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## Review of Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes

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*REASON AND RHETORIC IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HOBBS* by  
Quentin Skinner. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 477  
+ xvi pp.

In the 1960s, Quentin Skinner wrote a series of polemical if terse papers arguing that the conventional approach to the history of political theory was confused. Using Hobbes as something of a vehicle for his position, Skinner enunciated what is now well known as the “Cambridge” approach to political theory. He urged that we situate authors in their intellectual contexts so that we can isolate what is distinctive, perhaps subversive, in their use of language: only then, he argued, can we have any valid historical understanding of what they are doing in writing these weird books in the first place.

This new study, daunting in its erudition, marks Skinner’s return to Hobbes. It is tempting to take it as exemplary of the method he has so assiduously propounded—and practiced—over the years, to think that its merits demonstrate the soundness of that method, its flaws the weakness or perversity. The temptation ought to be avoided, I think, or at least gratified with exceeding caution. There is more and less to the method than one could conceivably find in any particular instantiation, however faithful.

Skinner opens with a lengthy review of the reigning rhetorical theories of Tudor and Stuart England. Cicero, Quintilian, and other ancient figures were alive and well in translation—and dutifully taught in schools. So, Skinner argues, these ancients are themselves part of the intellectual milieu of Hobbes’s world. (Though one could still wonder how the meaning of these ancient texts changed when they are transplanted into the rather different social and political world of early modern England.) Briefly, these authors all urge the merits of eloquence. They are skeptical of the power of unadorned logical argumentation to move audiences—especially in politics. But this flattens an astonishingly detailed presentation of the rhetorical tradition, far more than what Skinner requires for his reading of Hobbes, but nice to have

available anyway. Readers uncertain about figures and tropes will receive a crash course in aestismus, anaphora, antiphrasis, antiptosis, antithesis, apodioxis, aposiopesis, catachresis, charientismus, climax, diasyrmus, *dubitaño*, epanodos, epergesis, *evocaño*, hyperbole, irony, leptotes, meiosis, metaphor, metonymy, mycterismus, onedismus, paradiastole, paranomasia, parrhesia, *percantaño*, *permissio*, polyptoton, sarcasm, simile, syllepsis, synchorexis, synecdoche, syugnome, tapinosis, and zeugma. (Readers who doubt the interest and merits of such hyperformalized approaches to literary language will not have their doubts assuaged.)

Skinner wants to show that Hobbes is firmly in control of this rhetorical legacy. His way of doing so, cataloguing Hobbes's own use of language into the relevant rhetorical categories, sometimes inspires skepticism. I myself, it turns out, have often used many of these figures and tropes—I presume any minimally competent writer has—but without having a clue about any received views in rhetoric. Like Moliere's character, we speak prose without knowing it. But Skinner has sharper evidence up his sleeve. He has strong evidence that, as a student, Hobbes would have ingested this material. Reviewing some works by the very young Hobbes, Skinner is able to demonstrate how faithfully he cleaves to the rhetorical masters, how formulaically some of the minor texts reproduce their recommended strategies: no unself-conscious writer could accidentally be such a good mimic. But then Hobbes veers sharply and champions science against deceptive eloquence. The compressed style of the *Elements* and *De Cive*, their deliberate failure to attempt to engage the reader's passions with flowery language and historical examples, represents a renunciation of the entire rhetorical tradition, Skinner urges. Whether boring or precise, their somber, even impassive tone is crucial.

Then Hobbes veers sharply again. (These claims about shifts in Hobbes's style are not new but remain oddly controversial, and Skinner advances them quite persuasively.) By *Leviathan*, Hobbes knows that "the Sciences, are of small power." He is especially troubled by paradiastole, redescribing some action or characteristic in language suggesting a competing evaluation. (So, famously, prodigality might be recast as liberality, cunning as wisdom, recklessness as courage, and so on. Those ignorant of rhetoric might think of recent work in ethics on thick concepts.) Here, insists Skinner, is the source of Hobbes's famous worries about evaluative language, not in any more recent philosophical tradition of skepticism. (But why must we choose one or the other?) In his exile years in France, he was surrounded by writers who reinforced the rhetorical tradition's doubts about unassisted reason by offering misanthropic political psychologies focused on the passions and interests.

And he identified the real culprits of England's civil war as religious fanatics. So Skinner explains Hobbes's *volte-face* embrace of rhetoric, which makes *Leviathan* mischievous, even sizzling. Its arguments are not just interrupted occasionally by snide comments and *ad hominem* speculations on his opponents but are themselves shot through with a staggering assortment of rhetorical devices. In a world where some readers continue to manage to see Hobbes as an orthodox Christian, this is surely worth insisting on.

Then again, the Hobbes on offer, as might already be obvious, is not the most politically engaged figure one might imagine. A naive reader willing to blink or nod during just a few passages could put down this weighty study having no idea that Hobbes's England endured a ferocious civil war or a republic declared by Puritan regicides. Skinner is emphatically uninterested here in the rise of masterless men, in the lurid Jacobean revenge tragedies, in the everyday practices of religious enthusiasts, in the emerging natural science of the virtuosos of the Royal Society, in the theory and practice of tyrannicide and regicide, in any of dozens of historically sensible contexts in which one might place Hobbes. But of course the debate is not simply between those who place texts in context and those who do not. Even those championing some suitably sophisticated version of the maxim that context bestows meaning might have sharp differences on just what contexts are right for particular purposes. And even those historians of political theory who wish to cling to the distracting distinction between intellectual and social history might not find the tradition of rhetoric the most incisive intellectual context for appraising Hobbes.

Skinner's volume is bracketed by another agenda about which he is maddeningly coy. Hobbes, he urges, bequeathed us a prose style that analytic philosophy has retained to this day: urbane, snotty, faintly amused at the idiocies of one's opponents, and so on. Yet, Skinner confesses—*argues* would be too strong, given the unhappy brevity of his comments—some allegiance not just to any old rhetoric but to dialogue. We should relinquish the dream of incorporating everything worth saying in one coherent view; we should not just concede that paradiastolic possibilities lurk around every evaluative corner but embrace that fact. Unhappily, though, a book focused on the contrast between Hobbes's science and his rhetoric offers no clear picture of how one might write political theory in such a dialogic mode, let alone why one should strive to.

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