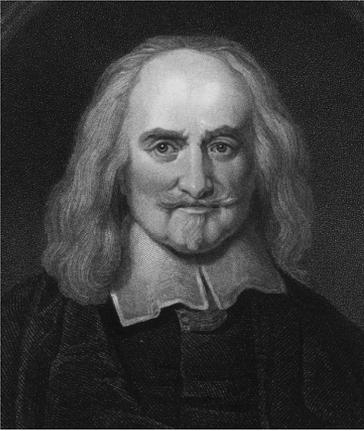


Hobbes on Civil Association



THOMAS HOBBS



MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

Hobbes on Civil Association

Michael Oakeshott



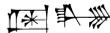
FOREWORD BY PAUL FRANCO



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Foreword

Though Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) is best known as a political philosopher in his own right, he was also a profound student of the history of political philosophy, and he was a major scholar on the thought of Thomas Hobbes. Oakeshott's interest in Hobbes emerged quite early in his career—he wrote a review-essay of recent Hobbes scholarship in 1935¹—and it continued throughout most of his life—he published a lengthy review of a book on Hobbes in 1974.² It seems at first strange that this last gasp of the British idealist school—in his first book, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), Oakeshott named Hegel and F. H. Bradley as his greatest influences—should have turned to Hobbes for inspiration, but the development of Oakeshott's political philosophy gradually revealed the deep affinities he had with his seventeenth-century predecessor. The themes Oakeshott stresses in his interpretation of Hobbes are, for the most part, themes that animate his own political philosophy: skepticism about the role of reason in politics, allegiance to the morality of individuality as opposed to any sort of collectivism, and the idea of a noninstrumental, nonpurposive mode of political associa-

1. Michael Oakeshott, "Thomas Hobbes," *Scrutiny* 4 (1935–36), 263–77.

2. Michael Oakeshott, "Logos and Telos," *Government and Opposition* 9 (1971), 237–44; reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 351–59.

tion, namely, civil association. This last-named idea receives explicit recognition in the title Oakeshott chose for this volume.

With the exception of the reviews mentioned above, the essays collected in this volume (which was originally published in 1975) represent almost the whole of Oakeshott's writings on Hobbes. By the elephantine standards of contemporary scholarship, it may seem a rather slender output, but Oakeshott disdained the more industrial side of academic scholarship, and he generally packs more into a single essay than most authors manage to express in an entire book. It is indisputable that these essays—especially the Introduction to *Leviathan* and “The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes”—have influenced Hobbes studies far beyond their modest length and that they disclose a distinctive portrait of Hobbes with which any contemporary scholar of Hobbes's philosophy must come to terms.

The earliest of the essays is “Dr. Leo Strauss on Hobbes” (1937), an admiring but not uncritical review of Strauss's important book *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*. One of the things that no doubt attracted Oakeshott to this book (which he actually reviewed three different times)³ was its attempt to replace the traditional, positivist image of Hobbes as a naturalistic philosopher engaged in a scientific analysis of politics with an image of Hobbes as a genuine moral philosopher. Though Oakeshott shares this general aspiration with Strauss, he rejects Strauss's specific argument that the original and real basis of Hobbes's political philosophy was a prescientific moral attitude upon which Hobbes in his mature writings merely superimposed a scientific form but never really abandoned. For Oakeshott, the argument of *Leviathan* constitutes a genuine advance in Hobbes's philosophical thinking, not because it is more “scientific”—to Oakeshott “Hobbes was never a scientist in any true sense . . . his ‘science’ is conceived throughout as an episte-

3. Besides the review contained in this volume, he reviewed Strauss's book in *The Cambridge Review* 57 (1936–37), 150; and in *Philosophy* 12 (1937), 239–41.

mology”—but because it represents Hobbes’s attempt “to find a firmer basis than merely a moral opinion” for his political philosophy.

Oakeshott also qualifies Strauss’s rather grand claim that Hobbes was the originator of a new tradition in political philosophy and the founder of modern political philosophy. Though Oakeshott accepts Strauss’s thesis that Hobbes’s political philosophy, in its substitution of right for law as the basis of the state, represents a break with the dominant natural-law tradition, he does not see this move as completely unprecedented, and he argues that Strauss neglects Hobbes’s significant affinities with an earlier, Epicurean tradition. Beyond this, Oakeshott argues that Hobbes also lacks something vital to modern political thought, namely, a satisfactory theory of volition. Here Oakeshott expresses a rare criticism of Hobbes, one that reflects his own Hegelian background—he cites Hegel’s doctrine of the rational will as an attempted remedy to this defect—and suggests the direction Oakeshott’s own reconstitution of Hobbes’s civil philosophy will take.

Almost a decade passed—a tumultuous one in world events—before Oakeshott’s next writing on Hobbes appeared. This was his now-famous introduction to *Leviathan*, published in 1946. The version of the Introduction found in this volume is slightly revised from the original and bears the imprint of some of Oakeshott’s later thinking on Hobbes and civil association. Many of the themes that were sketched in the essay on Strauss are here developed and gathered into a coherent and strikingly novel image of Hobbes’s thought. Oakeshott sweeps away the received view of Hobbes’s philosophy as naturalistic and grounded in a scientific doctrine of materialism, suggesting instead that the thread that runs through Hobbes’s system is an idea of philosophy as reasoning. Hobbesian “reasoning,” however, is not to be confused with the more substantial Reason of the classical tradition. It yields only hypothetical or conditional knowledge; it can never provide us with knowledge of ends. In terms of political philosophy, this skeptical doctrine of the limits of reasoning en-

tails the replacement of reason by will as the foundation of political authority. Herein lies the historic significance of Hobbes for Oakeshott: he is the first thorough expositor of the tradition that explores political life in terms of the master-conceptions of will and artifice as opposed to reason and nature.

It is Hobbes's voluntarism and individualism that receive the greatest emphasis in Oakeshott's introduction to *Leviathan*. And Oakeshott is particularly concerned to refute the view that Hobbes, though an individualist at the beginning of his theory, ends up as some sort of absolutist. Hobbes's austere idea of authority is ultimately more compatible with individual liberty than is the classical notion of reason and rule by "those who know." "[I]t is Reason, not Authority, that is destructive of individuality." Oakeshott puts this point in the most provocative way: "Hobbes is not an absolutist precisely because he is an authoritarian. . . . Indeed, Hobbes, without himself being a liberal, had in him more of the philosophy of liberalism than most of its professed defenders."

The most charming piece in this collection is "*Leviathan: A Myth*," which was originally delivered as a radio talk in 1947. Here again Oakeshott dismisses the interpretation of *Leviathan* as a work of reductive science, considering it instead as a work of art, a profound and imaginative exploration of the myth or collective dream of our civilization. After tracing the Christian roots of this myth, Oakeshott concludes that there can be no mistaking the character of Hobbes's rendering of the human condition in *Leviathan*. "It is myth, not science. It is perception of mystery, not a pretended solution."

In the latest of the essays in this volume, "The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes" (1960), Oakeshott returns to the issue of the nature and role of reason in Hobbes's thought. The question around which this essay revolves is whether the conduct that Hobbes held to be preeminently rational, namely, endeavoring peace, he also held to be morally obligatory, and, if so, whether Hobbes was not thereby contradicting his view of

reason as merely hypothetical or instrumental and improperly invoking the older meaning of reason as sovereign master or guide. In an elaborate discussion, in which he considers the very different arguments of Strauss and Howard Warrender on this question, Oakeshott shows that Hobbes did not contradict himself in this way. Hobbes never confused rational conduct with moral conduct, and he therefore never abandoned his instrumental notion of reasoning for the sovereign reason of the classical tradition. Oakeshott concedes to Warrender that there are places in which Hobbes writes as though he did believe there were “natural laws” imposing a “natural obligation” on men to endeavor peace, but he ascribes to Hobbes in these places an exoteric intention to show his contemporaries where their duties lay and to conceal his more radical teaching.

Oakeshott considers one other objection to Hobbes’s interpretation of the moral life: that Hobbes’s solution to the human predicament privileges fear and the desire for security over pride and thereby one-sidedly defends the morality of the tame man, or even the bourgeois man. But Oakeshott shows that there is evidence in Hobbes’s writings of an alternative derivation of the endeavor for peace out of the passion of pride. The presence of this aristocratic element in Hobbes’s moral outlook refutes the simple designation of it as “bourgeois.” In general, while Oakeshott is willing to concede the bourgeois character of Locke’s moderate brand of liberalism, he believes that the term grossly underestimates the radical individuality that lies at the heart of Hobbes’s moral outlook.

How are we to judge Oakeshott’s interpretation of Hobbes? That is a question that lies beyond the scope (and charge) of this Foreword. One thing, though, can be asserted with confidence: Oakeshott has given us a Hobbes that is vastly more interesting, imaginative, complicated, and compelling than almost any other. After reading Oakeshott’s essays, one wants to go back and read Hobbes.

Preface

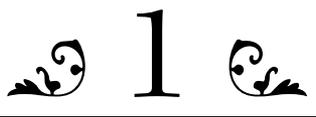
The edition of Hobbes's *Leviathan* in the Blackwell's Political Texts was published in 1946, and it was then the only easily available edition of this work. But now that there are many others it has been allowed to go out of print. The *Introduction* I wrote for it has also been overtaken by the tide of more recent writing on the subject: the intervening years have been a notable period in Hobbes scholarship. It has, however, a certain meretricious buoyancy and I have consented to the publisher's wish that it should remain in print. I have removed some of its more obvious blemishes and I have put it with three other pieces on Hobbes. The first came out of a lecture given at the University of Nottingham and was subsequently published in *Rationalism in Politics*, the second was originally published in *Politica*, and the third was a broadcast talk. I am grateful to Mr. James Cotton for his kindness in reading the proofs.

St. Valentine's Day, 1974 M.O.

Author's Note

The texts of Hobbes's works referred to are, with the exceptions of *Leviathan* and the *Elements of Law*, those published in the *English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, edited by Molesworth, 11 volumes, 1839 (referred to as *E.W.*), and in the *Opera Latina*, edited by Molesworth, 5 volumes, 1845 (referred to as *O.L.*). References to *Leviathan* (*L.*) are to the pages of the Clarendon Press reprint (1909) of the edition of 1651. References to the *Elements of Law* are to the edition by Tönnies, Cambridge, 1928.

Hobbes on Civil Association



Introduction to *Leviathan*

“We are discussing no trivial subject, but how a man should live.”

—Plato, *Republic*, 352D.

I. Biographical

Thomas Hobbes, the second son of an otherwise undistinguished vicar of Westport, near Malmesbury, was born in the spring of 1588. He was educated at Malmesbury where he became an exceptional scholar in Latin and Greek, and at Oxford where in the course of five years he maintained his interest in classical literature and became acquainted with the theological controversies of the day, but was taught only some elementary logic and Aristotelian physics.

In 1608 he was appointed tutor (and later became secretary) to the son of William Cavendish, first Earl of Devonshire. For the whole of his adult life Hobbes maintained a close relationship with the Cavendish family, passing many of his years as a member of the household either at Chatsworth or in London. In these circumstances he came to meet some of the leading politicians and literary men of his day, Bacon and Jonson among them. The year 1610 he spent in France and Italy with his charge, getting a first glimpse of the intellectual life of the conti-

ment and returning with a determination to make himself a scholar. The next eighteen years, passed mostly at Chatsworth, were the germinating period of his future intellectual interests and activities. There is little record of how precisely they were spent, and the only literary product of this period of his life was the translation of Thucydides, published in 1629; but there can be no doubt that philosophy occupied his mind increasingly.

On the death of the second Earl of Devonshire in 1628, Hobbes accepted the position of tutor to the son of Sir Gervase Clinton, with whom he stayed three years, two of which were spent on the continent. It was at this time that Hobbes discovered for himself the intellectual world of mathematics and geometry, a world so important to the continental philosophers of his time, but of which hitherto he had been entirely ignorant. The discovery gave renewed impetus and fresh direction to his philosophical reflections, and from then philosophy dominated his mind.

In 1631 Hobbes returned to the Cavendish household as tutor to the new earl, with whom he made his third visit to the continent (1634–37). It was on this visit that he met Galileo in Florence and became acquainted with the circle of philosophers centred round Mersenne in Paris, and particularly with Gasendi. And on his return to England he completed in 1640 (but did not publish until 1650) his first important piece of philosophical writing, the *Elements of Law*. He was fifty-two years old, and he had in his head the plan of a philosophy which he desired to expound systematically.

The next eleven years were spent in Paris, free for a while from extraneous duties. But instead of embarking at once on the composition of the most general part of his philosophy—his philosophy of nature—he wrote *De Cive*, an exposition of his political philosophy, which was published in 1642. Paris for Hobbes was a society for philosophers; but in 1645 it became the home of the exiled court of Charles, Prince of Wales, and Hobbes was appointed tutor to the prince. His mind still ran on the philoso-

phy of politics, and in 1651 his masterpiece, *Leviathan*, was published.

In 1652 he returned to England, took up his place (which he was never again to leave) in the household of the Earl of Devonshire, and set about the composition of the rest of his philosophical system. In 1655 was published *De Corpore*, and in 1658 *De Homine*. He had still twenty years to live. They were years of incessant literary activity and of philosophical, mathematical, theological, and political controversy. After the Restoration he was received at Court, and he spent much of his time in London. In 1675, however, perceiving that he must soon retire from the world, he retired to Chatsworth. He died in the winter of 1679 at the age of ninety-one.

II. The Context of *Leviathan*

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.

Reflection about political life may take place at a variety of levels. It may remain on the level of the determination of means, or it may strike out for the consideration of ends. Its inspiration may be directly practical, the modification of the arrangements of a political order in accordance with the perception of an immediate benefit; or it may be practical, but less directly so, guided by general ideas. Or again, springing from an experience of political life, it may seek a generalization of that experience in

a doctrine. And reflection is apt to flow from one level to another in an unbroken movement, following the mood of the thinker. Political philosophy may be understood to be what occurs when this movement of reflection takes a certain direction and achieves a certain level, its characteristic being the relation of political life, and the values and purposes pertaining to it, to the entire conception of the world that belongs to a civilization. That is to say, at all other levels of reflection on political life we have before us the single world of political activity, and what we are interested in is the internal coherence of that world; but in political philosophy we have in our minds that world and another world, and our endeavour is to explore the coherence of the two worlds together. The reflective intelligence is apt to find itself at this level without the consciousness of any great conversion and without any sense of entering upon a new project, but merely by submitting itself to the impetus of reflection, by spreading its sails to the argument. For any man who holds in his mind the conceptions of the natural world, of God, of human activity and human destiny which belong to his civilization will scarcely be able to prevent an endeavour to assimilate these to the ideas that distinguish the political order in which he lives, and failing to do so he will become a philosopher (of a simple sort) unawares.

But, though we may stumble over the frontier of philosophy unwittingly and by doing nothing more demonstrative than refusing to draw rein, to achieve significant reflection, of course, requires more than inadvertence and more than the mere acceptance of the two worlds of ideas. The whole impetus of the enterprise is the perception that what really exists is a single world of ideas, which comes to us divided by the abstracting force of circumstances; is the perception that our political ideas and what may be called the rest of our ideas are not in fact two independent worlds, and that though they may come to us as separate text and context, the *meaning* lies, as it always must lie, in a unity in which the separate existence of text and context is resolved.

We may begin, probably we must begin, with an independent valuation of the text and the context; but the impetus of reflection is not spent until we have restored in detail the unity of which we had a prevision. And, so far, philosophical reflection about politics will be nothing other than the intellectual restoration of a unity damaged and impaired by the normal negligence of human partiality. But to have gone so far is already to have raised questions the answers to which are not to be found in any fresh study of what is behind us. Even if we accept the standards and valuations of our civilization, it will be only by putting an arbitrary closure on reflection that we can prevent the consideration of the meaning of the general terms in which those standards are expressed; good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice. And, turning, we shall catch sight of all that we have learned reflected in the *speculum universitatis*.

Now, whether or not this can be defended as a hypothetical conception of the nature of political philosophy, it certainly describes a form of reflection about politics that has a continuous history in our civilization. To establish the connections, in principle and in detail, directly or mediately, between politics and eternity is a project that has never been without its followers. Indeed, the pursuit of this project is only a special arrangement of the whole intellectual life of our civilization; it is the whole intellectual history organized and exhibited from a particular angle of vision. Probably there has been no theory of the nature of the world, of the activity of man, of the destiny of mankind, no theology or cosmology, perhaps even no metaphysics, that has not sought a reflection of itself in the mirror of political philosophy; certainly there has been no fully considered politics that has not looked for its reflection in eternity. This history of political philosophy is, then, the context of the masterpiece. And to interpret it in the context of this history secures it against the deadening requirement of conformity to a merely abstract idea of political philosophy.