



Frontispiece by Abraham Bosse to Hobbes's *Leviathan*, 1651

Hobbes's choice

How a philosopher approached ideas

In one of his later works of political philosophy, Hobbes famously declared that the science of civil philosophy "is no older ... than my own book *De cive*". In this declaration, he threw down the gauntlet and declared that he had finally established what was at the time considered an oxymoron – political science. In the famous anecdote by Hobbes's friend and biographer John Aubrey, the catalyst for this momentous intellectual revolution was Hobbes's encounter at the age of forty with Euclid, from whom he learned how to reason from axiomatic first principles to logically certain conclusions. But, as Timothy Raylor points out in his new book, the anecdote was a rhetorical sleight of hand, since Hobbes would certainly have encountered Euclid earlier, whether at Oxford or while assisting the assessor on the estate of his employer, William Cavendish. Whether we owe this sleight of hand to Aubrey or Hobbes is unclear, but as the quotation about *De cive* illustrates, Hobbes was certainly capable of his own gestures of rhetorical self-aggrandizement.

His rhetoric has been an issue in Hobbes scholarship ever since, not least because he himself was so disparaging of it. We see this in Hobbes's early translation of Thucydides where he pits Herodotus' florid eloquence against Thucydides' rougher but more illuminating style, in his criticism of civic humanists for linking rhetoric to democracy, and in his observation that radical preachers of the 1640s used eloquence to seduce and mislead their listeners. Rhetoric, Hobbes complained, panders to opinion and prejudice, stirs up the passions, and can make the worse appear the better case. What, then, do we make of Hobbes's obvious rhetorical brilliance, not least of all in his masterpiece of 1651, *Leviathan*?

In the early twentieth century, interest in Hobbes's rhetoric was rekindled by Leo Strauss, who argued that Hobbes was indebted to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, in part for its analysis of the passions. For Strauss, Hobbes's subsequent claim to put philosophy on a scientific

basis was unfounded: Hobbes never abandoned his early humanist education and the centrality of rhetoric to it. Since then, a variety of positions have been put forward concerning the relationship between humanism, rhetoric and science in Hobbes's work. Miriam Reik also insisted on the importance of Hobbes's humanist education for his political science. Some, like Tom Sorrell and Jeffrey Barnouw, have argued that Hobbes saw rhetoric as a mode of rational persuasion and that *Leviathan* frequently and deliberately makes use of the probabilistic and dialectical reasoning associated with rhetoric. Others, including Victoria Silver, Ioannis Evrigenis and me, have argued that Hobbes self-consciously developed the resources of rhetoric, including poetic figuration, to produce the fiction of self-evidence or the rhetorical effect of scientific demonstration. Still others, such as A. E. Taylor and J. G. A. Pocock, have declared that, whatever Hobbes's intentions, *Leviathan* fails to live up to his notion of science. For David Johnston, Hobbes's goal in *Leviathan* was not to demonstrate the truth of his philosophy but rather to persuade his readers of his conclusions. Quentin Skinner has argued that Hobbes's attitude to rhetoric changed over the course of his career: trained in humanist rhetoric, then hostile to it, by the time he wrote *Leviathan* Hobbes had come to realize that he needed rhetoric in order to persuade his readers of the logical conclusions of his political philosophy. Rhetoric here means all the devices of *elocutio* or style, including metaphor, irony, sarcasm, and paradiastole or rhetorical redescription.

Raylor takes a bracingly new position in this debate. He argues that the problem for Hobbes was not rhetoric, but philosophy. In particular, Hobbes objected to philosophical reliance on probabilistic reasoning and to arguments that took established opinion and commonplaces as premisses. His goal was to put philosophy, especially political philosophy, on a scientific basis, which meant arguing from fixed principles to certain conclusions. Raylor traces Hobbes's developing commitment to this view of science, which solidified in the late 1630s. He shows how Hobbes recast natural philosophy, or the knowledge of nature, as indemonstrable or merely probable, while claiming the status of science for civil philosophy (a field traditionally viewed as subject to opinion and dispute). He convincingly argues that Hobbes's attitude to rhetoric was consistent throughout his life, from his early translation of Thucydides, through his condensation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, to his later works of political philosophy. In Raylor's persuasive account, Hobbes was critical of the Ciceronian and humanist view, according to which rhetoric educated to moral virtue; instead, he followed Aristotle in seeing rhetoric primarily as an amoral technique, an art of providing the best available means of persuasion. His humanism was Tacitean rather than Ciceronian, more concerned with the exercise of power and secrets of state than with civic virtue. And yet, while Hobbes was always critical of the abuse of rhetoric, he consistently allowed a role for it in illustrating already established logical conclusions.

Raylor concedes that in *Leviathan* Hobbes doesn't always abide by his strictures concerning the practice of rhetoric. He even goes so far as to suggest that Hobbes himself didn't think of the complete text of *Leviathan* as a work of philosophy; if he had, he would have made clear its place in that philosophy, as he did with works such as his three-part *Elements of Philosophy*. But Raylor does insist that Part One and especially Part Two of *Leviathan* are polit-

VICTORIA KAHN

Timothy Raylor

PHILOSOPHY, RHETORIC AND
THOMAS HOBBS

352pp. Oxford University Press. £55.
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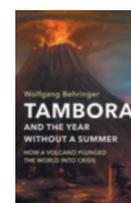
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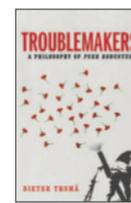
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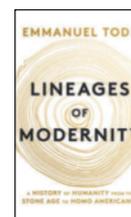
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ical philosophy as Hobbes imagined it, that is, “syllogistic reasoning on the basis of disambiguated definitions”. By contrast, Parts Three and Four are not philosophy by this definition. Instead, in Raylor’s account, Part Three attempts to demonstrate the congruence of Hobbes’s philosophy with revealed religion and it does so not by reason but by scriptural interpretation. Part Four, which takes up the Christian notion of the “kingdom of darkness”, is a witty polemic against the abuses of the Catholic Church and by extension radical preachers in England in the 1640s. In Raylor’s *Leviathan*, then, philosophy and rhetoric remain theoretically distinct and incommensurable activities, even as they exist within the covers of the same book. This is because rhetoric has no role in the discovery of truth for Hobbes; its only role is to aid in the communication of that truth by means of perspicuous prose or vivid illustration.

In his prefatory remarks to his discussion of *Leviathan*, Raylor declares that he is not interested in the inconsistency of Hobbes’s practice with his view of philosophy. He asserts that this practice is irrelevant to determining Hobbes’s theory of political philosophy, especially given the consistency of Hobbes’s views of rhetoric throughout his life and his clear distinction between logic and rhetoric from the late 1630s onwards. Raylor does concede the greater “rhetoricity” of *Leviathan*, but argues that this is only a matter of degree since the same polemical verve and witty figures can be found in Hobbes’s earlier works. The only significant addition he finds in the realm of figuration is Hobbes’s simile of the state as an artificial person, which is visually represented

in the famous frontispiece of *Leviathan*. But, for Raylor, who devotes only half a page to this discussion, the simile is a mere illustration of the logical argument Hobbes has already elaborated. As with the occasional explanatory figure in Parts One and Two, the obvious rhetorical verve of Parts Three and Four does not, according to Raylor, impinge on the philosophical arguments of Parts One and Two “(in theory, at least)”.

It is a measure of Raylor’s scrupulous scholarship that one finds oneself wanting to be convinced by his argument. But in order to be fully convincing, Raylor would have to address some of its gaps. For a book that spends a whole chapter on Hobbes’s *De mirabilibus peccis*, a Latin poem on the natural wonders of the area surrounding the Derbyshire peak, it is very surprising that Raylor doesn’t analyse Parts One and Two of *Leviathan* in any detail. Is it really the case that these parts conform to Hobbes’s notion of political science? Does Hobbes really proceed by logical deduction from first principles? What do we make of Hobbes’s own summation of Part Two in chapter thirty-two of *Leviathan*, when he claims to have derived the principles of government “from the Principles of Nature onely; such as *Experience* has found true, or Consent [concerning the use of words] has made so” (my emphasis)? What do we make of the obvious centrality of the problem of legal and political representation in Parts One and Two, which Hobbes compares to theatrical representation in Chapter Sixteen? The comparison is not simply an illustration of an argument that has already been made; it is the argument. And what do we make of the state of nature, which

Raylor does not mention at all? It would be consistent with Raylor’s argument to describe the state of nature as a rhetorical exemplum or mere illustration of the dangers of not entering into the commonwealth. But one could also argue that this fiction does essential work in making the argument that “the passion to be reckoned upon [in establishing the commonwealth] is fear”.

Finally, one could quarrel with Raylor’s insistence that the last two parts of *Leviathan* are not concerned with the exposition of Hobbes’s political philosophy. Is it really the case that at least half the book is irrelevant to the overall argument and that we should think of it instead as a rhetorical add-on? Hobbes himself seems to have recognized that Parts One and Two could not stand on their own, and that it was crucial to the success of his argument to demonstrate that the Kingdom of God was not a present kingdom that might compete with the sovereign for obedience, but instead an earthly kingdom at some unspecified time in the eschatological future, which therefore had no bearing on the subject’s obedience to his sovereign. Raylor says Hobbes demonstrates this not by reason but by scriptural interpretation. If we equate reason with syllogistic argument, as Raylor tells us Hobbes wants us to do, this makes sense. But if we recognize the role that scriptural interpretation has in Hobbes’s demonstration of his argument, it becomes more difficult to see Parts Three and Four as mere illustration. Here we should note that Hobbes himself, in the beginning of Part Three, declares not only that Scripture teaches nothing contrary to reason and is perfectly compatible with it; he also insists that we must not

renounce our natural reason, which he equates with “the undoubted Word of God”, in explicating the Bible.

By bracketing the question of the relation of theory to practice, Raylor avoids some of the most challenging questions regarding the interpretation of *Leviathan*. Practice, too, is a kind of evidence of Hobbes’s intentions or, at the very least, evidence of a tension within Hobbes’s own mind. While Raylor acknowledges at several points in his book that Hobbes was not always consistent in his definition of philosophy, and that these inconsistencies raise the question of the exact relation of Hobbes’s watertight logical method to the physical and political world we inhabit, he sees no such tension in Hobbes’s attitudes towards and practice of rhetoric. Such an acknowledgement might have required him to address more fully the relation of Hobbes’s intention to his results. As Barnouw and others have argued, in *Leviathan* Hobbes frequently has recourse to a mode of persuasion that involves rational argument even while not conforming to the exact strictures of logic. This would suggest that Hobbes thought that philosophy and rhetoric were ultimately compatible, if different, modes of argument. Or he may have intended to sequester rhetoric but failed to do so. This, certainly, was the view of many of Hobbes’s contemporary readers. If so, what do we make of this failure? What did Hobbes make of it, so far as we can tell? And what does this failure tell us about his political science? Raylor has given us an important and scrupulous account of Hobbes’s attitudes to rhetoric. It will remain for others to debate the significance of these attitudes in practice.

Willard van Orman Quine once remarked that people enter philosophy for one of two reasons: some are interested in the history of philosophy, and some in philosophy itself. Quine’s Harvard colleague Hilary Putnam claimed that what can be said in a nutshell belongs in a nutshell. Jane O’Grady’s *Enlightenment Philosophy in a Nutshell* casts doubt on both observations.

O’Grady’s book does not fall into the category of dry antiquarian intellectual history. Rather it steadfastly belongs to the kind of inquiry that engages with long-dead thinkers as if they were still our philosophical contemporaries. This genre presupposes (consciously or not) that the ideas of the great canonical philosophers of the past transcend their time and place and partake in the grand conversation of humankind, a conversation that is eternally present and universally worthwhile.

Typically, the authors of such histories acknowledge that the social and intellectual conditions from which the ideas of the great philosophers emerged are not of only trivial importance, but that the historical context has no pivotal bearing on the deeper, perennial matters they focus on.

It is relatively easy to mock such “histories”, or what Ian Hacking called the “pen-pal view” of the history of ideas. More often than not they are guilty of various sins of anachronism, from the most crude to the more subtle but no less flawed. But every so often this genre can produce something that manages to engage us despite its obvious shortcomings. *Enlightenment Philosophy in a Nutshell* is such a work.

Ideas of history

How to introduce a movement concisely

JOHNNY LYONS

Jane O’Grady

ENLIGHTENMENT PHILOSOPHY IN
A NUTSHELL
240pp. Arcturus. Paperback, £7.99.
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At first glance there appears to be nothing especially original or arresting about O’Grady’s book. Ostensibly a conventional and concise introduction to the central ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers, it conforms to the established pattern: beginning with the thought of Descartes and then moving swiftly to that of Locke, Spinoza, Berkeley, Hume and Kant. The only somewhat unexpected thinker to make the cut is Rousseau, who finds himself rather incongruously sandwiched between Hume and Kant. The book also includes familiar pictures of these great figures as well as unfamiliar yet fascinating illustrations from their times.

But there is nothing elementary about O’Grady’s primer. She pulls off the feat of writing a reliable and accessible introduction to modern philosophy that is also a meaningful contribution to the subject. She treats each of the long-deceased Enlightenment thinkers as interlocutors and then applies her skills as

a philosopher to explain and evaluate their core ideas in clear, precise and readable prose.

One of the results of her approach is that we are not presented with detached and soporific summaries of the main thoughts of each theorist: O’Grady wants to show us what is still alive in the ideas. For example, we are given an enviably clear account not just of the radically new and egocentric conception of philosophy put forward by Descartes but also of how the Cartesian emphasis on a first-person perspective transforms our understanding of the philosophical enterprise itself.

Inevitably, some of the philosophers emerge from her critical treatment as more interesting and important than others. The hero of her history is Hume, closely followed by Kant – she devotes two chapters to each in contrast to a single chapter on each of the other five. O’Grady’s analysis of Hume is particularly impressive and makes you want to re-read him with a renewed sense of energy and interest. She brings out the paradoxical character of his sceptical view of the world, revealing what makes his various paradoxes “infuriating but rich, ingenious and seminal”. One of the indirect lessons of her treatment of Hume’s brand of scepticism is that the epistemic value attributed to consistency by contemporary analytic philosophers would

appear to be somewhat exaggerated. Critical reconstructions of the other philosophers rarely fail to be anything less than genuinely curious and engaging, the arguable exception being the chapter on Locke, which feels just a little too perfunctory, even in a brief guide.

The undeniable success and appeal of this book raises a general question about the relationship between philosophy and its history. The contextual (sometimes called the “Cambridge”) school of the history of ideas argues that the more we succeed in recovering the actual meaning of historical texts, the more we converge on the insight that the past is a foreign country where things are done incomparably differently. Diametrically opposed is the more traditional, analytic, view of philosophy which plays down the otherness of the past and claims that there is a profound intellectual continuity between Plato and his descendants, including ourselves (the “pen-pal” view). Which of these competing perspectives should we opt for? Neither. We are better off keeping both perspectives in view. O’Grady’s work exemplifies the virtues as well as the vices of non-contextual, analytic “history” of philosophy, whereas, for example, the contribution of such distinguished intellectual historians as Quentin Skinner or Jonathan Israel displays the strengths and limits of an authentically historical approach to the history of ideas. The tension between history and philosophy (or perhaps, more accurately, historicity and truth) may be inescapable rather than resolvable or illusory. In any case, trying to create a truly enlightened world hasn’t ceased to be a good idea.