Hobbes’s choice

How a philosopher approached ideas

Raylor takes a brazenly 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 demonstrable 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 Ciceroan 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 Cicertean rather than Ciceroonian, 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 concludes 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 political...
ical philosophy as Hobbes imagined it, that is, “syllogistic reasoning on the basis of disambi
guished principles”. Parts One 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 intertext. Part Four, which details 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 incommen-
surably activities, even as they exist within the covers of the same book. This is because rhe-
toric has no role in the discovery of truth for Hobbes; its only role is to aid in the communi-
cation 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 inter-
ested in the inconsistency of Hobbes’s practice with his view of philosophy. He asserts that this practice is irrelevant to determining Ho-
bbe’s own summation of Part Two in chapter thirty-two of Leviathan when he claims to have derived the principles of gov-
ernment “from the Principles of Nature only; such as Experience has found true, or Consent [concerning the use of words] has made so” (my emphasis). What do we make of the obvi-
cious centrality of the problem of legal and political representation in Parts One and Two, which Hobbes compares to theatrical repre-
sentation 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 Hobbes 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 common-
wealth] is fear”. Finally, one could quarrel with Raylor’s insistence that the last two parts of Leviathan are not concerned with the exposition of Hob-
bes’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 sov-
ereign. Raylor’s project to demonstrate this 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 demon-
stration 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 noth-
ing contrary to reason and is perfectly compat-
ible with it; he also insists that we must not renounce our natural reason, which he equates with “the unbounded Word of God”, in expli-
cating 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, of the intentions of Hobbes’s own mind. While Raylor acknowled-

ges 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 Hob-
bes’s wittier 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 acknowledge-

gment 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’s rhetorical intentions and his phi-
tor, which are wittier and slyly oblique. But it is certainly, was the view of many of Hobbes’s con-
temporary 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 philos-
ophy 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 follow the tradi-
gory 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 con-
temporaries. This genre presupposes (con-
sciuously 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 power to explain the deeper, perennial matters they focus on.

It is relatively easy to mock such “histo-
ries”, 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 anchro-

nism, 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

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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 of 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 meaning-

ful 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 theo-
rist: 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 rad-
cially new and egocentric conception of phi-
losophy which plays down the otherness 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 what seems to be 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 sov-
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ing contrary to reason and is perfectly compat-
ible with it; he also insists that we must not 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 rela-
tionship between philosophy and its history. The context not only provides the “Can-
bridge”) view 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 incom-
parably differently. Diagonically opposed is the more traditional, analytic, view of philos-
ophy which plays down the otherness of the past and claims that there is a profound intel-
lectual continuity between Plato and his descendants, including ourselves (the “pen-
pal” view). Which of these competing perspec-
tives 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 exam-
ple, 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 inseparable rather than resolvable or illusory. In any case, trying to create a truly enlightened world hasn’t ceased to be a good idea.