with an interest in historical interpretation, have a twofold reason for appreciating.

First, it has vindicated my discontent over philosophical studies that make a conscious virtue out of disregarding the fact that old texts are old. As political philosophers today, our thoughts and ambitions are shaped (but not determined) by the troubles and challenges of our age. We not only know this but also validate our efforts with the help of this insight. It is only by virtue of it that we have any hope of coming across as relevant. So how can we possibly think that we can understand what political thinkers of past ages were on about, without accepting and attending to the fact that they did what we do? We, like them, use philosophy in order to understand the political situation we find ourselves in.

Skinner contextualizes the philosophy of the past within its own historical moment without making it hostage to it. We do not need to attend to every intricacy of the political, social, and material developments of 17<sup>th</sup> Century England in order to understand what Hobbes is doing. Of course, Hobbes's historical moment importantly shaped what he did. But he was a philosopher, not merely a political polemicist, and as such he did what philosophers also do: He tried to transcend the strictures of his age in order to say something of lasting – perhaps everlasting – significance. Perhaps he failed, as we might all be doomed to fail, but we need to make that attempt part of the context within which we place him. The most enduring strength of Skinner's approach is that the historical understanding that is being sought is philosophical at heart. The context of an idea is not only the material conditions of its historical moment but also the philosophical traditions and systems of thought within which the thinker aims to make his or her mark. The wish to transcend the here and now is part of the context of any philosophical idea. Assessing the "republicanism" which, as Skinner argues, was Hobbes's target can therefore not be done by simply looking at various republican-inspired positions in England during the 1640s; it requires an appreciation of what those positions looked like that at the same time abstracts from them

into republicanism as a tradition of thought. That is why the historical context of any work in philosophy will be not only material and social conditions but also, and importantly, words and arguments. No philosopher is above the battle, says Skinner, by which he means that philosophy is also polemics. He is right, but – and he knows this as well – philosophers usually (sometimes fruitlessly) *aim* beyond the battle, and contextualising philosophy is partly about contextualising that aim within an arsenal of words and their meaning.

In his book, Skinner wishes to contrast two rival theories about the nature of human liberty. One is the “republican” theory – with its roots in Ancient Greek and Roman thought – according to which a person is free to the extent he is not subject to the arbitrary will of another man. Liberty is contrasted to servitude and is lost in servile relationships of dependence, even when there is no interference. This view of liberty served as an argument against absolute monarchy; the subjects of a king, wholly dependent on his will, are nothing other than slaves even if the king is benign. The point republicans wanted to make was that it is possible to be a free-man under government, but only if one is a member of a free state, one in which the people rules itself collectively and is subject to laws only, not to the will of a man.

It is well known that Hobbes was propelled into political theory and his defence of absolute political power and indivisible sovereignty by the anxiety caused by the approaching Civil War. It is also common among philosophers to assume that the background of his approach to absolute sovereignty is divine right theory, in relation to which Hobbes looks modern by insisting that even absolute monarchy gets its legitimacy from the consent of the governed. Skinner claims instead that Hobbes’s main worry when formulating his political theory was the idea that freedom can be had under government if only government is democratic. The shift that Skinner identifies in the evolution of Hobbes’s thought on liberty is cast as part of a strategy to position his views most effectively against the republican cause.

Hobbes dumbfounded his contemporaries by insisting that there is nothing more to the will than a name we give to that desire on which we act. Since all action is the product of passion it makes no sense to say – as philosophers typically did say – that an act is free to the extent it is *not* the product of passion. Freedom and the lack of it, says Hobbes, apply only to bodies in motion; it is movement, not the will behind it, which is free or not free. The significance of Hobbes’s

theory of the will to his theory of liberty is manifold. Suffice it here to say, first, that it serves to bolster his claim that freedom is about movement, or action in the human case, not about thought or the background conditions of action, and secondly, that it made him deny the longstanding distinction between liberty and licence, since that distinction rested on the premise that free action is prompted by reason while licentious action is prompted by passions and tantamount to slavery because of it.

So what is the radical shift that Skinner identifies in Hobbes's thought on these matters? Let me try to summarize it in rough outline. After that I will say what I find to be the main strength in Skinner's analysis, but I will also attend to a question that is left unanswered.

We are used to thinking about Hobbes's view of liberty as negative in Berlin's sense and, in the later writings, it is. But Skinner makes a point of saying that in *The Elements of Law* Hobbes talks about natural liberty in positive terms, without ever defining it. He treats it as equivalent to natural right, with right taken in the traditional meaning of something that is not against reason. So natural liberty, then, is the right to do anything in order to preserve oneself. This liberty can be lost in two ways, by losing the capacity or by giving up the right. In the state of nature we have the right but often lack the capacity to make use of it. In the covenant that sets up the body politic we forfeit the right in order to benefit from the capacity. We make ourselves subject- and here is the punch line - being a subject is to be a slave. The subjects stand to the sovereign as a slave to his master. This means, for the early Hobbes, that there can be no such thing as civil liberty since in our civil capacity we are necessarily slaves, a price we willingly pay for peace.

The first step in the shift comes when Hobbes in *De Cive* offers a definition of liberty: Liberty is the absence of impediments to motion. This, Skinner assures us, represents an epoch-making moment, since Hobbes offers an explicit alternative to the traditional view of human liberty as a natural faculty. Human liberty here is simply a subspecies of the unobstructed movement of bodies. This definition allows him to speak of civil liberty, since also in the commonwealth there is freedom of movement as long as a person is not physically chained up.

In the difference between Hobbes's definition in *De Cive* and the one he was later to offer in *Leviathan* we find the second step of the

radical shift. In *De Cive* Hobbes says that there are two kinds of impediments to motion. The first is an external physical intervention that blocks movement. The second represents an oddity in Hobbes's system and creates a tension that, says Skinner, *Leviathan* later resolved; it is an internal impediment that consists in the lack of an ability to will. For example, strong fear of punishment shapes our will so that we cannot will to disobey. Given that it has been important for Hobbes to emphasize that fear and liberty are consistent and that an act performed from fear is voluntary, this internal impediment to freedom sits awkwardly within his system.

This awkwardness is removed when Hobbes redefines liberty in *Leviathan*, saying that freedom in the proper signification of the word is the absence of *external* impediments to motion. The internal impediment is dropped; the only impediments that restrict liberty are external and absolute in the sense that they make movement impossible. This makes it possible for Hobbes to say that even in a monarchy people have full use of their liberty since it is physically possible for them to disobey. But, Skinner adds and here we approach one of the book's main strengths, we retain almost no natural liberty as subjects. Hobbes still insists that a free subject is a contradiction. How can this be, that we are completely free and completely unfree at the same time?

What Skinner does so well is to insist that the theory of freedom in *Leviathan* cannot be understood without proper attention to Hobbes's claim that we, as humans in the commonwealth, live in two modes at once. As physical bodies we live in the natural world of things and movement. As subjects – an artificial category – we live in a world of artifice. We are subjects bound by obligation to a sovereign only because we regard ourselves as such. Law does not restrict our movements as physical bodies but it binds us, with artificial chains, in our capacity as subjects. So we are free and unfree at once, without contradiction, and the simultaneous freedom and unfreedom of our civil existence is the same regardless of the constitutional form of our commonwealth. Laws issued by a monarch are in this sense no different than laws issued by a democratic assembly.

But there is a question that remains. The limited liberty that we can still enjoy in our capacity as subjects is the freedom left to us in those pockets of our civil existence where we are not obligated by civil law. What some commentators would say is that this means that there is

## REVIEW

need of a further definition of liberty since the definition of liberty proper – corporal liberty – cannot explain the artificial bonds of law, and Skinner does not quite explain why, or if, Hobbes can do without it. In the civil mode of life, the external impediment is not corporal; it holds, in Hobbes's words, by the danger and not by the difficulty of breaking them. Obligation under law takes away my liberty in my capacity as civil subject but it does not affect my liberty of movement as a physical body. We can understand and appreciate both the political shrewdness and the philosophical subtlety of this, while still feeling that the relation is not sufficiently conceptualized. In discussing *The Elements of Law* Skinner notes that Hobbes says at one point that "where liberty ceases there beginneth obligation". This, according to Skinner, is a slip only corrected in *Leviathan*, where he makes clear that liberty proper is a matter of corporal fact. But in *Leviathan* Hobbes, in one and the same chapter, defines liberty proper as the absence of external impediments to motion *and* says that obligation and liberty "in one and the same thing are inconsistent". We understand that he is, at that later point, talking about liberty in the civil mode of life, and Skinner explains well that there is no need to be confused by this. But we might still wonder what it means and we might feel the need for an *analysis* of how the definition of liberty proper relates to what Hobbes says about liberty and obligation. There is, it seems to me, reason to think that Hobbes did need a further definition of liberty, one which applies to the civil mode of life and is not corporal. That discussion will go on, in our historical moment as in that of Hobbes.