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Hobbes Early Writings: A Review of Three Discourses

Review by Jason William Beutler


Hobbes' seminal work, Leviathan is considered one of the classic books in political philosophy. In the words of Richard Peters, "Hobbes' Leviathan ranks as one of the great books in philosophy because it attempted a systematic answer to the far-reaching social changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (Hobbes 1962, 7). Leviathan lays a great deal of the groundwork for liberal ideas about the nation-state's political foundation. Yet many scholars have lamented the lack of writing available by the young Hobbes. Until recently, the earliest major work available from Hobbes was written when he was already forty years old. Hobbes' early work would be useful to scholars who want to understand how his introduction to the deductive methods of geometry at the age of forty affected the questions Hobbes asked and the methods of argumentation used by Hobbes as a political philosopher. The word print work done by Noel Reynolds, James Hilton and other professors at Brigham Young University has proved that such a manuscript exists. This manuscript has recently been published under the title of Three Discourses edited by Noel Reynolds and Arlene Saxonhouse. In this review I will explain how this discovery was made and examine some of the important insights this manuscript gives about Hobbes' political philosophy.

The three essays that have recently been released under Hobbes' name were first published anonymously under the title Horae Subsecivae in 1620 by Mr. Edward Blount.1 This London publisher claimed not to know who had authored these discourses, but "having heard them commend-ed" (Reynolds and Saxonhouse 1995, 27), he asked a friend who had the handwritten copy for permission to print this work. This anonymous publication has left scholars debating the authorship of these essays for three and a half centuries. These discourses have been attributed to a variety of different authors, from members of the Cavendish family for whom Hobbes worked as a tutor to Francis Bacon, one of Hobbes' contemporaries. Leo Strauss was the first to suggest that these essays were written by Hobbes. Marlene Saxonhouse, the second editor of this book, wrote a dissertation arguing that Strauss was right to attribute Horae Subsecivae to Hobbes. Saxonhouse, however, was never able to find a method of proving this historically. It was not until Noel Reynolds showed that word print statistical analysis could be used to make this case that the "smoking gun" needed to get these essays published under Hobbes' name was available.

The third section of the book contains an essay by Saxonhouse in which she points out some of the important insights this early work gives us into Hobbes the political philosopher. Some scholars have suggested that Hobbes' fascination with geometry, discovered later in life, led him to search for origins rather than ends of the state. However, these essays make clear that this search for origins began long before Hobbes discovered geometry at the age of forty. In the essay entitled, "A Discourse upon the Beginning of Tacitus," Hobbes examines the work of the Roman historian Tacitus to show how Augustus was able to create a stable political foundation. In Saxonhouse's commentary on this essay she notes that Hobbes used the example of Augustus to examine the means necessary to establish political authority in a world where divine right to political leadership is no longer accepted as a sufficient ground for this authority. Saxonhouse points out that Hobbes is already asking the questions about how political authority is justified and its true origin that he deals with at greater length in Leviathan. Thus these early essays suggest that Hobbes search for the origins of the state and political authority began long before he discovered geometry.

Hobbes' early essays also show that he had already broken with ancient philosophers by searching for an origin to state authority separate from God or nature. Machiavelli had already written extensively about the means needed to maintain political authority in a godless world by examining Roman his-
In Hobbes' early essays, he follows Machiavelli's lead in embracing deception and murder of political adversaries by Augustus to establish political order. These acts are justified because political opponents must be put down before peace can be established. In Hobbes' words, "therefore being weary, they could not but be much won with the present ease, and vacancy of War, especially civil war" (44). These writings show that Hobbes does not see brutal actions to establish political order as a violation of a higher moral code.

Hobbes' willingness to justify any means of securing political authority in a chaotic world shows that he is already beginning to separate from natural law thinkers who see morals and law as a natural by-product of reason possessed by humans in every situation. Instead he begins an argument that he carries further in the Leviathan. For Hobbes the real moral imperative before a stable government forms is self preservation. In these early essays Hobbes is already prepared to suggest that laws and morals exist inside a society with a stable political order, but not outside of this order. Thus he has already accepted the view that laws and morals are conventions created to preserve a stable legal system.

Much has been made of Hobbes' discovery of geometry and the effect this had on his philosophical studies. This fascination with deductive methods of argumentation does seem to change how Hobbes engages in philosophical arguments in his later works. However, the basic questions that Hobbes deals with in his early essays are very similar to the questions he attempts to answer in his seminal work Leviathan. And even the answers Hobbes gives to these questions Leviathan coincide with Hobbes' earlier writings. Thus it seems that while geometry affected Hobbes' method of argumentation about political authority and the origins of the state, Hobbes still reaches a strikingly similar conclusion in both his early essays published in Horae Subsecivae and his later work Leviathan. Certainly, Hobbes arguments show far greater refinement in Leviathan than in his early essays, but the need for strong political authority to establish and maintain the state never changes.

In this review of Three Discourses I have outlined how the early writings of Hobbes were identified using word print analysis and examined some of the insights this new work gives on the development of Hobbes' political philosophy. The three essays by the young Hobbes demonstrate that the questions about the origins of the state and rationale for political authority are not simply foisted on Hobbes by the civil wars in England. Rather, these are questions that Hobbes had long thought about and examined. While the deductive methods of geometry helped Hobbes make what many consider to be the one of the greatest arguments ever for the state, these methods do not lead him to altogether new conclusions about how the state should be founded. Instead, the deductive tools give Hobbes a better way to make his arguments. Clearly, the newly identified Hobbesian essays published in Three Discourses produce interesting insights into Thomas Hobbes the political philosopher and create a new and interesting way to examine Hobbes' political philosophy.

Works Cited


1 Although Horae Subsecivae contained twelve essays, only three of these have been proven to be written by Hobbes.

2 It is interesting to note that even before Hobbes experienced the true ravages of civil war in England, he already sees it as the greatest evil.