

6-1-2009

# "Hobbes, Bramhall and the Politics of Liberty and Necessity/Hobbes and Republican Liberty"

Scott Yenor  
*Boise State University*

transformative” encounters between citizens, or groups, within a pluralistic democracy. As to declarations about the “limitations, incompleteness, and contingency” of anything and everything political, these are so common that they themselves risk becoming imperious. Button does offer an admirably direct defense of Rawlsian “public reason” (216) that does not dodge or apologize for its rationalist and exclusionary premises. But attacks are surrounded by retreats and feints, and this hardly indicates that liberalism’s central problem is excessive certainty. Indeed, it often seems there is no sector of political theory more uncritically sure of itself than the one whose language pivots around the limited/incomplete/contingent—and perhaps the most honest use of a Thomas Hobbes would not embrace it.

–Alex Schulman

### A PROPER ATTENTION TO CONTEXT

Nicholas D. Jackson: *Hobbes, Bramhall and the Politics of Liberty and Necessity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xii, 314. \$99.00.)

Quentin Skinner: *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. 245. \$22.99, paper.)

doi:10.1017/S0034670509990088

These books concerning Hobbes’s understanding of liberty arise from the Cambridge school of historiography. Nicholas D. Jackson’s *Hobbes, Bramhall and the Politics of Liberty and Necessity* approaches Hobbes’s works through his layered contexts, especially in emphasizing how Hobbes responds to the political challenges of his day. The result is a sometimes interesting, but ultimately unsatisfying account of a debate between Hobbes and the Aristotelian Anglican Bishop John Bramwell. The book’s failure to satisfy follows from Jackson’s inability to define the context with sufficient precision. Skinner, who is, in some sense, the father of the Cambridge school, has written a much less objectionable book. *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* shows how Hobbes developed a liberal understanding of liberty in opposition to the republican liberty preached and practiced by his antimonarchical contemporaries.

Cambridge school historiographers take their bearings from what they view as the penchant of some interpreters to excessive abstraction from historical circumstances. This problem can be solved by placing authors within the universe of discourse predominant during their time. A historian’s knowledge of this universe of discourse or of these conventions of thought is the key to unlocking a text under consideration, for it reveals what can be thought in a particular time and place. Few would, indeed, deny the premise that conventions grease the wheels of communication and these conventions set limits on how an audience might understand an author. The Cambridge school goes

further. So much does it emphasize context that Skinner in his "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" (1969) writes, "There simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions, with as many different answers as there are questions, and as many different questions as questioners."

Each of the books under consideration here reveals a main deficiency in its approach. Let me begin with Jackson's book, which illustrates the difficulty of reconstructing the appropriate universe of discourse around a text. Jackson locates Hobbes's writings on the relationship between liberty and necessity within the political and theological conflicts surrounding the rise and fall of the English Commonwealth. In Jackson's telling, the question of whether human beings possess freewill was a burning political question during the English Civil War. Those defending freewill, including Bramwell and the Anglican establishment, did so because it was in their interest. Sacramental theology empowers bishops and their patrons (e.g., King Charles), and such theology is connected to the belief that, somehow, those who are saved must choose to participate in their own salvation by coming to the Lord's Table and Fount. Those denying freewill, the republicans of Hobbes's day, do not need the intervention of priests since they think the saved are bound to heaven or hell from the "foundation of the world." This denial of freewill had a leveling tendency that pointed away from hierarchies, religious and political.

Jackson locates the dispute between Bramwell and Hobbes by concentrating on the political implications of these philosophic and theological issues. United politically behind monarchy, Hobbes and Bramwell are divided on freewill. That Hobbes and Bramwell were united politically is seen on the occasion of their one face-to-face debate, at the Parisian residence in exile of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, one of Charles's generals. Hobbes and Bramwell were both forced into exile by Cromwell's Commonwealth because both were connected to the Stuart regime. Their meeting at Cavendish's residence is the "High Noon" of Jackson's book. Their verbal debate, as Jackson relates, spilled over into a series of increasingly vituperatively written debates. By Bramwell's lights, Hobbes was worse than the Puritanical republicans. Hobbes, like the Puritans, denied freewill, and he went further in embracing a materialism that found no place for the human soul. By Hobbes's lights, Bramwell defended an unstable mystical royalism instead of a sound absolute sovereignty. Bramwell embraced a constitutional monarchy; Hobbes, an absolute and arbitrary sovereign. Bramwell and Hobbes could agree neither on the grounds for defending a restoration nor on what a monarch is, and this explains why Stuarts were weakened. Both sought to educate future kings, but they could not agree on the curriculum.

The fact that Bramwell and Hobbes put forward different visions of monarchy should lead Jackson to call into question the priority of politics in the vulgar sense of getting ahead to politics in the higher sense, in the service of the human good. Bramwell and Hobbes were not mere operatives or spin-doctors (as Jackson seems to suggest) deploying their arguments as the situation

demanded. They were engaged in a much deeper debate over the nature of sovereignty and human beings. Careful examination of their context, that is, shows that both men were engaged in statesmanlike debate and that they followed their conclusions all the way down. They sought to lay the groundwork for stable, secure politics consistent with their respective views of what was good for human beings. Jackson's analysis shows that politics points to philosophical and theological disputes. While Jackson could have taken his intellectual history in this direction, he takes the opposite, less interesting tack. He tries to show how the great works of Hobbes and Bramwell were permeated with narrowly tailored appeals to influential opinion-makers in Britain. Hobbes defends the principles underlying England's commonwealth, on this reading, because he wanted to go home after so long a time in exile; Bramwell defends freewill because he fears losing his job. This collapse of historiography into crude, self-interest narrowly understood biography represents the missed opportunity in Jackson's treatment. Jackson's book fails as an account of the debate between Hobbes and Bramwell because of this tendency to reduce their thought into appeals of interest. Jackson's attempt to reconstruct the calculations of Hobbes and Bramwell is built with such rickety speculations that it would not even pass for a serious historical account of the Hobbes-Bramwell dispute. The book fails, in short, both as an intellectual history and as a history.

Skinner's book forces me to reevaluate the extent to which Skinner is attached to the method of the Cambridge school. Just as Wagner's music is better than it sounds, so is Skinner's political theory better than his thinking about its grounds. Skinner's latest book on Hobbes relates Hobbes's account of liberty to Hobbes's critique of ancient or republican liberty. Republican liberty, for Skinner, sees "freedom within civil associations" as "subverted by the mere presence of arbitrary power" (x). Different in other respects, Hobbes's theoretical opponents—constitutional royalists, advocates of a mixed regime, and radical republicans—believed arbitrary power and freedom were like oil and water. Of most concern to Hobbes were radical republicans, whose nostalgic celebrations of ancient republics reflected a view in which liberty could exist only in a state where citizens offered "active consent to the laws by which they were bound" (63–64).

The beauty of Skinner's book lies in his presentation of how Hobbes undercuts, plank by plank, this ancient conception of liberty and proffers a more minimalist conception. Skinner insists that Hobbes develops this critique over the course of his corpus and that the critique culminates in *Leviathan's* conception of liberty. With his alternative, Hobbes makes liberty something individually related to freewill instead of politically related to lawmaking. "From the use of the word free-will," Hobbes writes in chapter 21 of *Leviathan*, "no liberty can be inferred of the will, desire, or inclination, but the liberty of the man, which consisteth in this: that he finds no stop in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to do." This understanding is, in Skinner's view, "an epoch-making moment" related to Hobbes's materialist account of the world as matter in motion. Freedom is, as Hobbes writes in *De Homine*, chapter 9,

“nothing other than *the absence of impediments to motion*.” Physical impediments there may be, but the effect of Hobbes’s redefinition of liberty is to show that absolute, arbitrary political rule is not an impediment to freedom. People can submit to government of one type or another and still “enjoy a substantial amount of what he now feels able to describe as . . . civil liberty” (116). Hobbes thereby vindicates absolute, arbitrary monarchy against those “Democraticall writers,” who taught that “all that lived under Monarchy were slaves” (*Leviathan*, chap. 21). By defining freedom down, Hobbes made it easier to realize and consistent with many forms of government: A government that protects is a sufficient condition for the enjoyment of liberty.

There are some elements of Skinner’s reputed contextualizing in this book, all of which serve a serious purpose. The two major contributions Skinner makes to developing Hobbes’s critique of republican liberty derive from Skinner’s mastery of the frontispiece literature and his access to the books in the Hardwick library. Concerning the frontispiece literature, Skinner’s analysis is often brilliant: he shows, for instance, how the frontispieces Hobbes commissioned for *Leviathan* compare to other images of monarchy in other contemporary frontispieces. The Hardwick library, owned by Cavendish, provided Hobbes access to the republican tradition, and Skinner notes that Hobbes catalogued the library in the early 1620s. (This was a discovery made by none other than Leo Strauss, whom Skinner has spent much of his career lampooning as a crude abstract de-contextualizer.) The books in the Hardwick library often end up as the target of Hobbes’s critique, though Skinner admits that he can only prove that Hobbes had “access” to those books and not that he actually read them. In any event, Skinner’s treatment of these books is thoughtful and nuanced—he eschews the kind of hardcore “universe of discourse” thinking practiced by his students.

The shortcoming of Skinner’s book has little to do with his interpretive method and everything to do with his scholarly temperament. His contention that Hobbes’s doctrines developed throughout his career was first forwarded by Leo Strauss, Skinner’s *bête noire*. In a man so learned and often so reasonable, this passing over of Strauss is surely intentional, and it bespeaks a troubling aspect of the Cambridge school generally: its intolerance of other approaches to political philosophy. It is also possible that Skinner’s work is so reasonable because its thesis is quite unobjectionable: no work of genius is needed to show that Hobbes is a critic of republican liberty. What is impressive about Skinner’s book is how it deftly connects the relevant portions of Hobbes’s context with permanent issues of political philosophy, and how Skinner, despite himself, perhaps, sees the need to call Hobbes’s understanding of liberty into question.

Consider Skinner’s reflections on the success of Hobbes’s redefinition of freedom: “If we reflect on his counterattack, and especially on its continuing historical influence, we can hardly fail to acknowledge that he won the battle. But it is still worth asking if he won the argument.” Far from reducing philosophy to context or linguistic conventions, Skinner closes this tract with an invitation to

philosophy, though Skinner only raises this question and does not provide grounds for resolving it. As someone grounded in what I had taken to be the decisive anti-Skinner arguments of Michael Zuckert and Nathan Tarcov, Skinner's book comes as a wonderful surprise, and it forces me to reconsider whether his approach must close the door on permanent issues. Either Skinner does not practice what he preaches, or his initial preaching may not be as closed as it had first appeared. Whereas Jackson practices crude and unhistorical contextualizing that does not warrant the name intellectual history, Skinner's achievement is subtle and enriching. Perhaps it is time to save Skinner from the abuses of his students and from his mischaracterization of his methods.

—Scott Yenor

### THE MARKET IN THE MORAL ORDER

Dennis C. Rasmussen: *The Problems and Promises of Commercial Society: Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2008. Pp. xi, 193. \$27.50.)

doi:10.1017/S003467050999009X

It is hard to get Adam Smith right. There is still a perception of him, despite much recent scholarship to the contrary, as the founder of a laissez-faire capitalism that feeds on the lower passions of unbridled self-interest and Ayn Rand-like individualism. What we can safely say is that Smith promoted a competitive market economy (not capitalism as we understand it today), the division of labor (which he predicted would result in greater prosperity), the pursuit of self-interest (rightly understood), limited (not weak) government, and the rule of law. He differs from modern economists in his firm belief that the market was necessarily part of a larger moral order.

Smith was, moreover, a harsh critic of his own philosophy, what he called the system of natural liberty. This is clearly established by Rasmussen's careful and well-reasoned comparison between Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Smith read Rousseau's devastating criticisms of commercial society and agreed with many of them. According to Rasmussen, both acknowledged "that commercial society necessarily produces great inequalities; that an extensive division of labor can exact an immense cost in human dignity by rendering people feeble and ignorant; that an emphasis on wealth and material goods can encourage moral corruption; and that the desire for wealth often leads people to submit to endless toil and anxiety in the pursuit of frivolous material goods" (7). Thus the question arises, why did Smith promote a commercial society that had so many shortcomings?

The answer to this question is twofold. First, Smith and Rousseau start from different operating premises. Rousseau compares present society with an Edenic state of nature against which it appears paltry, indeed. Given the way he sets up the problem, Rousseau can outdo even Augustine and Freud in