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**PARTS AND WHOLES:
TWENTIETH CENTURY
INTERPRETATION OF
THOMAS HOBBS**

A philosophical classic is kept alive by a constant flow of criticism and discussion; and it repays the debt by releasing us from the parochiality of our own time. The *Leviathan* of Thomas Hobbes is just such a classic, and although it was not greatly discussed in the 18th and 19th centuries, it has provoked in our time one of the liveliest of interpretative literatures. My concern will be with the literature in English, but this is merely a part of the story. The revival of serious interest in Hobbes owes a great deal to the German scholar Ferdinand Tönnies in the late nineteenth century, and these days Hobbes is a subject of sophisticated discussion not only in France and Germany, but throughout Europe, America and Japan.

Leviathan was published in 1651 when Hobbes was already 63 years of age. His political philosophy had by then been worked out very thoroughly indeed, and its general lines had already been published several times before, most notably in *De Cive* published in 1642. What we find in the 240,000 words of *Leviathan* is a lucid and sparkling distillation of a body of thought brought to almost total coherence. One must say "almost" because the creation of a totally transparent body of thought is a human impossibility; and presumably if it *were* possible, it would leave nothing

for commentators to say. Hobbes, by contrast, was drastically simplified by most of his contemporaries, particularly by those who were hostile to him; and in addition, he attempted to hold together a set of ideas which had previously been cultivated in isolation, and often, indeed, in contradiction to each other. As we shall presently see, Hobbes's moral and psychological theories appear to lead in different directions, and there are many other areas where the complexity of the text allows us to create several widely divergent personalities. For this reason, we may suggest that some slight degree of imperfection in a philosopher is not only unavoidable, but is also fortunate, in that it creates avenues by which subsequent interpreters may approach the discussion of his work.

So far as Hobbes is concerned, his contemporaries found him not merely imperfect but often sinister. He was regarded as an atheist who taught that men should ignore moral considerations and guarantee their personal safety by obeying whoever could dispose of the most force. In seventeenth century England, this was to interpret Hobbes as an apologist for Oliver Cromwell, whose power rested upon the New Model army which had deposed and executed Charles I in 1649. Such was the view held by Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, a lifelong royalist who served Charles II as a minister after the Restoration in 1660 and who devoted a later period of banishment to writing a history of the "Great Rebellion". That large task finished, "I could not think of anything in my power to perform of more importance to your Majesties service, than to answer *Mr. Hobbes's Leviathan*, and confute the doctrine therein contain'd, so pernicious to the Sovereign Power of Kings, and destructive to the affection and allegiance of subjects"¹. Already in 1666, suggestions had been made in Parliament that the great fire of London was a sign of God's wrath upon a nation which tolerated in its midst such no-

(1) A Brief View and Survey of the Pernicious ERRORS to CHURCH AND STATE in Mr. Hobbes's Book, entitled *Leviathan*, by Edward, Earl of Clarendon. Printed at the THEATER, 1676.

torious atheists as Hobbes, and in 1685 *Leviathan* was included in a collection of seditious books publicly burned at Oxford. But since Hobbes had died in 1679, he was then beyond the reach of political dangers.

What his contemporaries called "Hobbism" was, then, a simple and apparently cynical doctrine subverting the Christianity of the Church and the legitimacy of civil rulers. As we have seen, the Royalists had no taste for it (though Charles II was himself something of a sceptic, liked Hobbes, and protected him from those who thought the authorities should step in to purge his heterodoxy). But the supporters of Cromwell had no taste for Hobbism either, and republicans commonly regarded Hobbes as an apologist for absolute monarchy. If being widely misunderstood is a test of subtlety and genius, Hobbes easily meets the test.

Hobbes was rather better understood in France. He had spent the 1640's there and become a highly respected figure in Parisian intellectual circles, especially the circle that met in Merseñne's famous cell. Pierre Bayle was to call him the greatest genius of the century, and his thoughts were to form part of that complex of ideas which came to call itself the "Enlightenment." As Peter Gay has commented, Hobbes was to the seventeenth century "a disturber of the peace whose work was too great to be ignored but whose name was too disreputable to be praised" ². As an ancestor of the *philosophes*, he was one of those who "went largely unacknowledged because their reputation for impiety made them political liabilities" ³. In this respect, as in his political philosophy, Hobbes may be compared with his contemporary Spinoza, though there are, of course, significant differences between them —an important one being that Spinoza could be sympathetically adopted by later German idealists in a way that Hobbes's relentless scepticism would not permit. So far as the twentieth-century English spea-

(2) Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, London, 1967, p. 99.

(3) *Op. Cit.* p. 43 n.

king world is concerned, the scandal of Hobbes's opinions is a strange and mysterious tale, for the climate of opinion has moved in such a way that we may perhaps find Hobbes wrong, but cannot easily find him shocking. It was indeed a century after his death, when the European understanding of the world had already altered significantly, that many of Hobbes's ideas came to be adopted in Benthamism, whence they were exported to liberal circles in Spain, South America, France, Russia etc. The most obvious direct influence was in the notion of law as essentially the command of a sovereign body, a notion influentially expounded by the English utilitarian John Austin. It was another utilitarian from the same circle, Sir William Molesworth, who brought out the first (and as yet the only) collected edition of Hobbes's English and his Latin works⁴.

Yet, for all his influence on utilitarianism and his unmistakable stature, Hobbes was not usually found a figure of great interest in the 19th century. Marx's view is typical enough: "One of the oldest economists and most original philosophers of England —Thomas Hobbes— has already, in his *Leviathan*, instinctively hit upon this point overlooked by all his successors. He says: '*The value or worth of a man is, as in all other things, his price; that is, so much as would be given for the Use of his Power*'"⁵. This comment which, as we shall see, has been developed into a major interpretation of Hobbes, is fundamentally tangential to his philosophy. Marx is typical of comments of this period in that he assimilates Hobbes to the materialism of the early modern period, and thus deprives him of that philosophical complexity for which he is these days valued. The reasons why Hobbes was less highly regarded in the 19th century than he is today are two-fold: he was not historically minded, and he was not high-minded. The absence of historical considerations from Hobbes's work was an insuperable defect in a century which had fallen in love

(4) London, 1839.

(5) *Wages, Price and Profit* (1865), in Marx & Engels, *Selected Works*, London 1950, I p. 385.

with the idea of development. It was not uncommon to regard the 17th century social contract theory as a species of laughably bad history. Looked at from this point of view, the social contract appeared as a collective indulgence in the fallacy of *petitio principii*, for it purported to explain political obligation in terms of individual decisions which would only be binding if some principle of abiding by promises had already been assumed. David Hume, who in the early 19th century was regarded more as a historian than a philosopher, was thought to have refuted contractarian doctrines in his essay *Of the Original Contract*, and his fellow Scotsmen had taken the lead in understanding human history as a movement from lower to higher stages of society, a view which seemed better to account for modern complexity and social interdependence than the fiction of isolated individuals coming together to agree on a first constitution. Associated with this historical view of human development was the belief in progress, a moral view unambiguously excluded from the closed and timeless account of human nature given by Hobbes. In addition, Hobbes was (erroneously) regarded as an apologist for absolutism, which could not but offend advanced thinkers prone to identify moral progress with the ideals of liberty and democracy.

This view of Hobbes may be briefly illustrated from the *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation*, delivered by the English liberal Hegelian T. H. Green in 1879-80. In these lectures, Hobbes is treated as slightly perverse contractarian from whom "all the more fruitful elements in Spinoza's political doctrine are lacking"⁶. Green's relatively brief discussion identified as the central fallacy of *Leviathan* the belief that political obligation can be created by the social contract; for (he argues) if no form of right can be recognised in the state of nature, then it cannot exist subsequently, even as the result of an agreement

(6) New impression of Vol. II of *Green's Philosophical Works*, London, 1927, p. 60.

between men. Green does not fail to make the standard charge that Hobbes has begged the question: "...such a contract being made presupposes just that state of things—a *régime* of recognised and enforced obligations— which it is assumed to account for" ⁷. What is above all objectionable in Hobbes, however, is that he does not believe in "a final cause determining human life" such that the greater perfection of life might determine both the individual and the community. This omission in Hobbes is closely related to his radical individualism, "for where there is no recognition of a common good, there can be no right in any other sense than power" ⁸. Green treats Hobbes dialectically, as one who has grasped a few truths about the human situation, but who has grasped them one-sidedly, with results that Green believes to be intellectually deficient and quite possibly dangerous in practice. "The practical effect of the notion that the individual brings with him into society certain rights which he does not derive from society ... is seen in the inveterate irreverence of the individual towards the state, in the assumption that he has rights against society irrespectively of his fulfilment of any duties to society, that all 'powers that be' are restraints upon his natural freedom which he may rightly defy as far as he safely can" ⁹.

Precisely two centuries after his death, then, Hobbes could still be regarded as a dangerous and pernicious writer; and although there is about Green's treatment of Hobbes a tone of Victorian high-mindedness which would be hard to achieve today, the actual view just expressed is one which, in another form, we find in the work of Leo Strauss. Towards the end of the 19th century, interest in

(7) New Impression of Vol II of *Green's Philosophical Works*, London 1927 p. 66.

(8) *Op. Cit.* p. 64.

(9) *Op. Cit.* p. 67. Hobbes in fact had similar feelings about those who are not prepared to perform their duties. Consider the passage beginning "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no such thing as justice..." in *Leviathan*, Ch. 15.

Hobbes was in fact growing, as evidenced particularly in the critical and biographical work of Croom Robertson. In 1904, Leslie Stephen finished, just before he died, a short popular treatment of Hobbes which may conveniently be taken as a statement of the view of Hobbes sympathetically taken of him by those who did not become deeply involved in the complexities of textual analysis. So far as Leslie Stephen is concerned, Hobbes is someone who cleared away from political understanding a good deal of worthless lumber. The doctrine of the *Leviathan* is regarded as narrow, but interesting because it was an attempt at the scientific understanding of politics produced at a time when political thought was largely advocacy:

His position may be compared to that of the old economists. They used to maintain that in taking for granted the selfishness of mankind they were making a legitimate abstraction. Men, it is true, are not simply selfish, they have other motives than a love of money; but the love of money is so prominent an instinct in economic masses that we may consider it as the sole force at work, and so we may get a theory which will be approximately true, though requiring correction when applied to concrete cases¹⁰.

Thus Hobbes is praised for grasping an approximation of political reality. The state involves organised force, and the result must be some degree of coercion. "These are undeniable facts which it is well to recognise clearly, and which are most vigorously set forth in Hobbes's *Leviathan*"¹¹.

This praise of Hobbes treats him as a pioneer of political science, and at the turn of the century when Stephen was writing, the project of understanding politics as if it were a field of physical forces was thought to offer the promise of opening up the way to turning politics into a form of knowledge as reliable as natural science. In the

(10) *Hobbes*, (English Men of Letters Series) by Sir Leslie Stephen, London, 1904, p. 211.

(11) *Hobbes*, (English Men of Letters Series) by Sir Leslie Stephen, London, 1904.

case of both Stephen, and also of George Catlin¹² who wrote two decades later, praise of Hobbes is a form of ancestor worship.

What we find in Stephen's discussion may best be described as a fragmentary Hobbes, and we may perhaps generalise this point to suggest that the characteristic misunderstanding of those who interpret the thought of philosophers is to take the part for the whole. In Stephen's book, egoism is promoted to the central principle of Hobbes's thought (we shall see later that there are good reasons for doubting if this principle is even sustained by Hobbes) and the moral elements are discarded as so much window-dressing designed to put his heresy-hunting contemporaries off the track. "...the supposed contract is merely another version of the first principle of egoism: a man will always do what seems to be for his own interest"¹³. Thus there is a large and significant section of the Hobbesian edifice, the treatment of obligation and contract, which Stephen dismisses out of hand. (As we shall see, Stephen can barely take seriously the large area of *Leviathan* devoted to theology). Part of the reason for this must be found in the familiar and deplorable Victorian tendency to patronise the past, one of the many fruits of the doctrine of progress which has now turned distinctly sour. Time and time again, Stephen uses the word "quaint" to describe some Hobbesian point, and these are often cases where Hobbes, who was found by his contemporaries to be a witty and amusing man, was obviously making a joke. Leslie Stephen misses the joke, imagines the point to be serious, and wards off what he thinks will be modern hostility by turning anachronism into something exotic. Thus Stephen quotes a joke about natural equality of men which was obviously found so irresistible by the Parisian circle that it is found both in Hobbes and Descartes:

(12) G. E. C. Catlin, *Thomas Hobbes, as Philosopher, Publicist and Man of Letters*, London, 1922.

(13) Stephen, *op. cit.* p. 210.

Every man thinks of himself as wise, though not as witty or learned as his neighbours. What better proof can there be of equality of distribution than that every man is contented with his share?

Stephen comments that Hobbes tries to establish the doctrine of natural equality "by rather quaint arguments". Again, Hobbes being a materialist (like, for example, Tertullian amongst the Christian fathers) had to square his theology with his materialism. Stephen remarks: "The doctrine that he (God) is 'corporeal' or an infinitely 'subtle' matter occupying space is merely a quaint attempt to evade the more natural inference that he is simply outside of all knowable relations" ¹⁴. Here again, as on many occasions, we have this dismissive word "quaint" used to make a distance between the primitive beliefs of Hobbes and what Stephen imagines to be the sophisticated agnosticism of his own time. The culmination of this attitude comes towards the end of the book when Stephen cuts the Gordian knot of Hobbesian argument by saying: "Nobody, I believe, ever followed Hobbes in this audacious identification of law and morality. I must try to make some apology for a most estimable old gentleman misled by an excessive passion for logic" ¹⁵.

I have dallied long, perhaps too long, over one of this century's early discussions of Hobbes. It is, however, an attractive book, lucid, well-written and clear in its thought. Further, it established what we may call the popular view of Hobbes as a tough-minded but unsubtle ancestor of modern scientific positivism in politics. Thus in George Sabine's *History of Political Theory*, by far the most popular textbook on the history of political thought from its publication in 1937 up till very recent times, the Hobbes described is the same as that of Leslie Stephen. "It would undoubtedly have been easier for Hobbes" wrote Sabine, "if he could have abandoned the law of nature altogether..." and he goes on to say: "The novel element in Hob-

(14) *Op. cit.* p. 155.

(15) *Op. cit.* p. 215.

bes's psychology was not the rather cynical assumption of human selfishness which it implied, for in this respect he did not differ from Machiavelli. It was rather the psychological theory by which he tried to make egoism a scientifically grounded account of behaviour" ¹⁶.

The established view of Hobbes early in the century was, then, that his importance rested upon his influential though imperfect attempt to study politics scientifically ¹⁷. It was this view which was challenged in 1936 by Leo Strauss, a German refugee who had done research in Britain in the thirties, and who subsequently moved to the United States where he was for many years a highly influential exponent of the history of ideas at the University of Chicago. He died in 1973. Strauss had what can only be called a grand vision of the significance of political thought, a vision in which the requirements of civil order were constantly at war with the philosophical cultivation of truth. The consequence of this conflict was that political philosophy was an esoteric discipline and had to be read with great care so as to extract the message hidden behind an often bland surface. The method of probing the surface of political philosophy is described in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, ¹⁸ and the emphasis on the esoteric became steadily more prominent in Strauss's writings. Already in his discussion of Hobbes, Strauss elaborates his celebrated distinction between classical political philosophy based upon the concept of duty, and modern political order which begins with the conception of right. When Strauss wrote *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* in 1936 he was

(16) George H. Sabine, *History of Political Theory*, 3rd Edition, London, 1951, p. 391, 393. The first edition appeared in 1937.

(17) We may note, however, that Croom Robertson had already taken the view, as far back as 1886, that the main lines of Hobbes's thought had already been fixed "when he was still a mere observer of man and manners, and not yet a mechanical philosopher". George Croom Robertson, *Hobbes*, 1901, p. 57. Quoted in J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes's System of Ideas*, Ch. II, p. 27.

(18) Glencoe, Illinois, 1952.

still convinced that Hobbes was the founder of modern political thought. More recent editions of the work contain a preface in which Strauss declares that this slightly dubious honour should be accorded to Machiavelli; but these issues of priority do not affect Strauss's main argument.

Strauss contends that the scientific element of Hobbes's method is not fundamental to his philosophy. What actually is fundamental is his moral argument. Had Hobbes been merely naturalistic, that is, concerned merely to describe human behaviour rather than to construct moral argument, he would have had to take all human inclinations as morally neutral. In fact, however, he settled upon one particular inclination, which he called Pride, as being the form of human behaviour that generates the horrible predicament described in his state of nature; and he settled upon Fear as the passion by which man might be released from the predicament. This is a moral, not a scientific position; but it is a moral position quite different from the natural law tradition in whose vocabulary Hobbes's argument is to a large extent expressed. The novelty is that Hobbes has abandoned the primacy of law (or, what is the same thing, virtue) in favour of resting his argument upon individual will—the concept described in *Leviathan* as the “right of nature”. The starting point of Hobbesian argument is to be found in the will of individuals. In Plato, by contrast, law and virtue are independent metaphysical structures to which man must accommodate himself; and Christian natural law doctrines had merely changed the basis of that independent structure. In Hobbes (and perhaps also in Machiavelli) modern political philosophers have abandoned this autonomous order of right and obligation, and have made man himself, his will and his appetites, the centre of the world. Strauss is in no doubt about the importance of this shift of philosophical emphasis initiated by Hobbes (or, alternatively, by Machiavelli): “This moment was decisive for the whole age to come; in it the foundation was laid, on which the modern development of political philosophy is wholly based, and it is the point from which every attempt at a thorough understand-

ding of modern thought must start" ¹⁹. Hobbes had Strauss believes, expressed the ideal both of bourgeois capitalism and of socialism "with a depth, clarity and sincerity never rivalled before or since" ²⁰.

Only three years before, John Laird in a thorough and historically fascinating work claimed to be attempting "to enliven an interest in Hobbes that seems less active today than it should be among British philosophers" ²¹. Here was a clarion call quickly answered by Strauss and taken up by so many others that by 1960's we find, instead of complaints of neglect, lamentations that textual attention to Hobbes had been so intense as to generate decreasing returns; even, suggestions that scholars should leave him alone for a time. Strauss's argument attracted considerable attention, but none more fruitful than that of Michael Oakeshott, who wrote several articles on Hobbes in the wake of Strauss's publication; and who, in 1946 produced a long and celebrated introduction to the Blackwell edition of *Leviathan*, which he there declared to be "the greatest, perhaps the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language" ²². Oakeshott's *Leviathan*, it may be said at once, is a more elevated and more romantic version than had appeared hitherto. It is more elevated because Oakeshott ranks it alongside Plato's *Republic* and Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* as one of the three great masterpieces of political philosophy. Each of the three embodies, on Oakeshott's view, one of the three central traditions of European thought. Plato's *Republic* is a fertile masterpiece, whose master conceptions are nature and reason. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* embodies the emergence

(19) Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, London, 1936, p. 5.

(20) *Op. Cit.* p. 1.

(21) John Laird, *Hobbes*, London 1934 p. vi

(22) These writings on Hobbes, together with another long essay which appeared in the 1962 collection called *Rationalism in Politics* will be published in a separate volume in Britain in 1975.

of a relatively new conception of the state as an accumulation of historical contingencies: Oakeshott calls this the tradition of historical coherence, and its master conception is the Rational Will. What of *Leviathan*? Partly remembering the introduction where Hobbes compares the state to an animal and an animal to a machine ("in which the *sovereign* is an *artificial* soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body...") Oakeshott takes it to be the masterpiece which elaborates the conception of the state in terms of Will and Artifice. Nor should the word masterpiece here be taken as a mere piece of editorial hyperbole. It is for Oakeshott "the still centre of a whirlpool of ideas which has drawn into itself numberless currents of thought, contemporary and history, and by its centripetal force has shaped and compressed them into a momentary significance before they are flung off again into the future"²³.

It will already be clear that we are here in a world of considerably greater sophistication than that of Leslie Stephen, and the difference becomes immediately clear if we consider Oakeshott's view of Hobbes's moral theory. Stephen's simplistic psychological egoism has been replaced by an interpretation which takes the moral theory seriously. Oakeshott insists on two points. First, that whilst a theory of human behaviour in terms of self-interest²⁴

(23) *Leviathan*, Ed. Michael Oakeshott, Oxford 1946. Introduction, pp. xii-xiii

(24) Hobbes was, of course, directly attacked in the 18th century as the fount of psychological egoism by Bishop Butler (Sermon V). But on a close reading of Hobbes, it is clear that he did not hold a theory of psychological egoism, nor, indeed, could he have done so given his mechanism. See Bernard Gert, "Hobbes, Mechanism and Egoism" *Philosophical Quarterly* XV (October 1965) p. 31; and "Hobbes and Psychological Egoism", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Volume XXVII October-December 1967, p. 503. I have myself argued along similar lines in "Hobbes and the Just Man" in *Hobbes - Forschungen* Berlin, 1969, reprinted in Maurice Cranston and Richard S. Peters (Eds.) *Hobbes and Rousseau*, New York 1972. None of this affects the fact that Hobbes did indeed take a "pessimistic" view of human nature.

may perhaps be extractable from some of Hobbes's utterances, it is not consistently to be found there, and it is not the basis of his moral theory. Secondly, even if it were there, it would not in Hobbesian terms provide a valid reason why the subject is obliged to obey the sovereign. Hobbes clearly recognised the difference between Might and Right, and took good care not to invalidate his argument by muddling them. One of Oakeshott's main concerns is, then, to elucidate the idea of obligation as used by Hobbes. It is an idea whose metaphorical sense (that of being physically bound) is never very far from the surface of Hobbes's mind. A man may be *physically* abliged if he is prevented from doing what he wants by physical impediments, such as chains or prison. Further, he may be *rationaly* obliged if he refrains from doing some act because he perceives that its consequences will be physically damaging to himself. These obligations may limit a man's power, but they do not affect his right. For right can only be affected by a man's own decision, and in the case of men in civil society, moral obligation derives from the presumption that they have anthorized the Soreraeign to act for them. "The answer to the question, Why am I morally bound to obey the will of this Sovereign? is, Because I have authorized this Sovereign, 'avouched' his actions, and am 'bound by my own act.'" ²⁵. Political obligation in modern civil states emerges from this analysis as mixture of these strands of obligation - physical, rational and moral, all combined together but never merging into one another.

In a later essay, Oakeshott went beyond this analysis of obligation to discuss the distinctly rarified interpretative problem of the First Performer. The problem arises from the fact that in the state of nature, which lacks a sovereign to enforce the performance of agreements, it is not rational to be the first performer in a "covenant of mutual trust". A covenant, it will be remembered, is an agreement in which the parties perform their part of the

bargain at a later stage than that at which the agreement was made. To be the first performer in a covenant is not rational in the state of nature because one cannot be sure that the second performer will do his bit, since there is not authority to compel him. Now the civil society itself is established by a covenant of mutual trust, which means that there must come a moment when the Sovereign will command one of the newly created subjects to obey and order. What would make it rational for this man to become the First Performer of a newly established civil society? Oakeshott makes several suggestions. Firstly, in terms of rational self-interest, what would be lost by the First Performer is insignificant compared to the developing security of the State which he would gain. Secondly, it would be rational to the the first performer just so long as a majority of other covenanters were also prepared to perform, and it would not even matter if this majority shifted about in the group according to "The clouds of avarice, ambition and the like (which) sweep over the sky and (whose) shadows fall now upon this man and now upon that; no single man can be depended upon to keep the covenant all the time and upon every occasion. But this is not necessary, it is enough if enough may on any occasion be reasonably depended upon to endow by their willing obedience the sovereign with enough power to terrify into obedience those who on that occasion are not disposed to obey"²⁶. Oakeshott agrees, however, that these are merely suggestions which would render First Performance not unreasonable. There remains a gap in the argument, and Oakeshott tosses off the suggestion that Hobbes may have had in mind some such character as that of his friend Sydney Godolphin who is mentioned in the preface, and whose actions would, in the opinion of his contemporaries exhibit "a certain nobleness or gallantness of courage, rarely found, by which a man scorns to be beholden for the contentment of his life, to fraud or breach

(26) "The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomes Hobbes", in *Rationalism in Politics*, London, 1962, pp. 298-299.

of promise" ²⁷. In the end, the most rational of political philosophies perhaps rests upon an irrational and disinterested act.

We are here a long way from Hobbes the simple-minded exponent of psychological egoism. What had previously seemed a stark and simple doctrine was proving to exhibit a degree of subtlety that seems to have escaped commentators in earlier centuries. Hobbes's concept of obligation became, from the thirties to the sixties, the central battleground of Hobbesian interpretation. It is clear that in a modern positivist environment, Hobbes's apparent claim to have deduced political duties from the facts of the human situation seemed to violate what G. E. More called "the naturalistic fallacy", that is to say, the fallacy (as More took it to be) of identifying a natural quality (such as pleasure) with a moral predicate. Another way of making the same point would be to argue (what Stephen seems to have believed) that Hobbes has much to say about prudence but nothing about ethics. A cruder manner of stating the difficulty would be to say that Hobbes had illicitly derived values from facts. We have just seen that Oakeshott had in 1946 argued that Hobbes does have a genuine theory of moral obligation. Oakeshott's argument has been taken ²⁸ as in an important respect agre-

(27) *Leviathan* Ch. XV.

(28) By Stuart M. Brown, "The Taylor Thesis", *Hobbes Studies*, Oxford 1965, p. 32. These connections are, of course, extremely complex. Thus in a scholarly and stimulating survey of the modern literature on Hobbes, and which consequently covers much of the same ground with which I am concerned, Professor H. W. Greenleaf divides interpretation into the traditional" case, the "natural law" case, and the "individualist" case. Oakeshott is there treated as an interpreter stressing Hobbes's individualism, which is, no doubt, a better characterisation than any which would link him with those who take Hobbes to be an exponent of natural law. But unlike some other individualists, Oakeshott takes the moral theory entirely seriously. See H. W. Greenleaf "Hobbes, The Problem of Interpretation" in *Hobbes-Forschungen*, Berlin 1969; reprinted in *Hobbes and Rousseau*, Ed. Maurice Cranston and Richard Peters, New York, 1972, p. 5.

eing with the main thesis of an earlier essay which became the source of a further strand of criticism, to which we must now turn.

This essay is "The Ethical Doctrine of Hobbes" which A. E. Taylor had published in *Philosophy* in 1938. Basing himself particularly on Hobbes's earlier works, and suggesting that *Leviathan* is in many respects a *piece d'occasion* whose persuasive intention obscures important subtleties, Taylor argued that "Hobbes's ethical doctrine proper, disengaged from an egoistic psychology with which it has no necessary connection, is a very strict deontology, curiously suggestive, though with interesting differences, of some of the characteristic theses of Kant"²⁹. It is evident from the texts that Hobbes was in no danger of confusing the obligatoriness of a duty with any of the reasons by which people might be persuaded to perform it; and Taylor goes on to suggest that this appreciation of duty arose from Hobbes's own personality. The laws of nature are thus taken to be genuinely moral laws binding on all men. But in order to be "laws" in the Hobbesian sense, they must have been commanded. What has commanded them? "I can only make Hobbes's statements consistent with one another by supposing that he meant quite seriously what he so often says, that the 'natural law' is the command of God, and to be obeyed *because* it is God's command ... A certain kind of theism is absolutely necessary to make the theory work"³⁰. Taylor's article was thus an extremely radical change of interpretation. It not only brought the ethical theory to the forefront of attention, but replaced Hobbes the cynical atheist with Hobbes the believing Christian. Taylor's Hobbes was a natural law philosopher working in a tradition that came directly from the middle ages; his scandalous reputation was now attributed to the superficiality of readers who had mistaken such trimmings as the scientific idiom and the slightly eccentric theology for the substance of the argument.

(29) Taylor's article was reprinted in *Hobbes Studies*. The passage quoted is on p. 37.

(30) *Hobbes Studies*, p. 49-50.

The reformed Hobbes, newly restored to respectable society, did not lack for subsequent support. In 1957, Howard Warrender published a long and closely reasoned book³¹ specifically devoted to Hobbes's theory of obligation, and defending and elaborating what has become known as "The Taylor-Warrender" thesis. The core of Warrender's argument was an ingenious and detailed account of how Hobbesian psychology fitted together with Hobbesian ethics, and rested upon the fact, often observed, that Hobbes had said that the "laws" of nature obliged men *in foro interno* (that is to say, in conscience) even in the state of nature; but that they did not oblige to action until there existed a sovereign power who could guarantee that others would be similarly bound. Until such a sovereign had been created, the obligatoriness of the law of nature was "suspended", for laws cannot oblige when there is no adequate motive to perform them. Warrender commended this interpretation by means of a persuasive analogy. "We assume a simple system in which the ground of obligation is God's will and the sole validating condition is sanity. If, now, the entire membership of the community to which this system relates were to become insane, no one would have any obligations, but the hypothetical statement would be true that if the members of this society were sane, they would be obliged to obey God's will, and hence they may be said to have a *suspended* obligation to do so ...if we further suppose, for example, that a psychiatrist appears who cures these people and restores them to sanity, their full obligations hold again. Can the psychiatrist, however, in this case be described as the *creator* moral obligations or the founder of moral distinctions?" The establishment of the sovereign is analogous to the appearance of the psychiatrist; he is the condition which allows a pre-existing obligation to become fully operative"³².

(31) *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation*. Oxford 1957.

(32) Warrender, *op. cit.* p. 27-28.

Warrender's argument quickly became a storm centre in the controversy about the theory of obligation. Warrender himself turned towards the work of preparing a new collected edition of Hobbes's writings to replace the rather primitive Molesworth edition. Before long, it transpired that Warrender had not taken the Taylor thesis as far as it might be pushed. For in his wake appeared *The Divine Politics of Thomas Hobbes* by Professor F. C. Hood³³. Hood presented Hobbes as a sincere and devout Anglican who had attempted with only moderate success to translate an established Christian morality into the fashionable idiom of 17th century science. Hood's work tended to be regarded as eccentric, as pushing a plausible thesis much beyond what the evidence would bear, and provoked, amongst other responses, the view that it was quite incredible that Hobbes's contemporaries could have been so profoundly wrong about what Hobbes had been intending.

To nearly every interpretation of Hobbes, there is, one might suggest, an equal and opposite re-interpretation. The scientific Hobbes began to make a comeback, the textual considerations which Warrender had ignored or minimised began to command more attention. Thus Professor J. W. N. Watkins quotes Warrender as saying there are "two systems in Hobbes's theory, a system of motives and a system of obligations. The system of motives ends with the supreme principle of self-preservation...; the system of obligations ends with the obligation to obey natural law regarded as the will of God"³⁴. Watkins comments that "The idea of two independent but coinciding systems seems rather fishy" and that "Hobbes was invariably opposed to anything which tended to make men 'see double', and mistake their lawful sovereign. If Hobbes had conceded that there are two systems which logically could diverge though they happen not to, he would have made it that much ea-

(33) Oxford, 1964.

(34) J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes System of Ideas*, London 1965, p. 89, quoting from Warrender, *op. cit.* p. 43.

sier for religious zealots to affirm that they actually do diverge. His whole tendency was monistic..."³⁵. These criticisms occur in a long meditated book, published in 1965, whose most striking feature was its return to an interest in Hobbes's affinities with seventeenth century science. Already in 1956, Richard Peters had presented a picture of a Hobbes enchanted with the idea that one might calculate the dimensions of the heavens while "sitting still in our closets, or in the dark"³⁶. Watkins' background lay not so much in politics as in philosophy, and particularly the philosophy of science. Being influenced by Karl Popper, Watkins found the rationalist element of Hobbes congenial, and he brought more to the surface than previous commentators Hobbes's debt to the Paduan resolute-compositive method. Hobbes was indirectly indebted to Galileo, and had been more directly influenced by his friend William Harvey, the discoverer of the circulation of the blood and also an exponent of Paduan method. The position taken by Watkins is precisely the opposite of that taken by Hood and (in a less extreme form) by Warrender: it is that Hobbes's metaphysical beliefs and scientific method *imply* the fundamental principles of his civil philosophy. The scientific method implies the materialism, which leads directly to the account of the universe in terms of body and motion. The components of a state therefore *must* be bodies i. e. individuals, and minds must be interpreted as entirely dependent upon bodies. Watkins links Hobbes's doctrine of egocentricity (namely that the explanation of any action must be a motive in the mind of that person, the expectation of some good to himself) with Harvey's account of the human body as a machine in which the heart is "the prime mover in the body of man"³⁷. There is plenty of warrant in the text that Hobbes was keen to bridge the gap between the physiological and the psychological, and Watkins claims that he did so by modifying some

(35) Watkins, *op. cit.* p. 96.

(36) Hobbes, Harmondsworth (Penguin Books) 1956.

(37) Watkins, *op. cit.* p. 107.

of Harvey's ideas, in conjunction with a set of metaphysical views about human nature. But how does Hobbes move logically from the psychology to the ethics? In one sense, Watkins takes up a set of hints which Taylor had trailed in the article we have earlier mentioned. He suggested that there were interesting affinities between Hobbes and Kant. Watkins interprets the laws of nature as having a status resembling that of Kant's assertoric hypothetical imperatives. Alternatively, he suggests that they are rather like the advice doctors give to patients - advice which can indeed be ignored, but only at the patient's risk. In virtually all interpretations of Hobbes, some element has to be thrown overboard, or at least weakened, and in Watkin's interpretation it is clearly the fully ethical status of the laws of nature. The theology, on the other hand is accommodated, though it is demoted to a tactical solution to the practical problem of persuading seditiously inclined Christian believers. The dictates of reason prescribe necessary means to the end of self-conservation, which arises from the natural constitution of men. But God is the "author of nature" and thus God wills these dictatets, and in this sense they are properly laws.

Watkins' has thus resuscitated the long-standing view of Hobbes as a man whose involvement with the scientific currents of the seventeenth century was essential and not just a piece of trimming on an otherwise fundamentally moral theory. The virtue he claims for his view is that it restores unity to the Hobbesian system, and there can be no doubt that Hobbes himself did seek to construct a unified and deductive suystem. The unity of the Hobbesian account of man and nature has recently been the subject of further enquiry by Thomas Spragens Jnr.³⁸ who addresses himself to another of the fixed points of the literature: the relation between Hobbes and Aristotle. That Hobbes exhibits a systematic hostility to Aristotle is clear from many pages of *Leviathan*; but it is equally clear that he owes

(38) *The Politics of Motion: The World of Thomas Hobbes*, London, 1973.

much to Aristotle, and not merely to the *Rhetoric*, the one work of Aristotle's which he evidently studied deeply, summarised, and from which (as Leo Strauss has shown) he took a good deal. The enterprise of Spragens has been to try and pinpoint just what he actually owes to Aristotle, and he has employed the fashionable terminology popularised by Thomas Kuhn³⁹ to such an extent that Professor Macpherson wittily describes his work as "Hobbes à la modé de Kuhn"⁴⁰. From Aristotle to Hobbes is, then, a "paradigm transformation". But of what kind? "Hobbes, I argu", writes Spragens, "undertook a highly systematic transformation of Aristotelian cosmology... He borrowed the form of the Aristotelian cosmology, but radically refashioned its substance to accommodate the discoveries of contemporaries such as Galileo"⁴¹. The change, as Spragens sees it, is the disappearance of *telos* from the universe and its replacement by a general principle of inertial motion. It was, of course, Spinoza who compared a human impulse to a stone falling, and it was certainly true that one of the great projects invented by the seventeenth century was to accommodate human and natural things to a single model of explanation. Nevertheless, there is abundant material in both writers to show that they had a clear sense of specifically human behaviour which required a form of understanding beyond the mere application of physical principles. Professor Spragens denies this, and thus presents us with another of those plausible pictures of Hobbes in which some crucial parts of the canvas have been left blank.

The work of Watkins and others in placing Hobbes within the tradition of seventeenth century science is of obvious validity; and part of the reason for its validity is that Hobbes himself was certainly attempting to construct a "science" in a sense of that slippery word well understood

(39) Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1962.

(40) Spragens, *op. cit.* p. 8.

(41) Spragens, *op. cit.* p. 8.

in his time. There is no question here of imposing upon Hobbes categories foreign to his thought. But there is another widespread interpretation where the question of whether we can validly understand Hobbes better than he understood himself becomes a persistent nagging worry. This other interpretation sees Hobbes as a pre-eminently bourgeois writer who expressed the fundamental conceptions of a newly emergent class. There is of course, no doubt that Hobbes is an individualist writer; and also that an individualist mode of behaviour had been developing in Europe for several centuries, and was in the seventeenth century well-established. It may indeed be the case that this development is part of the explanation of why Hobbes wrote as he did. But whatever the truth of this view, Hobbes certainly thought that he was theorising the human condition rather than merely the events of his own time. He regarded his civil philosophy as a new and unprecedented achievement of human selfunderstanding, not as a mere response to contemporary circumstances such as a pamphleteer might produce. Amongst his more notable early critics along these lines was Rousseau, who thought the Hobbesian state of nature to be an account of the character of civilised (i. e. modern) men. But for really grotesque versions of this line of thought, we must turn to contemporary writers: "There is hardly a single bourgeois moral standard", wrote Hannah Arendt, "which has not been anticipated by the unequalled magnificence of Hobbes's logic. He gives an almost complete picture, not of Man but of the bourgeois man..."⁴² What is involved in such a picture? A deep distrust of the whole Western tradition of political thought, according to Professor Arendt. "...he wanted nothing more nor less than the justification of Tyranny which, though it has occurred many time in Western history, has never actually been honored with a

(42) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London, 1950 (2nd revised edition 1964) p. 139. This work was published in the United States as *The Burden of Our Time*.

philosophical foundation”⁴³. Hobbes’s point was rather that “tyranny” is a name given by men to any régime they dislike; he was not “justifying” tyranny, nor, for that matter anything else. This line of argument is quite extraordinary if we remember that anything seriously to be considered democracy has always been closely associated with the development of societies in which commercial interests play a prominent part, whether in Athens or in Western Europe; and the extinction of the commercial classes, as in modern communist societies, may perhaps be the beginning of new types of society but is most certainly the immediate extinction of democracy. That Professor Arendt, who is amongst the more original and intelligent of modern political philosophers can write such palpable nonsense illustrates the way in which Hobbes tends to provoke an extreme reaction from his readers.

There is, however, one writer who has developed this line of thought without falling into the absurdities we have just quoted. Professor C. B. Macpherson of the University of Toronto has for nearly thirty years been developing an argument which appeared more or less fully developed in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. The general argument is that between the 17th and 20th centuries, European thought and European society have been dominated by bourgeois ideas in which man was conceived of as a creature of infinite appetite involving him in ceaseless competition with his fellows. In what Macpherson has called “possessive market society” everything is treated as a commodity, including a man’s thought and talents, and whilst this assumption has led to the dynamic achievements of capitalism, it has now resulted in a major crisis of modern civilisation which can only be solved if we understand clearly the hidden assumptions on which the more inhuman features of our society are based, assumptions which are set out with great clarity in Hobbes. What this means for the interpretation of Hobbes is that Professor Macpherson construes *Leviathan*

(43) Arendt, *op. cit.* p. 144.

as an account not of the creation of civilised men out of primitive men by way of a contract, but as an account of "men whose desires are specifically civilized ... men as they now are, with natures formed by living in a civilized society..."⁴⁴. That this is a fair account of Hobbes's thought would seem to follow directly from his explicitly resolutocompositive method which we have already discussed; and it is certainly true that Hobbes is making no pretence at being concerned with primitive men, of whom he knows virtually nothing. (Hence it is that those modern anthropologists who have been tempted into suggesting that their inquiries have refuted the social contract theory are entirely beside the mark). Hobbes's account of men as seeking limitless power is related by Macpherson to the existence of a competitive market as it developed out of mediaeval Europe. Some social assumptions about the existence of such a market are required (on this view) to validate the deduction of Hobbes's conclusions⁴⁵. If so, of course, then Hobbes was wrong in his philosophy; he imagined that he was philosophising the human condition, yet what he was really doing was to analyse the events of this own time. Indeed, he was not even successful in doing this, for this theory of absolute sovereign power as the postulate of the modern state proved an unnecessary solution to the practical problems with which Professor Macpherson thinks he was concerned. "What Hobbes missed, then, was the possibility of class cohesion offsetting the fragmenting forces in market society ... if there is a cohesive class, its sense of common interest may be strong enough to make its members capable of upholding a sovereign government and of holding it ultimately responsible to themselves by retaining the right of appointing or electing to the sovereign body"⁴⁶. In this light, John Locke appears as the hero of bourgeois political thought, since he did recognise this sup-

(44) Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford 1962, p. 18.

(45) Macpherson, *op. cit.* p. 68.

(46) Macpherson, *op. cit.* p. 93-94.

posed reality of modern society, and was therefore able to dispense with the more prickly and unattractive features of Hobbesian absolutism.

Macpherson's view of Hobbes is an ingenious and highly intelligent argument, but there is nothing in it which had not been first adumbrated in Marx. Some passages in his argument are obscure, and others depend upon an element of selective quotation which allows Professor Macpherson to insinuate the idea - indeed, often at times merely the metaphor-of a market into his account of what Hobbes has said. One way of estimating the value of this interpretation is to consider the general terms in which the Macphersonite version is couched, and above all, his use of the word "bourgeois". And on this point the most formidable and elaborate work has been done by Keith Thomas, a Fellow of St. John's College, Oxford. "...*bourgeois* is not a term which can be translated into English, or easily adapted to fit any section of seventeenth century English society. Professor Strauss's analysis was based upon Hegel's conception of the *Bourgeoisie*, which derives, as his English editor remarks, from a completely different political tradition. Similarly Professor Macpherson is obviously indebted to Marx, yet attempts to fit the Marxist pattern of class structure to seventeenth century England usually involve classifying at least some of the gentry among the *bourgeoisie*, which makes it very difficult to see where the *bourgeoisie* ends and the aristocracy begins" ⁴⁷. Thomas's learned and detailed discussion of Hobbes's attitudes cannot quite refute Macpherson's analysis because of its level of abstraction, but it does leave bleeding, mangled and dead any attempt to represent Hobbes entirely as the philosopher of the *Bourgeoisie*. And so far as the universal claims made by Hobbes are concerned, we may note his concluding remark: "It is salutary to recall that his (Hobbes) ultimate goals for human endeavour

(47) "The Social Origins of Hobbes's Political Thought", *Hobbes Studies* Oxford, 1965, p. 186.

—peace, civilisation and intellectual progress— have a social appeal which will always be potentially universal”⁴⁸.

Opening up the historical relations of Hobbes's thought has come to seem one way of breaking out of the trench warfare of textual attrition. As we have noted, some current commentators have felt that close textual argument has been leading to diminishing returns. Further, one considerable revision of the intellectual history of this time and place has clearly come from historical rather than textual analysis. It had been confidently reported in many books that Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* must have been directed at Hobbes, despite the fact that Hobbes is not mentioned in them, and seems to be alluded to in only one place. For what else, it might be supposed *a priori* do great philosophers do, except talk to each other? Closer attention to Locke, however, has made it clear that he was in fact very directly concerned with the political issues of his time, and that the refutation of Filmer, so long thought merely a diversionary tactic, was in fact the dominant preoccupation of the *Two Treatises*. In a similar spirit, Quentin Skinner has written a number of articles on the context of ideas in which Hobbes worked, arguing that some interpretations of Hobbes (notably that of Hood and Warrender) are “historically incredible”⁴⁹. The main-spring of this work is to be found less in a direct preoccupation with Hobbes than in a sudden surge of enthusiasm for the methodology of intellectual history, a movement whose banners have been most conspicuously unfurled in Cambridge⁵⁰. This is a movement which sought to purge

(48) Thomas, *op. cit.* p. 236.

(49) “The Ideological Context of Hobbes's Political Thought”, *Historical Journal*, 1966. See also, “Thomas Hobbes and his Disciples in France and England”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1966; and “Thomas Hobbes and Nature of the Early Royal Society”, *Historical Journal*, 1969.

(50) See, for example, J. G. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time*, London, 1972, especially the first essay “Languages and the Implications: *The Transformation of the Study of Political Thought*” This volume contains also a striking essay “Time,

intellectual history of its heavy load anachronism - the finding of totalitarianism in Plato, natural sovereignty in Marsilius of Padua and similar excesses of pedigree hunting. It was hostile to the idea that there are perennial ideas and themes in political philosophy, and hence sought to involve the "great texts" much more closely with the bulk of less durable contemporary writing. The opportunity for this movement came (as one might expect) from the kind of excess we have just been considering. The Second World War (no less than the first) led many intellectuals to diagnose contemporary troubles in terms of bad ideas; and this conviction led to a fossicking through history in order to find the bad ancestors of bad ideas no less than the good ancestor of good ideas. Contemporary polemic, in other words, invaded our understanding of the past with more than usual force, leading to a kind of intellectual Nuremberg trial of the dead, in which Plato, Rousseau and Hegel (to name but the most prominent) were brought as mute defendants before the bar of contemporary academia. The passages we have already quoted from Hannah Arendt are most charitably to be understood as flotsam thrown up by this almost irresistible surge of political involvement. The same tendency may be seen in many places. It is found, for example, when a noted historian writes: "Mussolini's famous article on Fascism in the *Italian Encyclopedia*, with its attack on nineteenth century Liberalism as the anaemic child of the illusion of perfectibility, is unadulterated Hobbes. Hobbes was the foe of idealism, the individualism, and the method of compromise which have given Western civilisation its colour and shape"⁵¹. Much may be forgiven because nonsense of this kind was written in 1940. It certainly provided the most conspicuous of targets for recent writers seeking to elaborate a more historical view of the ideas of the past - a

History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes" which modifies many of the received ideas about Hobbes.

(51) G. P. Gooch, "Hobbes and the Absolute State", *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, London, 1942, p. 372.

view not the less valuable because many earlier writers on Hobbes (Robertson, Oakeshott, Laird, for example) were perfectly well aware of the considerations now emphasized with a possibly excessive enthusiasm.

It may perhaps seem strange to some (as Hobbes might have said, adding "who have not well weighed these things") that even a brief consideration of the abundant twentieth century literature on Hobbes has made no attempt to connect his vogue with the threat of totalitarian doctrines in our century, and with the widespread disillusion with progress. These things have often been advanced as reasons for the continuing passionate interest in *Leviathan* and the other works in which Hobbes elaborated his political philosophy. But as I have already suggested, most of the interest in Hobbes which actually has been directly stimulated in this way is hardly worth the effort of contemporary attention. Most of it is gross and propagandistic. The works to which we have directed attention have all been written by men who have fallen under the spell of Hobbes's intellectual brilliance and insight, and who have undertaken the task of exploring the house of understanding which he constructed. Seen in these terms, Hobbes's work has stimulated three kinds of inquirer: first, those who have explored the house in an attempt to unravel its plan: second, those who have attempted to plot its relations with its own surrounding locality, namely, the ideas of its time. And perhaps thirdly, those who for one reason or another still find Hobbes's thought, or part of it, habitable today. That men are in important respects isolated individuals for whom sociability is not a solution but a problem has, no doubt, been recognised by other men than Hobbes, but there can be little doubt that whoever has mastered Hobbes's thought looks upon this aspect of the world with a more penetrating eye. Contrary to those who see as entirely a creature of his own time, it seems eminently plausible to think that one of the reasons why we should continue to study Hobbes is because he so brilliantly releases us from many of the foolish illusions of our own time; he is a tonic in a torrent of syrup.

These reflections suggest two possible questions on which much more might be said than is possible here. One question is whether a later generation may have the presumption to think that it understands a thinker better than he was understood in his own time. It is certainly true that no extreme form of the contrary view can possibly be held: If a man can *only* be properly understood by his contemporaries, then later generations are condemned to a merely expository silence. It certainly seems plausible to think that a further refinement of distinctions (such as is thrown up by the flow of thought) combined with the benefits of hindsight, may allow us to discover things about an earlier writer which his contemporaries happen not to have understood. When, therefore, Quentin Skinner uses as a test of twentieth century interpretation the understanding of Hobbes asserted by his contemporaries (and, what is more, by politically inclined rather than philosophically competent contemporaries) he is using a tactic of argument which may meet a particular case but which cannot be generalised into a methodological principle. A fuller treatment of this question would have to go much more fully into the question of what it is to understand a writer; perhaps, indeed, it would be less misleading and less pompous if we were merely to say that the best formulation is: what are we doing when we read a philosophical book? The only conclusion that may be confidently anticipated from such an inquiry would be that the expression "a full and complete understanding" is entirely superstitious.

The second question generated by these reflections is: What sort of man was Hobbes? Up until quite recently, we have tended uncritically to accept the account given by Hobbes himself, and by his gossip friend John Aubrey. But Hobbes was an ironist, and Aubrey invariably the victim of a good line. The idea that Hobbes was a timid and fearful man was one that it amused Hobbes to put about, but which is contradicted by many obvious facts of his biography⁵². The confident belief that women played no part

(52) See, for example, Maurice Goldsmith's amusing discussion "A Case of Identity" in Preston King and B. Parekh (Eds) *Politics*

in Hobbes's life cannot be sustained any longer. The materials for any adequate biography of Hobbes are seriously limited, but the enterprise is going ahead and it is obviously of great significance.

If there is one conclusion to be drawn from this discussion, it is that the penalty of failing to understand Hobbes adequately is to substitute a part for the whole - a fallacy to which any attempt to use Hobbes in the discussion of contemporary political theory is particularly liable. Further, these parts will always be a great deal less interesting than what emerges when Hobbes is understood whole. Thus it has been a recent tendency of interpretation to believe that Hobbes was producing principles of prudence which amount to "little more than a collection of platitudes"⁵³ or that he was concerned with an axiomatics of choice with a good deal of practical relevance to modern politics⁵⁴. The best diagnosis of why these fragmentary accounts of Hobbes keep turning up would seem to be that Hobbes is so often taken to have been a "normative" political theorist making general recommendations designed to solve practical political problems. If Hobbes were indeed this, *Leviathan* would have been a spectacularly unsatisfactory performance, since conflicting parties in the English Civil War (both Royalists and Roundheads) both found support in his writings, and also subjected them to indignant repudiation. Yet this view is also fundamental to the most recent treatment of Hobbes, one that links his thought appropriately with that of Bodin⁵⁵. Professor King is largely concerned to argue that theoretical entities which he calls "ideologies of order" are "absurd"⁵⁶. He takes Hobbes to be recommending unquestioned authority (whereas Hobbes's

and Experience: Essays Presented to Michael Oakeshott, Cambridge, 1968.

(53) F. S. McNeilly, *The Analogy of Leviathan*, New York, 1968.

(54) Cf. David P. Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan, The Moral and Political Theory of Thomas Hobbes*, Oxford, 1969.

(55) Preston King, *The Ideology of Order, a Comparative Analysis of Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes*, London, 1974.

(56) King, *op. cit.* preface.

point is that authority *obliges* irrespective of “questioning”), and he goes on: “It is because Hobbes constructs this stark choice between untrammelled authority and unbridled anarchy that he inevitably pitches upon the former and, in this, ceases to recommend merely some extension of sovereign authority and recommends instead its illimitable extension: hence his normative absolutism”⁵⁷. But Hobbes is not in fact “recommending” anything; he is rather exploring the meaning of a structure of ideas (such as authority and obligation) in relation to a conceptual understanding of human nature. How people actually behave is a different question altogether, and no student of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as assiduous as Hobbes could fail to recognise it as such.

Hobbes, is, then, a vast and in many ways limitless monument, His work is there for us to enjoy, understand and profit from. Those who attempt to cut it down frequently illustrate nothing but the bluntness of their own axes.

(57) King, *op. cit.* p. 274.