

by Adrian Blau

Source:

Some scholars cannot see the wood for the trees. Noel Malcolm can see the wood, the trees, the birds and the bees. His attention to detail is staggering but he can also see how the details combine to create the big picture. The result is a critical edition of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* which will benefit scholars for far longer than the 25 years it took Malcolm to produce.

The edition comes in three volumes. I will start by discussing the introductory volume, which is an important contribution in its own right. I then turn to *Leviathan* itself, in the second and third volumes—books 1-2 and 3-4 of *Leviathan*, respectively. I will suggest that Malcolm’s critical edition, while a monumental achievement, might be worth supplementing with a shorter, lighter, ‘critical student edition.’

Volume 1 of Malcolm’s edition is a 200-page general introduction and a 125-page textual introduction. I will sidestep the excellent textual introduction, which covers *Leviathan*’s vexed printing history, the difficult question of which version was Hobbes’s preferred one, and how to deal with the variants. I focus instead on the general introduction.¹

Malcolm seems to distance himself from more extreme versions of Cambridge-school contextualism. Rather than reducing everything to historical context, Malcolm rightly sees Hobbes as both a contextual battler and a philosopher. Malcolm spots many similarities between apparently abstract comments by Hobbes and particular political and religious events in England and Scotland (pp. 22-51). But Malcolm is also emphatic that Hobbes had long-standing philosophical reasons for some arguments (pp. 13-20, 82).

Malcolm distances himself from the view that contextual analysis is all we need. “Investigating the political and biographical context of *Leviathan* may help to explain the timing of its composition, and may also elucidate some of its particular features.” But while “it may go some way towards explaining why Hobbes wrote in the way that he did, and when he did […] it is very far from exhausting the meaning of his work, or from explaining why Hobbes believed that what he wrote was true” (p. 82).

Malcolm may actually have gone a long way towards explaining why and when Hobbes wrote what he wrote. By a clever series of inferences (pp. 1-12, 52-59), Malcolm concludes that Hobbes began writing *Leviathan* in the late summer or early autumn of 1649, and “the speed and concentration of his work on *Leviathan*” imply he was “gripped by a powerful impulse to write the book” (pp. 8-9). What was this impulse? Malcolm takes seriously Hobbes’s

¹ In this review, all references to page numbers only are to volume 1 of Malcolm’s edition.
role as mathematics tutor to Prince Charles in Paris, and after much analysis, summarises his conclusion about why Hobbes wrote *Leviathan*:

At some point during the first year of Hobbes’s tuition of Prince Charles [1646-1647], after various conversations in which the Prince had asked him to express his opinions about psychological and political matters, Hobbes conceived the idea of writing an English-language text for the Prince's benefit, setting out his theories of human nature and political authority in an accessible way. With this purpose in mind, Hobbes also decided to add new material about various aspects of the workings of government and the state (p. 57).

Malcolm accepts that this conclusion is “rather speculative” due to “the fragmentary nature of most of the evidence” (p. 57). We should not see this as Malcolm making wild guesses. I explain elsewhere that Malcolm is a superb exponent of gathering as much historical evidence as he can, comparing different interpretations, and then—crucially—indicating how confident he is in his findings. In other words, he distinguishes between where he thinks a conclusion is all but certain, where it is likely, where two interpretations are plausible but one is stronger than another, and so on.² This is far better than presenting every conclusion with certainty, as with Leo Strauss.³

A second such example is Malcolm's useful contribution to the longstanding debate over how to interpret Hobbes's confusing “Table of the Sciences” in chapter 9 of *Leviathan*, which “does not correlate at all closely with Hobbes's other writings on the same topic [...]. The only possible explanation—inadequate though it is—for the inclusion of the anomalous table in Chapter 9 [...] is that this was something Hobbes had to hand because he had prepared it for rather different reasons” (pp. 143, 146). In effect, Malcolm rightly encourages us not to read much into the table.⁴

Another valuable contribution is Malcolm’s analysis of how Hobbes’s ideas developed before, during and after the writing of *Leviathan*. Differences between *Leviathan* and its predecessor, *De Cive*, include the “de-psychologising” of Hobbes’s account of obedience (p. 19), the downplaying of democracy (pp. 17, 20-21), and more emphasis on education of opinions (pp. 50-51). Hobbes even changed his mind while writing *Leviathan*. Unusually, he did not produce a whole draft and then amend it, but sent each chapter to the printers when he had written it. This means he could not change earlier chapters once they were finished. Indeed, the last chapters of *Leviathan* amend

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views from earlier in the book, on Independency and, in the final chapter, on obedience (pp. 61-82). This final chapter remains hard to interpret; Malcolm’s interpretation advances the debate but will not settle it.

Hobbes’s thought continued to evolve in his 1668 Latin translation of *Leviathan*. He had feared prosecution for heresy in the late 1660s (pp. 153-155), so it is striking that many of the changes in the Latin *Leviathan* led to “making his radical theology more radical still” (p. 180; see also pp. 194-195). Malcolm accurately captures the essence of Hobbes—a philosopher who, when challenged, did not compromise. He restated, clarified and improved his ideas, even if this made them less palatable.

I turn now to the text of *Leviathan* itself, and consider the strengths and weaknesses of Malcolm’s critical edition in relation to its competitors. Previous editions of *Leviathan* have all fallen short. The classic 1839 edition by Molesworth made “a large number of minor changes” to Hobbes’s text, “some positively mistaken” (p. 303). Scholars and students usually prefer modern editions such as Tuck’s or Curley’s, despite their imperfections (pp. 303-304). But curiously, the only previous effort at a critical edition, by Rogers and Schuhmann, failed dramatically (pp. 305-306). A key problem for all of these editions is knowing which edition of *Leviathan* to use. This reflects the extremely complex and sometimes illicit printing history of *Leviathan*. Uncovering what happened took Malcolm many years but he now presents a compelling case for his choices here (pp. 197-271). I cannot comment on the accuracy of Malcolm’s edition, but I suspect that it is as close to perfect as could have been achieved.

Two often-overlooked features will be useful to most readers. First, there is a superb 80-page index at the end of volume 3—significantly longer and more useful than the 15-page indexes in the Tuck and Curley editions. Second, each page of *Leviathan* has the chapter number at the top. This should be standard practice, but the editors of the Hackett and the Cambridge University Press editions of Hobbes’s *De Cive* forgot to do it, making those editions frustrating to use.

Malcolm’s most striking editorial decision was to include not only the original 1651 version of *Leviathan* but also Hobbes’s 1668 Latin translation. There has only been one other printing of the Latin *Leviathan* since 1841. Yet it is a valuable text: Hobbes made many instructive changes during the translation, which scholars increasingly use to understand Hobbes’s developing ideas. Malcolm’s edition facilitates such comparisons.

Nonetheless, the correct decision to include the Latin *Leviathan* has far-reaching consequences. The only practical solution was to place the English

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and Latin versions on opposite pages of this critical edition. (Where the two versions differ sufficiently, Malcolm adds explanatory footnotes.) This creates three inevitable problems. First, it can make the text look odd, especially in chapters absent from one of the English or Latin versions, where one side of the pages is simply empty. Second, the text can be a bit confusing to use. For example, there are up to five different kinds of footnotes on any given pair of pages, and Hobbes changed chapters 9, 46 and 47 so much that Malcolm has to translate the Latin versions on the right-hand side of the page too. Third, and most important, Malcolm’s edition constitutes three volumes of 1800 pages in total, which in hardback weighs 3.2 kg (7 pounds), currently costing $375 from the publisher. That makes the edition too heavy and too costly for all but libraries and Hobbes fanatics.

This critical edition is clearly not aimed at beginners. Volume 1 offers exciting new insights for Hobbes scholars, but no one new to Hobbes should start here. Students, in particular, would need an overview of Hobbes’s life and work, and a summary and assessment of *Leviathan*. Tuck’s short introduction in the Cambridge University Press edition serves students better in that respect. And I suspect that even Hobbes experts are likely to keep one hand on a more portable and user-friendly edition such as Tuck or Curley. Yet the Tuck and Curley editions, and their counterparts, have some problems too.

I thus hope that the publishers will produce a ‘critical student edition’ which uses Malcolm’s version of the English *Leviathan* and footnotes, excludes the Latin, and adds a more straightforward introduction. I hope that in such a future edition, paragraph numbers will be added. Some of us now think that this is the best way of referencing *Leviathan*: there are so many editions around that page numbers are increasingly unhelpful.

Overall, Noel Malcolm’s astonishing feat of scholarship finally gives us a critical edition of *Leviathan*, unifies the English and Latin texts, and makes significant substantive contributions to our understanding of Hobbes. But the edition is unwieldy, and there is still a gap in the market for a critical student edition of the English *Leviathan* with a more user-friendly introduction, taking advantage of Noel Malcolm’s superb ability to see the wood and the trees.

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