
What does Hobbes offer that is useful to us today? The editor of this book, Sharon Lloyd, has recruited a superb array of scholars to answer this question. The book has sixteen chapters, by both Hobbes specialists and non-Hobbes scholars. For reasons of space, I will focus on nine chapters: three which broadly succeed in getting contemporary insights from Hobbes (by Kinch Hoekstra, Jerry Gaus and Aaron James), three which fall a little short (by Eleanor Curran, Alice Ristroph and Maryam Qudrat), and three which are rather less effective (by Joshua Cohen, David Braybrooke and Neil McArthur).

It can be harder than we think to enlighten modern issues with historical ideas, I suggest. I thus conclude by offering an appropriately Hobbesian solution to the danger of overstating Hobbes’s contemporary relevance.


The late David Braybrooke’s five-page chapter builds on the Hobbesian idea of mutual expectations of mutual forbearance. Supporters and members of one political party, argues Braybrooke, should treat those of another party with respect; otherwise they risk deadlock, even civil war. I’m not convinced that disrespect is likely to cause civil war, though, or that greater partisan respect would have averted many past civil wars. Braybrooke’s examples, his language of ‘bipartisanship’, and his reference to ‘one party displac[ing] another peacefully’, also imply an American conception of party politics quite different to the more consensual and cooperative style found to greater degrees in many other countries. I like Braybrooke’s prescriptions but I do not find them especially Hobbesian or especially insightful for today.

After two disappointing chapters, Eleanor Curran fires the book into life with a careful, incisive and unorthodox reading of Hobbes on rights which, she argues, sidesteps some difficulties in contemporary rights theories. This is exactly the right approach for the book. However, the particular details of Curran’s argument do not convince me. She equates Hobbesian rights being grounded in liberty with Hobbesian rights being liberties (pp. 28, 31, 42–3), and likewise treats interest theories of rights as holding that rights are interests (p. 45). But for interest theorists, rights merely protect interests: interests ground rights only in the sense that certain interests justify particular rights under appropriate circumstances.1 So too for Hobbes, surely, as Curran indeed had previously argued: Hobbes’s ‘justification for the individual holding such

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rights is that it is in her vital interest to do so, because the protection of certain liberties are necessary for the possibility of peace and a commodious life’. Curran also imputes a liberty theory of rights to Rawls (p. 47), but like Hobbes, Rawls is defending a right to liberties, consistent with an interest theory of rights.

Curran defends the contemporary relevance of Hobbes’s theory of rights partly because she takes the interest theory of rights to imply that all interests must become rights (p. 46). But that is too extreme a form of the interest theory. Ultimately, I am not convinced that Curran’s new interpretation of Hobbes is an advance on modern theories of rights.

Kinch Hoekstra challenges the common view that Hobbes saw humans as naturally equal, amassing textual evidence that Hobbes recognized normatively relevant natural inequalities (pp. 77–82). Hobbes’s insight for us, argues Hoekstra, is less the traditional view that we can destroy each other if we wish, and more that ‘we must acknowledge one another as equals because we will otherwise be inclined to destroy one another’ (p. 77, 108–12). This strikes me as a plausible reading of Hobbes and a sensible contribution.

A sensible contribution is not necessarily a significant contribution, though. And here Hoekstra faces something which is a problem for anyone trying to make Hobbes relevant today: Hobbes’s prime concern was avoiding a return to a state of nature, but in many parts of the world we have other concerns. In terms of avoiding a return to a state of nature, I suspect we learn more from Rorty, who emphasizes acknowledging each other as humans (probably a more useful idea in such situations than acknowledging each other as equals) and learning to feel others’ pain — a sentimentalist, Humean approach, not a Hobbesian one. 3

Jerry Gaus uses Hobbes and Locke to challenge public reason liberalism, the dominant liberal theory today. Gaus notes that ‘contemporary political philosophy is deeply impressed by its reinvention of the wheel’: Hobbes posed a strong challenge to a key form of public-reason liberalism, and Locke replied in two ways, one of which remains importantly undeveloped in contemporary liberalism. Gaus’s position is perhaps more Lockean than Hobbesian, and his final suggestion — Hobbes’s concern that disagreement may be too deep for reasonable agreement — certainly does not need to come from Hobbes. But Gaus does not pretend that the challenges and solutions are uniquely Hobbesian, and his chapter is a masterclass in using historical authors to probe important contemporary issues in a sophisticated way.

Neil McArthur’s chapter on Hobbes’s economic ideas is promising but ultimately a touch disappointing. McArthur overlooks equity, increasingly

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recognized as a central normative principle for Hobbes. Equity, alongside treating others equally, may be a better Hobbesian justification of welfare-state taxes than McArthur’s important, prudential reading of this aspect of Hobbes’s economics; but either way, the debate between normative and prudential justifications of welfarist policies would make a useful addition to this short chapter. McArthur also claims that the ‘central’ end of Hobbes’s state is ‘protecting people’s private liberty within the context of a free market’ (p. 181). Here I disagree with McArthur. I do agree that Hobbes can be read as a rational choice theorist (pp. 178–9), but I have concerns about the way that McArthur, like many commentators, refers to ‘rational deliberation’ (p. 179), which is an un-Hobbesian term.

Alice Ristroph argues that Hobbesian punishment is imperfectly legitimate, since the person being punished retains the right to resist. I see no contradiction here, but I like Ristroph’s view that today we punish too much. However, when she argues that we should avoid assuming that punishment is legitimate and focus more on seeing if punishment is justified rather than seeking justifications for punishment, I remain unconvinced that this is a Hobbesian insight, and I also worry that it may be a false dichotomy. I may be wrong here: to demonstrate this, Ristroph could give examples of authors who hold the latter view but not the former. Fleshing out the contemporary angle would help to justify the relevance of Hobbes today.

Maryam Qudrat’s chapter is refreshing: rather than straining to show Hobbes’s relevance today, she argues against him, specifically his educational theory. Hobbesian indoctrination would not give enough citizens enough attachment to the state, she argues. ‘Unless citizens can think critically about the regime, the regime will melt easily, since those who do not think critically cannot develop the principled commitments needed for stability.’ Here and elsewhere she uses the example of Afghanistan. ‘The Taliban was doomed to fall because it did not attract a principled commitment to itself’ (p. 234). Indeed, Qudrat shows that the Taliban abused the Koran and other Islamic texts to justify its position in ways that actually weakened it in the end, highlighting the danger of giving the state the power to interpret religious texts.

I’m sympathetic to Qudrat’s arguments and to her excellent use of a case study to test Hobbes’s normative theory. I wonder if she could have drawn on modern research to back up her claims about education and attachment, and she does not address the existing literature on Hobbes on education, which

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sometimes treats Hobbes more broadly and more favourably than she does. These small changes would have turned a strong chapter into a first-rate one.

Aaron James argues that Hobbes raises fundamental questions for international politics. We can read the state of nature as an assurance game, where uncertainty about how others will act gives us absolute liberty rights to defend ourselves. James argues that we should not let the abstractions of contemporary ideal theory ignore the normatively relevant fact that epistemic considerations about uncertainty affect what agents have reason to do. For James, uncertainty is particularly important at the global level, and he thus argues for questions of global justice to be tackled at the international rather than global/cosmopolitan level. This is a valuable contribution to a contemporary debate, although as with Gaus, it may not be as Hobbesian as it looks: much of the work in the chapter is done with the idea of an assurance game, which Hobbes may have been the first to use but which is certainly not unique to him, and much of the rest of the work is done by the idea of a global state of nature, an idea which needs careful handling. But I don’t think this affects the broader thrust of James’s argument.

The book’s index is more quarter-hearted than half-hearted. Even the introduction is sketchy: the summaries of the book’s chapters start in the fourth paragraph. More problematic is the lack of a concluding chapter summarizing those areas where Hobbes is relevant today — and, importantly, where he is not. Such a concluding chapter would have made up for the overly strong claims of several chapters, and of Lloyd’s introduction in particular, where she declares that the answer to whether Hobbes has anything to say to us today is ‘a resounding “Yes!”’ (p. xi). I don’t think this is borne out, and in some chapters the ‘Yes!’ is more confounding than resounding. In every chapter discussed above, a bit or a lot more work is needed to show that insights are actually Hobbes’s or that these insights are useful today. Demonstrating contemporary relevance in historical texts is often harder than it seems.

An appropriately Hobbesian strategy would thus have been to inform chapter-writers that an impartial arbitrator would be commenting even-handedly on claims about contemporary relevance, at the conference out of which this book grew, and in the book’s final chapter. Such an experience would not be very pleasant, and one would want to avoid a situation where the book’s own editor demolishes one of the chapters, but such an approach would have put the fear of a mortal god into chapter-writers and might have encouraged more expounding and less resounding. The result would have been a more nuanced

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analysis of what is and is not of contemporary relevance in Hobbes, and would have been a fitting review and conclusion to the already high-class and often top-class scholarship in this book. Instead, we have a book which will certainly interest Hobbes scholars but which still leaves question-marks about the importance of Hobbes today.

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Carnes Lord states in the introduction to his translation of Aristotle’s Politics of 1984 that Aristotle’s political thought provides an invaluable perspective on the problematic currents of modern social science. Certainly, Lord contributed to raising scholarly interest in Aristotle with his groundbreaking translation. Now, nearly thirty years later, we are presented with a new edition of his original translation that differs fundamentally in its layout and to a minor extent in its content. The major changes in the format are from endnotes to footnotes and a generally more open and spacious text format. The choice of footnotes will doubtless help students, scholars and interested readers to solve problems of textual analysis and interpretation more quickly and in the process of reading the text. This new format was chosen prudently, since it highlights Lord’s thorough-going revision, not only of the choice of words and concepts but also of the footnotes, by paying even more attention to detail and referencing new scholarly debates. Lord’s revision extends to both the main text and the footnotes. The contents have changed slightly, however noticeably: at the beginning with the change of title from ‘The Politics’ to ‘Aristotle’s Politics’, with variations at the end of the introduction; and by replacing words in the main text e.g. ‘partnership’ with ‘community’ (pp. 1 ff.), ‘to participate’ with ‘to share’ (pp. 5 ff.) or ‘possession’ with ‘property’ (pp. 6 ff.), to name only a few. Lord is justified in making these changes — they are adjustments for the sake of clarification. In fact, the changes do not affect the interpretation of Lord’s translation but instead further elucidate the original text and improve fluidity in the reading process. Thus, Lord succeeds in heightening his original translation by honing in on certain expressions and sharpening passages in favour of readability and better access to the text. The insightful and useful details of the first edition, such as the analysis of the