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Book Symposium: Hobbes and Political Theory

Introduction: Hobbes, Language and Liberty

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Abstract
Hobbes's place in the history of political philosophy is a highly controversial one. An international symposium held at Queen Mary, University of London in February 2009 was devoted to debating his significance and legacy. The event focussed on recent books on Hobbes by Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit, and was organised around four commentaries on these new works by distinguished scholars. This paper is designed to introduce the subject of the symposium together with the commentaries and subsequent responses from Petit and Skinner. It examines the themes of language and liberty in the philosophy of Hobbes and concludes by highlighting some of the ways in which further research into Hobbes's debt to Aristotle's *Politics* will prove fruitful and illuminating.

Keywords
liberty, language, rhetoric, Republicanism, democracy

The papers that follow in this special issue of *Hobbes Studies* have their origin in a symposium on recent historical and philosophical research into the thought of Thomas Hobbes.[1] The symposium was specifically dedicated to discussing two major new contributions to scholarship in this field, Philip Pettit's study of Hobbes as the "inventor of the invention of language thesis" and Quentin Skinner's account of the development of Hobbes's theory of

[1] I am grateful to Joel Isaac for co-organising this symposium and for discussing its subject matter with me on several occasions. I am also in his debt for his comments on an earlier draft of this Introduction. Thanks are due to the Graduate School in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the History Department, and the Senior Vice Principal in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Queen Mary, University of London for generous financial support that enabled this symposium to take place.

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liberty.[2] The symposium was sponsored by Queen Mary, University of London under the auspices of the Centre for the Study of the History of Political Thought on 20 February 2009. The event was attended by Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner who participated in a debate structured around four papers delivered by Alan Cromartie, Chris Brooke, Ian Shapiro and Chandran Kukathas. The event was also attended by scholars invited from the wider international academic community who sustained and clarified the discussion.

The papers were organised into two main sessions devoted, first, to the place of Hobbes in intellectual history and, second, to his significance for political theory more generally. The four papers are printed below, together with responses from Pettit and Skinner that were written after the event. The aim of this Introduction is to present an outline of the two books that were the subject of the symposium and to summarise the main lines of the discussion. I do not adjudicate between topics in dispute among the participants but let the commentators and respondents speak for themselves. However, I do draw attention to recurring themes and set out overlapping points of criticism. I conclude by highlighting areas of outstanding controversy and by indicating the existence of problematic issues that might usefully be addressed in future research.

I Hobbes and Liberty

Recent scholarship on the political thought of Hobbes has greatly refined our understanding of how the concept of liberty was first formulated and then developed in his work. In *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* Quentin Skinner presents his fullest and most carefully argued contribution to the debate. The book defends a specific thesis about Hobbes's career before arguing that *Leviathan* had a decisive impact on subsequent thinking about the character of freedom. Skinner builds on some of his earlier research in order to refute arguments to the effect that Hobbes's political theory, including his ideas concerning liberty, remained substantially unchanged throughout his writings.[3] In fact, Skinner argues, a decisive shift in Hobbes's thinking becomes evident

[2] P. Pettit, *Made with Words: Hobbes on Language, Mind, and Politics* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 4; and Q. Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), passim.

[3] Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, xv. Skinner is taking issue here with J. Sommervile, *Thomas Hobbes: Political Ideas in Historical Context* (New York: St Martin's Press 1992), 3, 162, and J. R. Collins, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005), 9, but also with P. Pettit, 'Liberty and *Leviathan*', *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, 4 (2005), 131–51, 150.

with the publication of *Leviathan* in 1651. With the repudiation of his earlier beliefs about freedom, Hobbes presented in his new account the view that liberty consisted in action unhindered by external impediments. This line of argument, we are told, was developed by Hobbes in conscious reaction against the republican view of liberty. Moreover, the suggestion is made that in the longer term the Hobbesian thesis prevailed in philosophical argument with the result that much twentieth-century liberal political theory has come to depend on a conception of freedom whose roots lie in the corpus of Hobbes's writings.[4]

In 1997, in his *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Philip Pettit alleged that Hobbes had been responsible for a piece of dramatic intellectual innovation that took the form of a radically new understanding of freedom. This new conception, Pettit claimed, was designed to fit an 'absolutist' theory of the state, and it was accordingly directed against what Pettit identified as a set of republican attitudes to free government. But by a remarkable historical irony, it was this Hobbesian perspective that came to dominate approaches to liberty among the proponents of classical liberalism from the nineteenth century onwards.[5] Pettit restates this thesis at the start of *Made with Words*, but he places it within the context of an overarching interpretation of Hobbesian philosophy.[6] I turn to the substance of Pettit's interpretation in the next section of this Introduction, but I begin here with an account of the main argument of Skinner's book since it is concerned with developing a case about an aspect of Hobbes's thinking that both scholars agree was of epochal significance.

That the philosophy of Hobbes represents a remarkable intervention into seventeenth-century thought can hardly be doubted. The problem for scholarship has always been one of isolating the nature of Hobbes's originality. Skinner's book departs from previous accounts in discriminating precisely between the stages in which Hobbes developed his theory of freedom. The story for Skinner begins with Hobbes's *Elements of Law*, first circulated in 1640, in which an attack on existing ideas about liberty is launched. It is here, as Skinner puts it, that Hobbes's "hostility" to the republican theory of liberty

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[4] Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 212–13.

[5] P. Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1997). For revisions to his original thesis, see Pettit, 'Liberty and *Leviathan*', passim. See also Pettit, M*ade with Words*, Chapter 8. For a restatement of the irony of Hobbes's intellectual hegemony over liberal debate, see ibid., 140.

[6] Pettit, *Made with Words*, 1.

is first made evident.[7] But to support his case, Hobbes was obliged to develop a comprehensive account of human freedom, beginning with an analysis of psychology and terminating in a theory of political subjection.

Hobbes's psychological theory in the *Elements* is brought to bear on his understanding of freedom which he presents in his account of deliberation in Chapter XII. Here Hobbes traces "the first unperceived beginnings of our actions" to our appetites and aversions, and proceeds to unpack deliberation as a process of oscillation between desire and alarm that is concluded by a resolution of the will to act in accordance with a preponderating preference.[8] If we forbear to follow a certain course out of fear, our resolve will nonetheless result in voluntary action since the option finally chosen represents our freely deliberated preference. Acting under duress or compulsion in this way therefore has to be seen as resulting in voluntary action. But, as Skinner points out, it is precisely this analysis of deliberation in Chapter XII that is compromised by Hobbes's account of sovereignty by "acquisition" in Chapter III of Part II. At this point in the argument a distinction is drawn between "voluntary" subjection on the one hand and yielding to authority by "compulsion" on the other which cannot be sustained on the basis of Hobbes's account of deliberation.[9]

Skinner charts Hobbes's revisions to the original thesis set out in the *Elements* in part to show how he came to resolve these competing strands of thought. In the process Skinner itemises further additions to Hobbes's theory adapted to fit his insights to a changing ideological climate. In 1642 Hobbes published a further analysis of restraints upon freedom in *De Cive* by introducing a distinction between "external" and "arbitrary" impediments to action. It is at this point in the argument that Hobbes defines liberty as "*the absence of impediments to motion*", and the categories of external and arbitrary restraints upon free movement are intended to facilitate the analysis of obstacles to liberty by identifying willed impediments as freely chosen.[10] With this key distinction in place, Hobbes is in a position, Skinner observes, to leave the terrain marked out in the *Elements of Law* and to mount a positive defence of civil liberty within a framework of absolute subjection.[11]

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[7] Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, xiv.

[8] Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. F. Tönnies, 2nd ed. M. M. Goldsmith (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1969) XII.1–2, 61-62.

[9] Hobbes, *Elements of Law* II.III.1–2, 127-128.

[10] Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive: The Latin Version*, ed. H. Warrender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 167: "*absentia impedimentorum motus*".

[11] Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 116.

This move on Hobbes's part laid the groundwork for "an overarching rhetorical coup", a Skinner puts it.[12] It enables him not only to argue, as he retreats from the position laid out in the *Elements*, that absolute subjection to sovereign authority is distinct from the condition of servitude; it also makes it possible for him to claim that the bearer of civil liberty has to be understood as a *civis*, thereby reconciling absolute authority with the status of free citizenship. Citizen and subject are thus conflated as the *liber homo* is identified as one who serves the *civitas*.[13]

The refinements introduced into Hobbes's theory of freedom in *De Cive* are silently dropped in 1651 when he comes to present his most detailed account of the nature of freedom in *Leviathan*. In place of the changes to the argument that appeared in *De Cive*, a new set of alterations whose original formulation Skinner dates to a period soon after the spring of 1645 is introduced.[14] Hobbes now settles upon a definition of freedom as "the absence of Opposition", by which he means exclusively external impediments to action, and so frees himself from his previous reliance on arbitrary limits to freedom.[15] This in turn enables him to exclude the intricacies of psychology as a complicating factor from his theory of liberty and to present a bolder and less encumbered account of the compatibility between freedom and subjection. But, as Skinner goes on to show, Hobbes's revisions to his philosophy of freedom in *Leviathan* make an appearance in the radically new ideological context of England under the government of the Rump parliament.[16]

It is in this context that Hobbes advances a justification of subjection based on the right of conquest. Skinner contrasts Hobbes's position as set out in the Review and Conclusion of *Leviathan* with Marchamont Nedham's more militant legitimation of the regicide regime in terms of a *de facto* balance of physical force.[17] Conquest, Hobbes insisted, is justified on the grounds of right, and the right of conquest is founded on submission. He thus vindicates absolute subjection in normative terms rather than in terms of naked power. More precisely, he renders power normatively justified to the extent that it can secure

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[12] Ibid., 122–3.

[13] Hobbes, *De Cive*, 168: "quod LIBER is sit qui soli civitati, SERVUS autem qui etiam concivi servuit".

[14] Ibid., 128–31.

[15] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 145.

[16] Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 200.

[17] Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 204.

general pacification but irrespective of the status of the citizen's civil liberty.[18] Skinner concludes that insofar as this analysis came to hold sway over subsequent conceptions of freedom, liberty has lost its significance as a political status in proportion as it came to be regarded as a predicate of actions.[19]

II Hobbes and Language

Philip Pettit's *Made with Words* goes a considerable distance towards explaining why it is that Hobbes felt compelled to undermine the classical commitment to freedom as a civic status. He underlines the extent to which Hobbes had an acute awareness of status as exercising a deranging influence on the human mind, and shows that the objective of a civil science conducted in accordance with Hobbesian principles is to discipline its inflammatory potential. 'Standing' among human beings is a comparative achievement, and thus status always appears as *relative* status. The status of equal liberty is therefore intrinsically problematic since equality is prone to conflict with relative standing. Hobbes set out to demonstrate the extent to which this conflict was founded on the acquired characteristics of human psychology. Pettit's book traces the advent of this psychology in Hobbes's scheme to the acquisition of language in human development.[20]

Among the catalogue of gifts bestowed upon primitive humanity by Prometheus as set out in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* is listed the capacity for cognition. Finding savage man at first hapless, the Titan declares how he equipped him with mind (*nous*) and intelligence (*phrên*).[21] In Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1820 rendition of Aeschylus's tragedy this act of primal benefaction is described in terms of an original bequest of language: "He gave man speech and speech created thought".[22] According to Pettit, Hobbes is the key figure in intellectual history to have recognised the transformative capacity that the acquisition of language must have had on human mental capacities, and without whom Shelley's gloss on Aeschylus's drama would not have been possible:

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[18] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 485: "The Romanes used to say, that their Generall had *Pacified* such a *Province*, that is to say, in English, *Conquered* it; and that the Countrey was *Pacified* by Victory, when the people of it had promised *Imperata facere*, that is, *To doe what the Romane People commanded them*: this was to be Conquered".

[19] Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 213.

[20] Pettit, *Made with Words*, 2–3.

[21] Aeschylus, *Prometheus Unbound*, 444.

[22] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, II.4, 72. This line from Shelley is quoted in Pettit, *Made with Words*, 2.

"He is the inventor of the idea that language is a transformative technology that has shaped our species, accounting for our characteristic features on both the positive and negative side of the ledger".[23] According to Hobbes this transformation introduced, as Pettit puts it, a "deep cleavage" between human kind and the animal world, and one clear index of this profound difference is the human preoccupation with relative honour, or comparative status.

Pettit tries to show in this way that Hobbes's understanding of language as an acquired and transformative technology not only provided a means of sustaining his materialism against Cartesian dualism but also supplied the key to both the origins of human conflict and the means of pacification. In studying Hobbesian linguistic theory, starting with his analysis of speech and ratiocination and concluding with his account of incorporation through representation, we are thus provided with a direct bridge that leads from his anthropology to his political science. Ultimately Pettit takes his civil philosophy to be a "rigged job", since it depends on a definition of liberty designed to suit his partisan purpose.[24] But at the same time he acknowledges that Hobbesian anthropology contains valuable insights for contemporary philosophy, especially if it is shorn of what he regards as its more implausible claims.

Hobbes's science of man begins with the identification of a distinct human capacity for classification and association – or analysis and synthesis – that accompanies the acquisition of speech. His argument is that "curiosity" originally drove man to discover systematic relations between causes and effects, and so to discriminate among rival explanations. But this reasoning capacity depended in turn on the invention of speech to serve as a way of identifying the constitutive components of explanation.[25] Pettit argues that in the larger scheme of Hobbes's philosophy it is the use of names that gave rise to such novel human capacities as personation and incorporation that enable the civilization of natural belligerence among the species.[26] But equally it is language that generates pathologies of interaction that require the science of politics to bring about their resolution.

The relevant pathologies are the ability to establish a complex relationship to the future, calibrating our preferences and focussing our fears, and the capacity to place ourselves in comparison with our fellows. Both these tendencies render the satisfaction of individuals in society over time highly problematic. Natural

[23] Pettit, *Made with Words*, 2.
[24] Ibid., 140.
[25] Hobbes, *Elements of Law* I.IX.18, 45-46.
[26] Pettit, *Made with Words*, Chapts. 4 and 5.

desires such as characterise the needs of simple animal existence are at once oriented towards more or less immediate satisfaction and gratified in terms of individual welfare. However, human desires such as are mediated by society under the impact of thought and speech can be anxiously or hopefully projected into a distant future and modified by reference to the relative position of others. As a result, a whole range of human aspirations are not amenable to absolute satisfaction in themselves: the desire for future honour, glory, or equality can only be gratified in terms of standing relative to our fellows.[27] But in seeking comparative pre-eminence rather than abstract absolute eminence human behaviours are liable to conflict and are incapable of establishing conditions of permanent concord.

From this predicament follows the human dependence on the artifice of unconditional sovereignty as the sole means available to resolve the incidence of conflict. But Petit questions the plausibility of the theory of human nature that Hobbes employs to explain the condition of conflict. Hobbes's claim that individuals interacting with one another seek recognition over and above their fellows seems to Pettit to be contradicted by the evident satisfaction which people draw from equal social standing.[28] From this aptitude or tendency to make do with or even draw pleasure from parity of esteem Pettit extrapolates to the possibility of durable social cooperation, and thus to the viability of a coordination of forces in mixed constitutional polities, and finally to the availability of a republican political order in which the interests that citizens are disposed to avow in common are guaranteed under a non-arbitrary representative regime.[29]

III Conclusion

On Pettit's reading, the Hobbesian redefinition of liberty as a property of actions rather than a political status is surplus to requirements since the general problem of status which the redescription of freedom was intended to resolve was misconceived by Hobbes in the first place. The "rhetorical coup" that Hobbes's move represented may have overwhelmed subsequent classical liberal approaches to the problem of freedom but, as Skinner has insisted, this victory was secured at the expense of argumentative cogency.[30] However, the

[27] Hobbes, *Elements of Law* I.XIV.1–5, 70-71.
[28] Pettit, *Made with Words*, 96.
[29] Ibid., 139.
[30] Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 216.

commentaries that follow raise doubts about the extent to which the concerns that fuelled Hobbes's project can be disposed of. For Alan Cromartie Hobbes's alarm about the threat posed to natural concord by mutually incompatible desires for equal status has a particular salience under the conditions of modern pluralistic societies. From this perspective one of the key problems of contemporary politics stems less from the hegemony of the Hobbesian analysis of liberty than from the failure to appreciate its peculiar pertinence.

In this vein, Ian Shapiro argues that the attempt to challenge Hobbes's intellectual hegemony by counter-posing a rival "gross concept" of freedom is to condemn debate to vicious circularity, and urges us to focus on the abiding political questions thrown up but not resolved by Hobbes's analysis. Chris Brooke takes the central topic of ongoing relevance in Hobbes's thought to be a suspicion of republican pretensions – a Tacitean scepticism regarding the high-sounding phrases trumpeted by aristocratic apologists for liberty. But the very strength of Hobbes's analysis here tells against his own ambition to unmask the rhetoric of liberty: if the appeal of republican freedom is derived from the persistence of proud phrases, there can be little hope that philosophical analysis will purge language of the resonances that help keep republican politics alive.

Chandran Kukathas nonetheless proposes in the spirit of Hobbes that we should pursue an agenda of conceptual clarification. Liberty is liberty and not some other thing, he argues, and it ought not to be "mistaken" for something else. Kukathas's plea recalls Isaiah Berlin's claim in his 1958 Inaugural Lecture on "Two Concepts of Liberty" that "nothing is gained by a confusion of terms" – "liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice or culture, or human happiness or a quiet conscience".[31] And yet the whole premise of Berlin's Lecture was that this categorical distinction needed to be drawn in the face of persistent uncertainty about what the concept of freedom should properly cover. It might be possible in theory, Berlin hoped, to distinguish liberty understood as uninhibited action from liberty understood in terms of self-government, but he also saw that political practice had a habit of blending the two. In fact, so powerful was the tendency to associate liberty with democracy that cold war politics was divided on how to disentangle them both.[32]

Berlin cited Hobbes in defence of a commitment to liberty in the "negative" sense of the term,[33] although he never displayed much depth of scholarship in

[31] Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 125.
[32] Ibid., 130–1.
[33] Ibid., 123n.

the cast of characters on whom he drew for support. However, he also inadvertently advertised Hobbes's limited success in disassociating the idea of liberty from its historic connection with democratic government: over three hundred years after Hobbes first undertook to disambiguate the two, Berlin still felt obliged to proclaim that "there is no necessary connection between individual liberty and democratic rule".[34] Both Pettit and Skinner recognise that Hobbes traced the assumption of a connection between freedom and democracy to Aristotle's *Politics* where it is claimed in Book 6 of the 1598 translation that "the end and foundation of the popular state, is Libertie".[35] But it is worth recalling that Aristotle explains this common association between freedom and democratic politics in terms of the liberty to participate equally in ruling and being ruled. In other words, the one is taken to imply the other as a result of the popular tendency to associate democracy with the freedom that comes with the enjoyment of equality (*to ison*).[36]

It is commonly accepted that Hobbes based his civil science on a fundamental criticism of the Aristotelian concept of the *zôon politikon*,[37] and yet it needs to be more generally recognised that much of Hobbes scepticism is derived from reading Aristotle against the grain. It was after all Aristotle who first argued that man was the most savage of animals on account of being the most disputatious.[38] While this disputatiousness drew upon the human capacity for speech (*logos*), it was above all incited by competition over equality that in practice takes the form of a desire for profit (*kerdos*) and honour (*timê*).[39] In the face of such potentially incendiary ambition, it is obvious why Hobbes was desperate to distinguish freedom from democracy. But while it can be seen that Hobbes's agitated polemic against egalitarian struggle is powerfully indebted to Aristotle's analysis, it is also clear that he took the argument further in equating conquest with consent. Both Pettit and Skinner are keen to judge this outcome by the demanding norms of peacetime politics, and of course it is right that Hobbes's claims be exposed to civilized standards. But we also need to bear in mind the realities of violence that prompted Hobbes to erect a bulwark against popular outrage resulting in bloody strife.

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[34] Ibid., 130.

[35] Aristotle, *Politiques, or Discourses of Government*, trans. I. D. (London: 1598), 339, cited in Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 66. Hobbes's engagement with Aristotle is also discussed in Pettit, *Made with Words*, 99.

[36] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1317b1–5.

[37] Hobbes, *De Cive*, 90. See also the discussion in Pettit, *Made with Words*, 99.

[38] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a1–1253a39.

[39] Ibid., 1302a1–1302a15.