

Hobbes in the Context of Modern Political Thought
As
Interpreted by Oakeshott, Strauss and Voegelin

Timothy Fuller

The thought of Thomas Hobbes is a living force in philosophic reflection on modern politics. Yet many insist that an era of political philosophy, roughly beginning with Hobbes, is at an end or rapidly approaching it. To speak generally, but within the framework of much contemporary discourse, it is “liberalism” which is in crisis and specifically the “liberalism” which traces its habits of utterance and action back, to Hobbes.

The three twentieth century political thinkers I propose to consider here – Michael Oakeshott, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin – have each responded to this situation. They each have made it a central object of their political reflections. Each has at some stage of their work made the question of interpreting Hobbes a central issue, and for each the interpretation of Hobbes is a major indication of their respective characterizations of the fundamental political question of our own time, namely, the state of the liberal tradition. The interpretations they offer of Hobbes, and of the development of the history of modern political philosophy, indicate their aim to return to philosophic dialogue with past thinkers, contributing to the revival of political philosophy in the classic sense.

For Oakeshott, Strauss and Voegelin, interpreting Hobbes is a necessary part of exploring the fundamental questions of our time. This involves, among other things, clarifying the tension between millennialist optimism about the human capacity to shape our destiny and revulsion to the greatest modern claims of success, along with a deeply felt inability to distinguish between what is permanent and what is transitory in the human condition, a loss of faith in philosophy’s capacity to provide guidance in the very conditions which dramatize the need for such guidance. This tension expresses itself, for instance, in the question whether we can sustain liberal democracy if it is believed to have no foundation other than the habit of acceptance of the last few centuries.

The three thinkers discussed have each examined the modern problem from a perspective which is not bound to its typical expressions, involving a *skepsis* that looks

beyond “modernity.” Each, in acknowledging the positive achievement of liberal democracy, nevertheless act as friendly critics of liberal democracy.

To put it another way, Oakeshott, Strauss and Voegelin have each responded to the liberal tradition as a friend of liberalism from a philosophic perspective which demands a certain detachment from it. Not surprisingly, proponents of liberalism, not satisfied with detached friends, attack these thinkers as “conservative,” “old-fashioned,” “theological,” “reactionary,” and so on. Yet such attacks often defend the liberal tradition while suggesting that, under the influence of relativism and historicism, something is missing. A striking expression of this concern we find in remarks of Jurgen Habermas, certainly no reactionary, in his well-known dialogue with Joseph Ratzinger in 2004:

Does the free, secularized state exist on the basis of normative presuppositions that it itself cannot guarantee? This question expresses a doubt about whether the democratic constitutional state can renew from its own resources the normative presuppositions of its existence...¹

To seek clarification, a brief excursion into Hobbes’s work is in order: One critique of liberalism is that, for more than three centuries, it has been constituted in the idea of rights antecedent to government, promoting depoliticization or the demotion of the public realm in favor of the private realm. In response, it is argued that to advance in our time it is necessary to repoliticize our relations, or to reawaken the political by ideological commitment to an imagined and desired future.

To restate this, with Hobbes in mind, one might say that the liberal tradition sought to “dedramatize” the political life. That is, Hobbes sought to teach us how the private lives of individuals might become a source of greater drama and excitement for those individuals than the life of political action or public participation. That Hobbes sought to restrict severely the role of “private men” in the public realm was not merely an attack on “private men” as a source of disorder, which it was, but also an endorsement of their lives apart from the public realm.

To illustrate this one might refer to Hobbes's critique of religion in Chapter 12 which precedes the famous Chapter 13 of the *Leviathan* on "the natural condition of mankind." That criticism prepares the reader for the proper appreciation of Hobbes's argument to describe a science of practice counseling us to understand ourselves, to put aside frenzied curiosity which wastes time anticipating imagined future events, as if we did not have enough to do digesting the present. To come to terms with oneself one requires a realistic appraisal of the common features of human nature underlying the diversity of individual preferences. Hobbes tells us we should understand the "laws of nature" as prudential maxims of conduct which occur to us when we reflect on the perils of potential warlike conditions always lurking in human relations; they threaten because we necessarily start from our own individual interpretations of the world; and there are no universally agreed-upon final purposes or supernatural ends to direct the practice of those rational maxims.

In the structure of the *Leviathan*, the discussion of the difference of manners among men, and of religious conflict, precedes consideration of the "natural condition of mankind." The natural condition is to be seen clearly only when it is no longer thought that the concerns of the "old moral philosophers," nor that settling arguments about the meaning of life, are essential to its elucidation. Nothing must be required that cannot be confirmed in the experience of selves when considering themselves as selves among other selves. The "laws of nature" are maxims accessible to the individual human reason which pertain to the self in seeking to order its conduct in relation to other selves.

What is discovered, of course, is not an answer to the question of the meaning of life, but instead the possibility that the conduct of the affairs of selves in relation to each other can be managed intelligently and made regular without having to answer questions about the *summum bonum* or *finis ultimus*. Specifically, what is clarified is the possibility of "self" regulation. Yet the "general inclination of all mankind" is the desire for power after power. "And the cause of this, is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight, than he has already attained to; or that he cannot be content with a moderate power: but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more."²

Out of this tension arise the aggregated customs of utterance, or habits of expression, constituting the society of mankind, bound together not by a bond of truth, or perpetual certitude, but by a compulsion to explore, through the movements of the tongue, the possibilities proposed by selves to themselves and others, and by the emergence of some possibilities as more plausible than others. Nothing absolves the society of mankind from repeated alteration, making and remaking, nothing in any proposal that precludes the thought of an alternative. To recognize this condition directs our attention to a remedy for the pridefulness of self-assertion by showing the prudential necessity of self-regulation, of controlling, without abandoning, self-assertion. There is permanent tension between the natural person, driven by passion, and the civil person which human beings must make themselves into through reasoning correctly about the natural condition. We are both the matter to be shaped and the makers of that shape. Hobbes offers the *Leviathan* as a guide to thinking through these issues carefully and systematically.

What we speak is less than the whole of what could be said. The choice of utterance depends on the “discretion” of the speaker.³ It is the speaker’s judgment of the appropriate thing to say that propels human discourse, what Hobbes calls the “conversation of mankind.” The sanity of discourse appears not by adhering to a fixed standard of what is to be said, but by the exhibition of steadiness or “direction to some end.”⁴ Thus, the character of the speaker lies in directing to some end the flow of possibilities that constitutes his existence, limited only by the speaker’s imagination, and what his experience of time and place, and what he understands of the other selves present, seem to permit.

Discourse is to be restrained or prudential, for in expressing oneself in the hope of engaging others, one also conceals what seems impermissible to say here and now. What is not permitted here and now is not intrinsically impermissible, for the occasion may arise to draw out of the flow of the self’s experience, expressions previously not established as proper. Human beings will differ in the degree to which they feel comfortable with restraints prudence imposes upon the self which seeks constantly to show itself. The society of mankind, viewed as an aggregation of voices, a sort of discordant conversation, is a society of beings whose urge to self-assertion is always on

the verge of overreaching the bounds of prudence. Verbal expression under restraint is never wholly fulfilling of the desire of each to express himself – to propose to the “world” that *his* experience is significant.

And since “continual success in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continual prospering, is that men call *felicity*,”⁵ felicity is to be found in the discovery of openings in the conversation and society of mankind where the overflow of the possibilities of the self may safely make their appearance.

There is danger in this restless search for power after power, for it can become strong enough in some to make them extravagant in their passions, beset with madness. Such passion can result in pride or in dejection. Pride incites rage or fury, the inability to accept that others contradict one’s “vehement opinion of the truth of anything.”⁶ Or it may lead to dejection from which melancholy follows, a shrinking back from the world, perhaps a superstitious preoccupation with the mysteries presented by an unresponsive world.

The aggregation of customs of expression is stable just so far as a balance between the voices composing society prevails. Engagement in life is complicated; each of us must be what we are, nature makes no two of us alike, and every private wish is born and nourished at the expense of others. In the passions that distinguish us is the possibility of greatness, but also of madness. In our capacity to speak lies the possibility of expressing what is within, and expressing what is within reveals one’s character. What is common is a convenience, an accommodation, a contrivance always to be shored up and patched against the day that things might fall apart.

If self-knowledge makes possible self-regulation, there is no guarantee that it will. On the contrary, there is much in life to seduce us away from self-regulation. The flow of desires within, and the temptations without, conspire against us. We contend with ourselves, and the achievement of self-regulation is uncertain. On the one hand, one is pushed towards the peace and unity of a civil order composed of enforceable laws, a condition desirable for the security it provides to the self’s continual wish to explore itself, for the fruits of industry, and even for an intellectual life. On the other hand, one may be pushed towards that self-assertion which is the madness of the proud, or perhaps to the experience of self-forgetfulness in the “mob” incited by “eloquence.”

This polarity cannot disappear because there is no self-regulation which cannot be attacked as in some fashion, arbitrary, incomplete or unfulfilling. Yet it is not unreasonable that one might learn to find meaning and purpose within oneself, settling for recognition in the form of permission from without, a form of personal self-sufficiency, a way of showing oneself to have a task, a way of showing that one knows what is proper to oneself. Perhaps one can come to feel that knowing what is proper to oneself is a greater achievement than overpowering others (or submitting to them), since what others may believe is extraneous business that compromises the task of knowing oneself, and overpowering the others has little to do with elucidating or confirming what one knows or wishes to know.

Such a person may accommodate others in order to be left to his own devices. The impulse to do this suggests that one can learn to understand more deeply the individual that one by nature is and to embrace individual self-sufficiency. The task of managing individual experience can become intriguing. And, in one's devotion to giving oneself some direction, one may bring oneself to believe that one is immersed in a world of significance that does not depend on confirmation from others, requiring merely that they put up with it. This is Hobbes's radical individualism.

To see Hobbes's thought in this light is to see how it encourages the private search for meaning against the attempt to discover or assert it in the public realm, demanding affirmation from without. The highest achievement of civil order lies in creating a stable sphere of peace and freedom, values which are instrumental in empowering the pursuit of private ends. Equally, however, one sees the connection between this conception of the human condition and the critique that proceeds from the conviction that this view has only led to a disgusting "acquisitive egotism," the situation of "alienated man" (selfish and claiming rights) seeking "identification" in "community" (collectivization in the name of compassion or altruism), and the further contention that "individuality" is largely an illusion since groups, classes and nations are the constituting elements of one's identity, that all constitutions are crystallizations of power constellations favoring some, and that the favored are those who wish to "dedramatize" or "depoliticize" everyone else, and so on.

Oakeshott, Strauss and Voegelin understood both the dangers of excessive individualism, the perils of collectivism and threats to liberal democracy. In their varying responses to Hobbes they respond to Hobbes as a philosopher who maintained the ancient belief that thoughtful human beings could investigate seriously how they ought to live.

Strauss on Hobbes

Leo Strauss's work on Hobbes is well known and has long been an influential voice in Hobbes scholarship. The method of investigation for Strauss was to understand a thinker "as he understood himself" primarily through a careful analysis of the author's texts. Serious criticism of liberalism must respond to the most profound formulations of the concepts which lie at the heart of the historical phenomenon in question, and this means that adequate criticism of liberalism depends on carefully considering Hobbes's writings by offering a philosophical critique of the philosopher's thought. Because, in Strauss's opinion, "Hobbes achieved the foundation of liberalism,"⁷ an adequate assessment of liberalism requires an adequate critique of Hobbes. An adequate critique of Hobbes assumes at least the possibility that Hobbes cannot be simply superseded or rejected. If there are no undisputed answers to the fundamental questions of human existence, Strauss accepted that one has to argue for the standard by which one judges the thought of a thinker of the rank of Hobbes. By posing, as possible standards, alternative philosophical judgments to those of Hobbes one could hope to attain that larger perspective within which a judicious judgment of the modern situation is possible.

For example, in relation to Plato's *Republic*, Hobbes claimed to have a more "elegant" solution to the establishment of political order than Plato's by dispensing with the necessity of mathematics, but more importantly by dispensing with the "noble lie" through grounding the conviction of the necessity of political order on incontrovertible facts about the human passions observable by reflection to virtually all men if they take the trouble to think about it.⁸ Or, Aristotle recognized what Hobbes recognized: that law is necessary to produce a minimum standard for men to observe, but Aristotle, contrary to Hobbes, pointed to that which is above the political as a means to establish the limits of the political, whereas Hobbes pointed to what lies below the political in the unconquerable self-preserving instinct. "In this respect, Hobbes's criticism of Aristotle

can be defended, although at the same time a very difficult question is raised as to which reservation against the law would in the long run promote the more overt or the more beneficial resistance to the law.”⁹

For Strauss, such basic questions have no easy answers, although one may discover in oneself an inclination to one or another alternative. Nor would this be without its practical consequences: Approaching the fundamental issues in this way, Strauss hoped to revivify the ancient notion that politics is pre-eminently a realm of opinions about how we ought to live and about what purposes, aims, goals or interests we may reasonably pursue in each other’s presence. Hobbes is a powerful voice in elucidating what is to be thought about in serious thought upon politics. Hobbes’s response to the fundamental political questions preserves participation in the inquiries of classical political philosophy. He pursued a philosophic understanding of politics which cannot be reduced merely to debate over policy preferences. For Strauss, “Hobbes was indebted to tradition for a single, but momentous, idea: he accepted on trust the view that political philosophy or political science is possible or necessary.”¹⁰

Hobbes is not, for Strauss, merely the prelude to imaginative constructions of progressive projects for the future; rather, it opens the possibility to reconsider standards of moral judgment, an inquiry Hobbes accepted, but also to question Hobbes’s departure from ancient standards of natural right for a different standard. Hobbes identified political philosophy “with a particular tradition [that] the noble and the just are fundamentally distinguished from the pleasant and are by nature preferable to it...there is a natural right that is wholly independent of any human compact or convention; or, there is a best political order which is best because it is according to nature. He identifies traditional political philosophy with the quest for the best regime.”¹¹ And “By tacitly identifying political philosophy with the idealistic tradition, Hobbes expresses, then, his tacit agreement with the idealistic view of the function or the scope of political philosophy...he agrees with the Socratic tradition in holding the view that political philosophy is concerned with natural right...Hobbes rejects the idealistic tradition on the basis of a fundamental agreement with it”¹² What Strauss means by this is made clear in the following assessment of how the liberal tradition has evolved:

“At the bottom of the passionate rejection of all ‘absolutes,’ [there is a] particular interpretation of natural right according to which the one thing needful is respect for diversity or individuality...When liberals became impatient of the absolute limits to diversity or individuality that are imposed even by the most liberal version of natural right, they had to make a choice between natural right and the uninhibited cultivation of individuality. They chose the latter...But it is practically impossible to leave it at the equality of all preferences or choices.”¹³

Strauss in other contexts drew a sharp contrast between those loyal to ancient wisdom seeking restoration against decline -- and the “progressive man” who seeks liberation:

Progressive man...looks back to a most imperfect beginning...Progressive man does not feel that he has lost something of great, not to say infinite, importance; he has lost only his chains...The life which understands itself as a life of loyalty or faithfulness appears to him as backward, as being under the spell of old prejudices...To the polarity faithfulness-rebellion, he opposes the polarity prejudice-freedom.¹⁴

The tension Strauss describes makes politics seem to many a peculiarly unsatisfying activity; even if politics is unavoidably necessary, it seems irredeemably flawed. On the other hand, politics is the activity in which different kinds of people, living in close contact with each other, seek to make themselves creditable to each other. In this need for mutuality is an important element of our humanity. We can be both repulsed by, and attracted to, the world of politics.

What is important is not a hoped-for perfection that has never yet been achieved anywhere in the world; what is important is to draw out of this confusing experience the elements of an understanding of what it means to be a human being, and what is best for such a being; granted that we enjoy natural liberty, what then is the right order for a set of such beings? In the political world where what was thought false yesterday may be thought true today and false again tomorrow, it is not surprising to feel baffled in trying

to establish an enclave of stability and permanence. It is hard to avoid the thought that everything is either coming into being and not yet intelligible, or is intelligible only as it is beginning to exhaust its potential. The multiplicity of attitudes, sects, judgments, opinions, laws and customs might teach us some moderation about our own judgments, neither to despise nor overrate them. It does not follow, for Strauss, that, because there is a dizzying variety of opinions, there are no better or worse opinions. On the contrary, the fact of this infinite variety is the starting point of reflection in quest of the best or right opinions, discovering really worthwhile opinions, distinguishing the sound from the unsound, the excellent from the base.

It is a widespread prejudice that the basis for such discriminations is hopelessly absent. To accept uncritically that assumption is already to have made up one's mind on the most important issue. For Strauss, the serious person will note the magnitude of the consequences that follow from such a conclusion: If we cannot refer to values pertaining to all of us, we may well develop doubts about each other and ourselves.

We may say there is no "right" that transcends time and place, that all is conventional. Yet, at the same time, we continue to speak of unjust laws or decisions. Many people today hold the view that standards are only operative ideals emergent in and shaped by our culture; but all societies have their ideals, cannibal societies no less than others. And if it is assumed that ideals are in a process of constant alteration, nothing but habit prevents accepting alterations in the direction of cannibalism.¹⁵

Though we may suppose there to be no standard higher than the functional ideals of one's society, we can and do still question such ideals, or dispute their proper interpretation, which suggests that we are not altogether in servitude to society. We can seek standards with reference to which we can judge the ideals of our own and of other societies. That standard cannot be found only in the needs of the various societies, for societies have many needs which conflict with one another. The problem of priorities will arise and point to the necessity of a standard of reference for distinguishing genuine and fancied needs, and for determining the rank of needs. The task of resolving conflicts among felt needs is unguided if we do not or cannot gain knowledge of "natural right."

This critique of liberalism poses, in the manner of Socratic irony, a questioning of the story of the unfolding of freedom, rationality and increasing technical prowess. To

the extent that the modern predicament involves a deep-seated inability to exempt highly regarded values from the status of subjective preference, belief in them is contingent, raising the possibility that we cannot observe them wholeheartedly or without a guilty feeling.

For Strauss these are political questions in the deepest sense. He was driven to the conclusion that to abandon the search for acceptable answers to the decisive political questions is tantamount to abandoning the search for humanity itself. Politics is a distinctive human activity, and, as such, it reminds us of our limits as well as our possibilities. It may be exciting but not necessarily endearing. Nevertheless, it is the place where we confront permanent human questions among which the question whether there is anything just or right.

To dismiss political activity is not only frivolous but also, in the long run, impossible. The issues can be suppressed for a time but they inevitably reemerge since their presence is unavoidable. Strauss thus arrived at the conclusion that politics, even if unknowingly, encourages the desire for philosophy, or that the clash of opinions points beyond itself to the question of the right opinions, to the question, Is anything unqualifiedly right and can we articulate it in words?

For Strauss, politics, far from being trivial, or purely instrumental, is among the most important of human things. Instead of the depressing conclusion that political activity is the display of humanity tending towards the lowest level, Strauss thought he had compelling reasons for thinking that the very meaning of life is intimated in the political engagement even if that meaning is elusive.

This conclusion offers a critique of liberalism as Strauss saw it in our time, and led him to critique Hobbes as one of the primary progenitors of modern liberal thought particularly in his redefinition of natural right as a liberty rather than a duty. Strauss thought this eventually promoted uncontrolled individualism. At the same time, one can respect Hobbes's thought in that he put forward a fundamental alternative within political philosophy in responding to his ancient predecessors because he thought that the theorization of political life is a source for human wisdom about human predicaments.¹⁶

For Strauss, Hobbes inaugurated a revision of classical political philosophy that remained true in part to classical political philosophy's aims. Subsequent revisions of

Hobbes's revision, which together compose the story of modern political philosophy, have carried thought further from the proper appreciation of the fundamental questions of politics (for example, by failing to distinguish the "just" from the "pleasant"). Strauss saw the current political situation of the West as one of crisis,¹⁷ and he preferred Hobbes to developments that proceeded after Hobbes, but in so doing he came to the conclusion that the proper assessment of Hobbes depends not on subsequent revisions or radicalizations of Hobbes, but on engaging Hobbes in the context of classical political philosophy. In sum, to enter a fundamental debate between Hobbes and his predecessors will yield more insight than concentrating only on the use his intellectual descendants have made of Hobbes.

Voegelin on Hobbes

Voegelin's essay on Hobbes in *The New Science of Politics*¹⁸ seeks to clarify the crisis of modern politics describing what Hobbes achieved and what he failed to achieve. At the time Voegelin wrote this chapter on Hobbes (1951) he was in the process of developing a general account of the history of political philosophy from a perspective markedly different from that normally employed by writers of standard histories of political thought. The "new science" was to clarify both the nature of the modern political situation and the reason for its emergence from what preceded it. This effort came on the heels of his abandonment of a massive project to write a chronological history of modern political thought in the conventional way (part of which was published as *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 1975 and later in the *Collected Works*).

For Voegelin, the history of Western civilization turned on the unfolding awareness of the human condition as what he called, following Plato, the "metaxy" or the "in between" condition of man, involving intense experience of the tension between the human and the divine (the incomprehensible "beyond") marked by two primary high points of theorization in departing from the idea of cosmic truth. The first was the elaboration of what he called the "anthropological principle" or the "anthropological truth" exemplified in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle; the second he called the "soteriological truth" conveyed to us through the intense Christian experience of the

presence of the divine beyond on earth which, for Voegelin, was a continuation and deepening of an experiential insight earlier clarified by Plato.

A political society is “not only a microcosmos but also a macanthropos” the awareness of which leads both to an interpretation of society and a critique of it. Every society “reflects the type of men of whom it is composed...cosmological empires consist of a type of men who experience the truth of their existence as a harmony with the cosmos” whereas in the polis there appears the philosophic type who sees “the true order of man” is a “constitution of the soul” and the true order of the soul becomes the standard “for measuring and classifying the empirical variety of human types as well as the social order in which they find their expression.”¹⁹ “The theorist is the representative of a new truth in rivalry with the truth represented by society” since the discovery of the soul occurs in the opening to transcendence which prepares the way for the experience of “soteriological truth” involving the intensification of the experience of the tension between the divine and the human.²⁰

The experience of the divine presence on earth, however, rather than bringing heaven down to earth, actually intensified awareness of the difference between the “heavenly” and the “earthly” cities. According to Voegelin, the gradual triumph of Christianity meant the “dedivinization” or demotion of the immanent world inducing in turn repeated efforts to “redivinize” it: “by de-divinization shall be meant the historical process in which the culture of polytheism died from experiential atrophy, and human existence in society became reordered through the experience of man’s destination, by the grace of the world-transcendent God, toward eternal life in beatific vision.”²¹

“Modern re-divinization has its origins rather in Christianity itself, deriving from components that were suppressed as heretical by the universal church.”²² In Voegelin’s view, the modern political problems stem from a tension inherent within Christian civilization. The tension is between the continued acceptance of the experiential distance of the human from the divine as a limit on the human condition which no effort of unaided man (without grace) can repair, and the attempt to perfect our condition – to erase the tension -- through human action. This tendency, present in Christianity from the beginning, was pushed into the background by the tour de force of St. Augustine’s *City of God*: “This left the church as the universal spiritual organization of saints and sinners

who professed faith in Christ, as the representative of the *Civitas Dei* in history, as the flash of eternity into time. And correspondingly it left the power organization of society as a temporal representation of man in the specific sense of a representation of that part of human nature that will pass away with the transfiguration of time into eternity. The one Christian society was articulated into its spiritual and temporal orders. In its temporal articulation it accepted the *conditio humana* without chiliastic fancies, while it heightened natural existence by the representation of spiritual destiny through the church.”²³

In the Augustinian conception of history, direction occurs in the realm of sacred history, not in profane history which is the story of the rise and fall of nations and empires. Increasingly, however, beginning with Joachim of Flora in the twelfth century, a distinctly modern theoretical problem has come to the fore: whether, as Voegelin puts it, history has an “*eidos*.”²⁴ To Voegelin the answer is obvious: There can be no *eidos* of history because we can possess no demonstrable knowledge of history’s final outcome, and thus all claims about the final meaning of history are purely speculative. “The attempt at constructing an *eidos* of history will lead into the fallacious immanentization of the Christian eschaton.”²⁵

To Voegelin this point is so obvious that those who have repeatedly committed themselves to this fallacious activity must be blinded by a “drive in their souls” which led them to search for a “certainty about the meaning of history, and about their own place in it, which otherwise they would not have had.”²⁶ It is worth quoting Voegelin’s description of the situation at some length:

The feeling of security in a ‘world full of gods’ is lost with the gods themselves; when the world is de-divinized, communication with the world-transcendent God is reduced to the tenuous bond of faith in the sense of Heb. 11:1, as the substance of things hoped for and the proof of things unseen. Ontologically, the substance of things hoped for is nowhere to be found but in faith itself; and, epistemologically, there is no proof for things unseen but again this very faith. The bond is tenuous indeed, and it may snap easily. The life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, guilt and despondency, contrition and repentance, forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace, trembling on the verge of a certainty which if gained is loss – the very lightness of this fabric may prove too heavy a burden for men who lust for massively possessive experience. The danger of a breakdown of faith to a socially

relevant degree, now, will increase in the measure in which Christianity is a worldly success, that is, it will grow when Christianity penetrates a civilizational area thoroughly, supported by institutional pressure, and when, at the same time, it undergoes an internal process of spiritualization, of a more complete realization of its essence. The more people are drawn or pressured into the Christian orbit, the greater will be the number among them who do not have the spiritual stamina for the heroic adventure of the soul that is Christianity; and the likeliness of a fall from faith will increase when civilizational progress of education, literacy, and intellectual debate will bring the full seriousness of Christianity to the understanding of ever more individuals.”²⁷

The end result of this “attempt at immanentization of the Christian eschaton” has been the stupendous release of human energies for the building of material civilization “because on their fervent application to intramundane activity was put the premium of salvation.”²⁸ “The resources of man that came to light under such pressure were in themselves a revelation, and their application to civilizational work produced the truly magnificent spectacle of Western progressive society. However fatuous the surface arguments may be, the widespread belief that modern civilization is Civilization in a pre-eminent sense is experientially justified; the endowment with the meaning of salvation has made the rise of the west, indeed, an apocalypse of civilization.”²⁹

But this new revelation is the harbinger of the death of the spirit: “The more fervently all human energies are thrown into the great enterprise of salvation through world-immanent action, the farther the human beings who engage in this enterprise move away from the life of the spirit. And since the life of the spirit is the source of order in man and society, the very success of a Gnostic civilization is the cause of its decline. A civilization can, indeed, advance and decline at the same time – but not forever. There is a limit toward which this ambiguous process moves; the limit is reached when an activist sect which represents the Gnostic truth organizes the civilization into an empire under its rule. Totalitarianism, defined as the existential rule of Gnostic activists, is the end form of progressive civilization.”³⁰

This bleak picture, analogous to Strauss’s description of the “crisis of the West,” prepares the way for Voegelin’s description of Puritanism in the English Reformation as a movement producing a prototype of the modern intellectual: The man with a “cause” who repeatedly criticizes the social ills and the upper classes, thus appearing to be

particularly full of integrity, zeal and holiness because he is so deeply offended by evil, and who provides reasons to believe that it is government action or inaction, rather than human frailty, which is the culprit.

In Voegelin's view, the Anglican Richard Hooker provided the perfect description of this new intellectual phenomenon, and Hobbes provided the restatement of the theory of representation which clarified the political problem (tension between representation of one's historical situation and representation of what is transcendentally true) and offered a solution to it. Voegelin summarizes Hobbes' views:

The Hobbesian theory of representation cuts straight to the core of the predicament. On the one hand, there is a political society that wants to maintain its established order in historical existence; on the other hand, there are private individuals within the society who want to change the public order, if necessary by force, in the name of a new truth. Hobbes solved the conflict by deciding that there was no public truth except the law of peace and concord in a society; any opinion or doctrine conducive to discord was thereby proved untrue.³¹

According to Voegelin, the structure of Hobbes's argument is as follows: Reason makes man understand the necessity of peace and thus the necessity of civil government to achieve that peace and to enjoy worldly happiness; the obligatory force of this reasonable dictate, however, must be believed to be a divine command (he cites *Leviathan*, chs. 15 & 31); once this dictate of reason is seen as a law proceeding from God it remains to put the law into action by actually combining into a civil society under a public representative. "Only when they have covenanted to submit to a common sovereign, has the law of nature actually become the law of a society in historical existence."³² As Voegelin sees it, then, Hobbes's aim is to theorize political representation in such a way as to conflate the historical actuality of a society with the realization of the dictates of reason understood as the commands of God: "the covenanting members actualize the divine order of being in the human sphere."³³

The result so far is the creation of an empty vessel which is nevertheless an actualization of the divine. The vessel is filled by a reinterpreted Christianity which cannot be in conflict with the civil order. Voegelin now raises the question: "How can the Christian *theologia supranaturalis* be established as a *theologia civilis*?"³⁴

Voegelin proposes an answer to this question by reference to a polarity that is deeply embedded within the Christian tradition. For Voegelin, thinkers like St. Augustine “understood Christianity as a truth of the soul superior to polytheism but did not recognize that the Roman gods symbolized the truth of Roman society...that an existential victory of Christianity was not a conversion of individual human beings to a higher truth but the forceful imposition of a new *theologia civilis* on a society. In the case of Hobbes the situation is reversed. When he treats Christianity under the aspect of its substantial identity with the dictate of reason and derives its authority from governmental sanction, he shows himself as oddly insensitive to its meaning as a truth of the soul as were the Patres to the meaning of the Roman gods such as a truth of society.”³⁵

Thus, Voegelin attempts to show that the opposition or polarity – between the “truth of society” and “openness to the transcendent” – came to be a permanent feature of the human situation in the West at least from the time of Plato but elaborated with a peculiar insensitivity in Christian thought with the result that the Church found herself in constant oscillation between its spiritual aims and its earthly realities culminating in the religious civil wars.³⁶

Hobbes sought to construct a civil theology beyond debate because he recognized that public order required it; “it is the great and permanent achievement of the *Leviathan* to have clarified this point.”³⁷ But, at the same time, Hobbes’s solution to the fundamental political problem involved the claim to have discovered a way of ending the tension between the “truth of the soul” and the “truth of the society.” He saw himself as a new Plato with a “new truth” to inculcate into the people. By proper education there might be hope for an everlasting constitution.

Voegelin both praises and blames Hobbes for his accomplishments. On the one hand, Hobbes is to be praised for his clear identification of the need of the “truth of society” against the apocalyptic tendencies in Christianity. On the other hand, Hobbes is to be criticized for his attempt to solve the problem of the “truth of society” by uniting it with the “truth of the soul.” In this respect, Hobbes reveals the influence upon him of habits of thought which seek to discover the transcendent only immanently. The attempt to end the differentiation of human experience by bringing the tension to a close shows,

as far as Voegelin is concerned, that Hobbes, in part at least, succumbed to the most dangerous tendency of modern political thought. He concludes:

The idea of solving the troubles of history through the invention of the everlasting constitution made sense only under the condition that the source of these troubles, that is, the truth of the soul, would cease to agitate man. Hobbes, indeed, simplified the structure of politics by throwing out anthropological and soteriological truth. This is an understandable desire in a man who wants his peace; things, to be sure, would be so much simpler without philosophy and Christianity. But how can one dispose of them without abolishing the experiences of transcendence which belong to the nature of man?³⁸

One might summarize Voegelin's view of Hobbes's accomplishment by saying that Hobbes reawakened an essential part of the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle in his attention to the problem of civil theology, but unfortunately sought to go to the extreme of ending the tension between the divine and the human, the eternal and the temporal, and thus falls into the category of modern thinkers who have repeatedly sought to supersede the insights of classical and Christian philosophy essential to the proper theorization of the human condition. For Voegelin, modern liberalism, descending from Hobbes, has found its civil theology in millennialist doctrines of progress, more or less activist or virulent, centering on the preoccupation with perfecting the human condition. From this standpoint, the history of the modern period in the West is the story of incessant projects to make good on the claim that the "truth of society" can be an adequate actualization of whatever ancient claims have been made about the destiny of the human soul, what later came to be known as the "religion of humanity."

This is a paradoxical result of Hobbes's theoretical accomplishments. Hobbes accepted that any order might do if it secured the existence of society. To make this valid he created a new idea of man, conceiving human nature as seeking fulfillment in existence itself; a purpose for human beings transcending existence itself was to be denied. Hobbes countered the Gnostic immanentization of the eschaton which endangered existence by a radical immanence of existence which denied the eschaton.

To put this somewhat differently, Hobbes attempted to show the possibility of discovering the divine in the civil order, thus ending the tension between the eternal and

the temporal, but that in so doing he equally was compelled to eliminate the experience of the beyond as a “destiny” or “destination” so that the “everlasting constitution” would be “ever-present.” In turn, he analyzed the psychology of religious zeal, arriving at the general conclusion that a theory of the rank of the objects of passion was foreclosed (although it is true that he criticized the pursuit of “wealth, command or sensual delight”). In this respect, his reliance on the idea of the contractual origin of civil society is to be understood as a useful vehicle through which to depict a “psychological transformation” in the individual who grasps Hobbes’s teaching and is thus on the threshold of the “real unity” achieved under the “mortal god.” The *Leviathan* aims to teach us to think of ourselves in a new way.

The paradoxical legacy of Hobbes’s teaching arises because there is inevitably a discrepancy between the theoretically imagined coincidence between the divine and an historically existent social order, and the actuality of human experience. This led to repeated attempts to rearrange human affairs so as to end the embarrassment of a continually reappearing disjunction in our experience. In short, the tension of human existence, theorized fully by classical and Christian philosophy, comes back to haunt men committed to the idea that such tension should no longer be integral to their experience, and that it is undignified to be forced to acknowledge that an essential element of human experience points beyond human beings and limits their self-constituting aspirations.

For Voegelin, Hobbes preserved aspects of the traditional conception of the ordinary or common sense experience of life, but he did so only up to a point. The point is reached when the tension between the divine and human is presented as overcome, and is to be understood as a choice on Hobbes’s part to respond to the theological and religious controversies of his time not by an attempt to rekindle the traditional (Platonic/Augustinian) understanding, but by seeking to supersede it and thus to refound thought about the human condition in such a way as to preclude the dangers inherent in the Christian heritage as revealed in the Reformation. In fact, Hobbes did not succeed in this enterprise. Subsequent events have shown that the experience of this tension cannot disappear. The depoliticization or dedramatization of the human condition with respect to ultimate meaning, has been at best intermittently, momentarily successful, and is likely to

be less successful to the degree that faith in the perfection of the human condition in the material sphere declines into disillusionment.

Oakeshott on Hobbes

In a passage from his famous 1946 “Introduction” to the *Leviathan*, Oakeshott renders a judgment which he never altered: “The *Leviathan* is the greatest, perhaps the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language. And the history of our civilization can provide only a few works of similar scope and achievement to set beside it. Consequently, it must be judged by none but the highest standards and must be considered only in the widest context. The masterpiece supplies a standard and a context for the second-rate, which indeed is but a gloss; but the context of the masterpiece itself, the setting in which its meaning is revealed, can in the nature of things be nothing narrower than the history of political philosophy.”³⁹

Oakeshott proceeds from this statement to elucidating political philosophy as an activity whose hallmark is “always the revelation of the universal predicament in the local and transitory mischief.”⁴⁰ For Oakeshott, there is a persistent task for political philosophy which is evident throughout the history of European civilization from the time of Plato, punctuated by what Oakeshott identified as “three great traditions of thought,” which constitute intelligible turning points within a civilization’s history. Demarcated as these moments are by Plato, Hobbes and Hegel, we are nevertheless not to understand that the earlier are superseded by the later. Indeed, “The first of these traditions is... coeval with our civilization; it has an unbroken history into the modern world; and it has survived by a matchless power of adaptability all the changes of the European consciousness.”⁴¹

Oakeshott sees the history of political philosophy as the unfolding of elements for discussion in an endless dialogue between philosophical voices which have discovered each other in the course of their ascent from the particularities of their time and place to the apprehension of fundamental questions of human existence. In the midst of this dialogue the masterpiece, when and if it appears, “springs from a new vision of the predicament; each is the glimpse of a deliverance or the suggestion of a remedy.”

It is clear, however, that Oakeshott means what he says in referring to a “glimpse”: the masterpiece is “the still center of a whirlpool of ideas which has drawn into itself numberless currents of thought, contemporary and historic, and by its centripetal force has shaped and compressed them into a momentary significance before they are flung off again into the future.”⁴² Such an achievement is, for Oakeshott, something beyond the polemical (even though it engenders fierce debate). “Philosophical reflection is... the adventure of one who seeks to understand in other terms what he already understands and in which the understanding sought (itself unavoidably conditional) is a disclosure of the conditions of the understanding enjoyed and not a substitute for it.”⁴³

This view informs Oakeshott’s discussion of the moral life in the writings of Hobbes. Hobbes was concerned to explore the “morality of individuality” given the fact that the “emergent human character of Western Europe in the seventeenth century was one in which a feeling for individuality was becoming preeminent.”⁴⁴ What distinguished Hobbes from his contemporaries “is not the idiom of the moral life he chose to explore, but the precise manner in which he interpreted this current sentiment...”⁴⁵

The discussion that follows concentrates on the use Oakeshott has made of Hobbes’s understanding of the morality of individuality to explicate what he considers the fundamental modern problem. In “The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes” (1960) Oakeshott developed the distinction to which he was to return in detail in *On Human Conduct* (1975): “In the morality of individuality...human beings are recognized (because they have come to recognize themselves in this character) as separate and sovereign individuals, associated with one another, not in the pursuit of a single common enterprise but in an enterprise of give and take, and accommodating themselves to one another as best they can: it is the morality of self and other selves.”⁴⁶

In the morality of the “common good,” by contrast, “Human beings are recognized as independent centres of activity, but approval attaches itself to conduct in which this individuality is suppressed whenever it conflicts, not with the individuality of others, but with the interests of a ‘society’ understood to be composed of such human beings. All are engaged in a single, common enterprise. Here the lion and the ox are distinguished from one another, but there is not only one law for both, there is a single

approved condition of circumstance for both: the lion shall eat straw like the ox. This single approved condition of human circumstance is called ‘the social good’, the ‘good of all’, and morality is the art in which this condition is achieved and maintained.”⁴⁷

One cannot help but notice the antipathy to the morality of the “common good” as Oakeshott describes it, nor can one ignore the symbolic meaning of “lion” and “ox.” If Oakeshott is still inclined to accept three great moments in the history of political philosophy – represented in Plato’s *Republic*, Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* – it is clear that the “morality of the common good” is not the necessary implication, as he states it here at any rate, from any one of them.

It is not a proper deduction from Plato’s *Republic* if one reads the *Republic*, as Oakeshott does, as the exploration of the limitations in this world of the Socratic quest for wisdom. The philosopher who ascends out of the shadows of the cave and, upon returning from his travels, brushes aside the “cave-understood conditionality of ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’ and were to insist that matters should be delayed while the question What is truth? was explored, or if he were to lecture judge and jury about the postulates of justice, those concerned might be expected to become a trifle restless. Before long the more perceptive of the cave-dwellers would begin to suspect that, after all, he was not an interesting theorist but a fuddled and pretentious ‘theoretician’ who should be sent on his travels again, or accommodated in a quiet home. And the less patient would be disposed to run him out of town as an impudent mountebank. In short, the cave-dwellers resent not the theorist, the philosopher ... but the ‘theoretician’, the *philosophe*, the ‘intellectual’; and they resent him, not because they are corrupt or ignorant but because they know just enough to recognize an impostor when they meet one.”⁴⁸ In short, the cave allegory endorses the quest for wisdom but also accepts the limits to that quest’s ability to transform the human condition.

Nor is it a proper deduction from Hegel’s political philosophy if that is understood, as I think Oakeshott understands it, as an addendum to the exploration begun by Hobbes of the morality of individuality. Thus the modern state is, conceptually, the instrument for encouraging the reconciliation of subjective desire (Hegel’s world in which “all are free”) with rational will in voluntary decisions that do not deny the reality of individuality, or suppress the fact that human relations are initiated in the sphere of

individual desires for satisfaction and for recognition in ways more or less compatible with each individual's self-understanding.

The morality of the "common good" Oakeshott sees rather as arbitrary attempts to bring the morality of individuality to a completion in collective identity. Revulsion at the spectacle of subjective individuality is generated among those who wish to "escape from freedom" dissatisfied with the Hobbesian civil order which is a "negative gift, merely making not impossible that which is desirable." Students of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* recognize in that work the many passages which can be read either to encourage the procedural interpretation, which is Oakeshott's, or the collectivist, Marxist interpretation which Voegelin accounts for in criticizing Hegel. In my view, this is a matter for each student of Hegel's thought to work out since there is no easy resolution.

As Oakeshott was wont to say in his 1933 work *Experience and Its Modes*, the world of practice is a world *sub specie voluntatis*, a world of the "wished-for" which is "not yet"; "practice is activity, the activity inseparable from the conduct of life and from the necessity of which no lining man can relieve himself."⁴⁹ In practical experience the "to be" which is "not yet" turns into the "ought to be" intimating fulfillment, coherence and release. The intimation of coherency brings forward the "to be" as what "ought to be" since if it did not it would be inexplicable that the current condition is unsatisfactory. It is a world of incompleteness constantly intimating, but never achieving, completion. The world of practice's distinctiveness consists in its mutability, its transiency, its constant exhibition of the desirability of what is "not yet," its insistence that the world is a world only *sub specie voluntatis*, while it is, nonetheless, driven by the hope of completion that would release volition into a world where the "not yet" loses its seductiveness.

Today's coherency "is merely preliminary to its transformation"⁵⁰ suddenly appearing as the not now acceptable consequence of yesterday's "not yet" which sought "to be." The world of practice is a world of endless change, tempted by the belief that there must be some transformation which would be once and for all. For Oakeshott, this temptation is always a mistake, and no one has given a more compelling account of its dangers than Hobbes. Oakeshott emphasized Hobbes's attack on pride, which connected Hobbes in his own way to the Augustinianism of pre-Reformation Christianity.

In a deeper sense, therefore, whereas Oakeshott spoke of three great moments in the history of political philosophy, there are, for him, really two: The ancient inauguration of political philosophy as such, and the achievement of the insight into the reality of individuality achieved as much by Hobbes as by any thinker. It is with Hobbes that the path towards clarifying the ideal of “civil association,” which Oakeshott later developed in *On Human Conduct*, is clarified and advanced. Yet Oakeshott saw this not merely as an ideal for it is deeply rooted in the European experience of the last five centuries, and the theorization of it in clear terms constitutes (Oakeshott’s intent in *On Human Conduct*) one of the greatest intellectual achievements of the modern European consciousness in its effort to understand itself.

The ideal has, however, also been an ordeal – the ordeal of self-consciousness. It has generated as its opposition the ideal of the “common good” which Oakeshott later characterized as the “universitas” or joint enterprise governed by “corporate purpose” under governors who are more like “managers” governing citizens who are more like “corporate workers” or “role-players.”

Thus, against the alleged supersession of Hobbes’s account of morality as individuality, Oakeshott defends it as an historical reality in what he called the “politics of skepticism” in dialectical opposition to the “politics of faith” or millennialist politics. In this formulation Oakeshott, like Strauss and Voegelin, has attempted his own delineation of the elements of the human condition which, to quote the Athenian Stranger, are “according to nature.” For him, as for the others, to expound the original, most powerful conception of the modern tradition against subsequent revisions of it, to understand and evaluate that tradition requires recognition of its foundation.

In each of these thinkers there is respect, while critical, towards a monumental philosophical aspiration. The proverbial buoyancy of the liberal tradition now is in need of sober friends who diagnose the dangers of liberalism misunderstanding itself. Oakeshott, Strauss and Voegelin attest to Hobbes’s significance by engaging him at the level of philosophic dialogue he deserves.

¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) and Jurgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization, On Reason and Religion*, Ignatius Press 2006, p. 21. Also “The encounter with theology can remind a self-forgetful, secular reason of its distant origins in the revolution in worldviews of the Axial Age.” In Jurgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing, Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, Polity Press 2010, p. 82.

² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. By Michael Oakeshott (Blackwell ed., Oxford, 1946), p. 64, (hereafter cited as *L*).

³ *L*, p. 43

⁴ *L*, p. 44

⁵ *L*, p. 39

⁶ *L*, p. 42

⁷ *The Concept of the Political by Carl Schmitt, With Comments on Schmitt's Essay by Leo Strauss*, transl., intro., and notes by George Schwab (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976), p. 105.

⁸ We must construct a political order as a “conscious construction.” “The world of our constructs is wholly unenigmatic because we are its sole cause and hence we have perfect knowledge of its cause...The world of our constructs is therefore the desired island that is exempt from the flux of blind and aimless causation.” Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1953; Sixth Impression, 1968, P.171 (hereafter cited as *NRH*).

⁹ Joseph Cropsey, *Political Philosophy and the Issues of Politics*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 307.

¹⁰ *NRH*, P.167

¹¹ *NRH*, P.167

¹² *NRH*, P.168

¹³ *NRH*, P.5

¹⁴ “Progress or Return?” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism, An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, selected and introduced by Thomas L. Pangle. University of Chicago Press, 1989. Pp. 229-30.

¹⁵ *NRH*, Introduction.

¹⁶ *NRH*, Pp. 167-170.

¹⁷ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Edition, 1978), Introduction.

¹⁸ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics, An Introduction*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), (hereafter cited as *NSP*).

¹⁹ *NSP*, Pp. 61-3

²⁰ *NSP*, Pp. 77-9

²¹ *NSP*, p. 107

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *NSP*, p. 109

²⁴ *NSP*, Pp. 119-120

²⁵ *NSP*, p. 121

²⁶ *NSP*, Pp. 121-122

²⁷ *NSP*, Pp. 122-123

²⁸ *NSP*, p. 130

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *NSP*, Pp. 131-132

³¹ *NSP*, p. 153

³² *NSP*, Pp. 153-4

³³ *NSP*, p. 154

³⁴ *NSP*, p. 155

³⁵ *NSP*, p.156

³⁶ *NSP*, Pp. 156-7

³⁷ *NSP*, p. 158

³⁸ *NSP*, p. 161

³⁹ *L*, Introduction, p. viii

⁴⁰ *L*, Introduction, p. xi

⁴¹ *L*, Introduction, p. xii

⁴² *L*, Introduction, p. xi

⁴³ *L*, Introduction, p. xii

⁴⁴ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. vii, (hereafter cited as *OHC*).

⁴⁵ *OHC*, *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Michael Oakeshott, “The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, New expanded edition, (Liberty Press, 1991), p. 298, (hereafter cited as *RIP*).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *RIP*, p. 297

⁴⁹ *OHC*, p. 27

⁵⁰ See the essay on the practical mode, in Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, (Cambridge University Press, 1933), passim. See also *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism* (Yale University Press, 1996).