
Eleanor Curran’s new book, *Reclaiming the Rights of the Hobbesian Subject*, is a fresh look at a subject that is widely taken to have been ‘resolved’ in Hobbes scholarship: Hobbes’s view of rights. According to Curran, the orthodox view surrounding this issue consists of two related claims: first, Hobbes was undeniably a royalist (both in his personal loyalty to Charles I and II, and in his adherence to the principles of royalist political thought); and second, Hobbes has no meaningful theory of rights. The received wisdom, according to Curran, has been that the rights afforded Hobbesian subjects are barely worth the name, for they offer no protection at all against the absolute power of the sovereign. Although the literature is surely more complicated than Curran portrays, this has no doubt been a prominent trend in Hobbes scholarship. Curran’s project is to question this received wisdom and to ultimately disabuse us of it. In this way she hopes to “reclaim” Hobbesian rights from those who mischaracterize and disparage them. The view that emerges is likely to be unfamiliar. This is a Hobbes that deliberately advocates limited sovereign power and who has a substantive theory of protected rights; a Hobbes that gives subjects the right to rebel if they judge that the sovereign is not fulfilling the duties of the office to which he has been entrusted. While I am not entirely convinced that Curran has found the ‘real’ Hobbes (or no more so than I am convinced by the Hobbes of ‘received wisdom’), this book is thought provoking, well-argued, and original. Curran’s book is an ambitious project on a crucial and understudied topic in Hobbes scholarship.

The first third of the book examines the question of whether or not Hobbes can properly be called a royalist. While contemporary scholars take Hobbes’s royalism for granted, Curran adduces historical evidence to show that the answer to this question is not so straightforward. In appealing to the reception of Hobbes’s work by his contemporaries, Curran shows that many of the prominent royalists in the seventeenth century reacted to it with horror; Hobbes was accused of disseminating “false and evil Doctrines [which are] pernicious to the Soveraign Power of Kings” and *Leviathan* was called a “Rebells catechism” (Clarendon 1676 and Bramhall 1658 in Curran, p. 2). On the basis of this evidence, Curran suggests that these seventeenth century critics may have seen something that the contemporary orthodoxy does not.

Through a detailed, sophisticated, yet relatively brief survey of the historical evidence (ranging from Hobbes’s autobiographies, to his letters and associations), Curran shows the difficulty of stating Hobbes’s personal political loyalties with any certainty. The evidence is simply inconclusive. Of course, many of Hobbes’s closest associates, including his employer, were staunch royalists and close allies of Charles I both before and during the Civil War. But, Curran compellingly argues that although many have assumed that Hobbes’s own allegiances were with the royalist cause, this has been an unjustified claim of “royalism by association” (p. 15). Hobbes took the ‘Engagement’ signifying his loyalty to Cromwell’s government; but after the Restoration, he declared his support for Charles I and denied having supported Cromwell. While she admits that Hobbes might have simply changed his mind, Curran thinks it more likely that he was political savvy, skilled at creating “the impression among different groups who were enemies to one another that he was their friend and supporter”
Having shown that we cannot ascertain the true nature of Hobbes's own political loyalties, Curran turns to the political positions expressed in his published work. She argues that Hobbes's views on controversial issues of the time (e.g., Hobbes's insistence on natural equality, his belief that sovereignty originates in the people, and his claim that subjects retain rights against the king) contradicted fundamental tenets of royalist thought and instead aligned him philosophically with some of the most adamant critics of monarchy and absolutism. Here, Curran's discussion is illuminating and convincing; however, in covering a vast amount of material in only a few pages, she, at times, glosses over important distinctions. For example, Curran likens Hobbes to Henry Parker because both believed that subjects retain the right of self-defense. It is true that Hobbes's position on rights is different from the traditional royalist position, which denied that subjects retained any rights. However, it is misleading to equate Hobbes's views on the right of self-defense with those of Parker, who invoked the right of self-defense to justify rebellion against the King—an action about which Hobbes showed clear disapproval. Indeed, Hobbes took it as one of his primary goals to show that rebellion against one's king was both irrational and unjustifiable. So, Hobbes, himself, would likely be unhappy by the comparison to Henry Parker (and also to the Levellers).

Throughout the book Curran is quick to take Hobbesian rights to include or even to entail a right of rebellion, a point to which I return below. However, Curran provides a wealth of interesting information, compiled in a way that gives the reader a real sense of the complexities and ambiguities in the debate over Hobbes's royalism. Even if some important details are lost in the discussion, Curran demonstrates that Hobbes's political positions are far more complex than they are often assumed to be; and, this is enough to cast doubt on the received view that takes Hobbes to be a royalist of an obvious sort.

In the remainder of the book, Curran turns her attention to Hobbes's views on rights. Here too, Curran argues against the dominant interpretation. The received wisdom concerning Hobbes's view of rights, according to Curran, has three parts: first, the only rights that Hobbes affords to individuals are the 'bare liberties' that Wesley Hohfeld calls 'liberty rights' (i.e., rights that are not accompanied by correlative duties to respect the exercise of these rights); second, the only right that people retain in the commonwealth is the narrow right of self-defense (i.e., the right to protect oneself against imminent deadly threats); and third, the rights of Hobbesian subjects are too feeble to be meaningful at all, amounting only to what James Martel once described as the right to “kick and scream on the way to the gallows”.

In contrast to this received wisdom, Curran argues that not all Hobbesian rights are mere liberty rights; some are also 'claim rights' and are accompanied by correlative duties on the part of others to respect the exercise of these rights. Curran argues that Hobbes's understanding of laying down a right commits him to the existence of some claim rights. As she correctly points out “anyone who transfers or renounces a right is therefore under an obligation and has a duty to refrain from any action that would hinder the recipient in her

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