
This is a good book on Hobbes’s contributions to enlightenment secularism. Because modern life is characterized by increasing ennui despite material progress, Devin Stauffer writes, we should return to the “foundational arguments” of modern thought to discover whether the malaise of modernity grew out of its first philosophical seeds or arose later from different soil (p. 5). Stauffer’s interpretation of Hobbes is therefore also an interrogation of modernism and of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. This framing gives the book a sense of ongoing drama and broader relevance as Stauffer unweaves Hobbes’s *oeuvre* in pursuit of “a thread that runs through and unites the whole” (p. 7). Stauffer’s central thesis is that Hobbes promoted a novel moral and political vision, a “Kingdom of Light…that would dispel the reigning darkness, chasten religion, and bring a new dawn of enlightenment” (p. 7).

A follower of Leo Strauss, Stauffer concedes that historical contextualists like Quentin Skinner, Richard Tuck, and Noel Malcolm “have illuminated important ways in which Hobbes’s thinking was shaped by the complex, fast-flowing currents of his time” (p. 7). Nevertheless, although he makes clear that his critique is not tantamount to wholesale rejection, Stauffer alleges a couple weaknesses of their approach, namely, that it downplays Hobbes’s capacity for originality and distracts from Hobbes’s arguments. This critique is not convincing. Skinner developed his method partly in opposition to scholars who treated social context as determinative of a writer’s philosophical statements.¹ The “Cambridge School” holds instead that philosophical writing is a species of linguistic action, sometimes disruptive and even epoch-making action, and should be understood as such. Moreover, an appropriate context for interpretation might very well be the *longue durée* of philosophical writing, not the prosopography or immediate political circumstances of an author, as when Skinner interpreted Machiavelli’s infamous passage on the lion and the fox as an implicit repudiation of Cicero.² And Stauffer no less than Skinner is interested in authorial intention. Indeed, some of Stauffer’s methodological ruminations have a Skinnerian flavor, as when he states his goal of “trying to look at matters through Hobbes’s own eyes, to see problems as they appeared to

---


him and to grasp why he responded to them as he did” (p. 8, emphasis in the original).

To be sure, Stauffer is no Skinnerian, since he interprets Hobbes as being fundamentally a precursor of late modern modes and orders. And Stauffer does a better job than do most intellectual historians in subjecting Hobbes’s arguments to critical evaluation, rather than merely “explaining” them. But what Stauffer objects to hermeneutically, I submit, is not what the Straussians call “historicism” but instead (and rather the opposite) a certain kind of formalism that either underplays the distinction between content and form or self-consciously prioritizes the latter, treating the text as ding an sich, rather than as the phenomenal aspects – potentially deceptive – of noumenal qualities that must be painstakingly deciphered. By contrast, Stauffer is predominantly interested in finding the “deeper” message of Hobbes’s texts beneath their surface arguments. According to Stauffer, Hobbes sometimes permitted his rhetorical “cloak” to unravel and to reveal the naked truth that lies underneath (p. 139). Moreover, Stauffer intimates that this was a successful strategy, that Hobbes’s coded rhetoric drew modern minds beyond classical and Christian horizons.

Stauffer explores four themes: Hobbes’s critique of the classical tradition, his natural philosophy, his critique of religion, and his political philosophy. An erudite scholar of classical antiquity, Stauffer’s treatment of the first theme is predictably illuminating, although the focus on Aristotle somewhat crowds out his discussion of the other classical sources. Stauffer is no less insightful about the second theme while managing to write with lucidity about difficult metaphysical issues. These chapters corroborate Stauffer’s eminently logical interpretations of puzzling passages with conferatur citations to all the relevant passages across Hobbes’s oeuvre – no small feat of scholarship. But Stauffer’s treatment of the other two themes, in particular Hobbes’s critique of religion, is unavoidably more speculative. That is because Stauffer thinks Hobbes’s “deeper” message about religion goes much further than and sometimes vitiates the explicit argument. Stauffer sides with that faction of scholars who hold that Hobbes’s religious pronouncements were insincere. Today this verdict is close to becoming a trans-methodological consensus. Many intellectual historians agree with the Straussians that Hobbes was privately impious if not a crypto-atheist. Jeffrey Collins has even allowed that Leviathan’s theology was “fundamentally esoteric” (a word that does not appear in Stauffer’s book).

---

3 I do not mean to imply that Stauffer’s sartorial metaphor systematically misleads him. Elsewhere, he rejects the interpretation that Hobbes’s literal argument about morality was a rhetorical cloak hiding Hobbes’s true argument, Hobbes’s Kingdom of Light, 220.

But a few of Hobbes’s readers, notably the philosopher A.P. Martinich, stubbornly maintain that Hobbes was a Christian, as did J.G.A. Pocock in his classic essay on Hobbes’s uses of ecclesiastical history.⁵

Stauffer endorses Pocock’s injunction that Hobbes’s readers should not begin “by making prior assumptions about Hobbes’s beliefs when he wrote them, but by paying attention to what he actually wrote” (p. 128). Directly after quoting Pocock, Stauffer runs through the first few paragraphs of part three of *Leviathan*. When Hobbes refers to natural reason as “the undisputed word of God,” Stauffer asks: “What, then, is the questionable or ‘doubted’ word of God? Must it not be Scripture itself?” (p. 129). When Hobbes endorses the standard Christian principle that Scripture does not contravene reason, Stauffer reads this as a pretense to perform a rational assault on the Bible. Hobbes then clarifies that whenever Scripture exceeds our understanding, “we are bidden to captivate our understanding to the words” rather than trying to extract scientific truths from religious mysteries. Stauffer incredulously replies: “But by whom are we bidden, and in what sense?” (pp. 129–130). Hobbes’s metaphor that “the mysteries of our religion” should be “swallowed whole” like “pills for the sick” is, according to Stauffer, too debased to be the handiwork of a pious Christian (p. 129–130). Hobbes’s observation that beliefs are not products of the will is allegedly a sly attempt to give his readers a “preemptive defense” for their religious unbelief (p. 130).

Even under the direction of a careful scholar like Stauffer, an inquiry of this kind can slide into an inquisition. Consider again Hobbes’s metaphor of wholesome pills. Are the connotations necessarily as irreverent as Stauffer supposes? After all, the metaphor ascribes curative properties to Biblical mysteries, and its vulgarity wholly pertains to Hobbes’s condemnation of scientism. And what about Hobbes’s metaphors that scan as both pious and sincere, even affecting, such as his remark that humans in the dark of ignorance infer God’s existence just as a blind man knows a fire by its warmth?⁶ Stauffer deserves credit for presenting textual evidence that softens his own argument, including his rich discussion of why Hobbes may have been at most a methodological not metaphysical materialist (pp. 50–66). But he counts all the hits and comparatively few of the misses.

Stauffer’s argument that scholars of Hobbes’s religious arguments should not skirt the question of sincerity is persuasive. It is surely a matter of interpretive


significance whether or not Hobbes systematically meant the opposite of what he said about religion. But the question of theological sincerity raises further, complicated issues about the nature of religious identity. Stauffer treats religion as fundamentally a matter of belief. Christianity, in his view, is a set of claims about the nature of reality, and anyone who assents to these claims within the privacy of his own skull is a Christian. From this perspective, what Hobbes wrote about God in the solitude of his study and never shared with even his closest associates would be the most decisive direct evidence of whether Hobbes was really a Christian. But an ontological understanding of religion as constituted by communal practices would lead to different conclusions about who counts as a Christian. The fact that in 1647 Hobbes took Anglican rites on what he thought was his deathbed, for example, indicates a commitment to the sacramental life of the Church of England. Interestingly, Hobbes himself had a strongly practice-oriented understanding of religion that construed even theological writing as expressive and honorific, not descriptive and epistemic.

Hobbes's Kingdom of Light makes a bold yet plausible argument about Hobbes's authorial intentions. But what about the other half of Stauffer's thesis, concerning reception history? In Stauffer's telling, Hobbes's critical project helped transform the West into the rational, liberal, and secular civilization it would become in the modern period. Whether one finds this half of Stauffer's thesis convincing partly depends on one's view of the causal relationship between political philosophy and real politics, and partly on one's evaluation of Stauffer's argument regarding Hobbes's deepest intentions. If there is no “truer” message underneath Hobbes's overtly Erastian – if not theocratic – literal argument that the civil sovereign is the “chief pastor” of the commonwealth, then Stauffer's claim that Hobbes directed the state to wholly rational and secular ends is defective.7 One intriguing possibility is that Hobbes's writings had the effect over time that Stauffer attributes to them, but that this effect was unintended by their author.

Whether or not Stauffer is correct that Hobbes initiated a sweepingly rationalizing – and ultimately dispiriting – cultural transformation, Stauffer makes the best possible argument for a broadly Straussian thesis about Hobbes. Intellectual historians are likely to find Stauffer’s respectful engagement with the secondary literature more palatable than Strauss’s accusations of obtuse

---

moral relativism. And political theorists will appreciate Stauffer’s unique ability to combine plodding exegesis with a stimulating inquiry into modernity and its discontents. Perhaps the greatest contribution of Stauffer’s book is to open a space for constructive dialogue between scholars of Hobbes who have conflicting methodological orientations. Of course, whether or not Hobbes was a sincere Christian is not a puzzle that they are likely ever decisively to solve. But for scholars of Hobbes looking for a serious argument that he is best seen as the patron saint of secular enlightenment, this is the book to read.

Andrew Day
Department of Political Science, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA
andrewday2019@u.northwestern.edu