
What makes a philosopher? In his important new book, Conal Condren suggests that this question is of huge importance to the study of the history of philosophy. In doing so, he seeks to challenge the assumption that the persona of the philosopher is merely ancillary to the logic of his or her arguments.

The focus of this book – emphasized in its opening pages – is the importance of the persona of the philosopher and ‘the disputed matter of the qualities necessary in order to philosophize.’ Condren is keen to stress, right from the start, that the nature of philosophy (and the act of philosophizing) is one that is contested, and his focus is principally on how it has been contested through the medium of satire and ridicule. This significant tool is one that has long been ignored in narratives of the history of philosophy, and this is in need of resurrection, since ‘specification and presentation of the persona could be a means by which differing understandings of philosophy were advocated and apostrophized.’ Such ‘specification and presentation’ was a means by which the limits of philosophy could be articulated. By, for example, dismissing certain ways of philosophizing as ‘absurd’ or ‘monstrous,’ writers were able not only to claim that their opponents were wrong, but that they were not arguing philosophically at all. Similarly, it was (and is) a means by which a profession could regulate itself, thereby articulating who was ‘in’ and who ‘out,’ for the same reason that ‘policemen have uniforms and badges, and why the blandishments of television advertising require scientists in white coats, and not revolving bow ties.’ This a lesson for contemporary philosophizing as much as it is a tool for us to understand early-modern literature.

The book begins with a discussion of the Lucianic humour of Thomas Hobbes. Condren insists that Hobbes’s humour ‘tells us something about the character of Hobbes’s philosophy that has until recently been largely ignored’. He recognises that some of this territory has already covered by Quentin Skinner. But, Condren argues, Skinner’s account is limited by its focus on Hobbes’s re-appropriation of ‘the Renaissance theory of laughter (singular),’ and therefore fails to recognize the power that the humour and wit of *Leviathan* has towards a ‘philosophically demonstrative end.’ Not only is humour crucial in simultaneously disproving one’s opponents’ points and proving one’s own, but it is a fundamental part of the kind of person the philosopher has to be.

The focus of Hobbes’s scorn is primarily directed towards the clergy, and in particular, Condren continues to reiterate the importance of Hobbes’s account of the philosophical corruption of early Christianity, and the extended comparison of the Catholic clergy to fairies. This in turn counts as an attack on the priestly persona, and yet by comparing Catholic clergymen to mythical fairies, Hobbes was explicitly accepting ‘the authority of old wives’: ‘Hobbes calls the Reformation an act of exorcism. But he believed in exorcism no more than he believed in ghosts or fairies.’ This stresses the central paradox: that Hobbes was promoting the ridiculous notion of what philosophy was in order to reject it as a form of philosophizing at all, while at the same time extending a theory which made wit

3 Condren, *Hobbes, the Scriblerians and the History of Philosophy*, 156.
6 Condren, *Hobbes, the Scriblerians and the History of Philosophy*, 34.
7 Condren, *Hobbes, the Scriblerians and the History of Philosophy*, 43-44.
central to the office of philosopher. What we can most plausibly take from this is the notion that philosophers of the past had simply taken their ungrounded philosophical talk too seriously.

The persona of the poet is also up for debate and demarcation, since the poet, too, is often mistaken as a source of philosophical understanding. Hobbes's *Answer to Gondibert* (1650) becomes very important in this respect, and gives a wholly new view of his translations of Homer’s epic poetry. Not only is there ‘ample evidence to suggest that Hobbes may have enlisted and adjusted Homer’s epics to buttress his own political doctrines, but ‘he may also have assumed the office of poet to fulfil the broader philosophic responsibility intimated in the *Answer*; specifically to counter the use of Homer as spurious philosophy.’ Hence, in the note to his readers, Hobbes stresses Homer’s humanness, eschewing previous commentators’ description of ‘the semi-divine status of the office and persona of the poet.’ Poetry is, fundamentally, about telling ‘an honest and delightful story,’ and not dispensing essential truths.

The political implications of these observations are oblique, but never far from reach. The hesitation and empty words of Hobbes’s Homeric gods are suggested as a ‘passing shot at the rhetorics of tyranny and slavery so readily deployed in Hobbes’s own society’ both by the priests, and by his other primary object of scorn, the ‘democraticall gentlemen.’ Indeed, the whole enterprise of casting the philosophical persona or defining the office of the philosopher can be said to be a profoundly political endeavour. Indeed, much more could be made of the possibility of application to Hobbes’s immediate political and religious context of civil war England. Instead, Condren focuses attention more upon philosophy and the bounds of the philosophical persona.

Most important for Hobbes was the assertion that the source of the arguments of his opponents was absurdity. This in turn pointed to the notion that their arguments originated in a failure of cognition and were therefore the legitimate targets of ridicule. Ridicule, in turn, became no longer a garnish for philosophical argument (which would become a source of embarrassment for future historians of philosophy), but a move in argument itself: ‘Where the failings of the mind became the focus, the provocation of laughter carried a philosophical point, a conduit for the proposition, rather than being framed by it.’ In other words, laughter was being used as a means by which to demarcate the limits of philosophy.

So, Hobbes was not averse to wit, or ridicule, or, indeed to paradoxes (since he refers to them as potent instruments of debate in a letter to Edmund Waller of 1645). But Condren describes how they had the potential to become a double-edged sword, which would aid Hobbes’s own detractors. Condren puts it well: ‘wit misliked could be a mark of the wicked.’ Condren moves on to Hobbes’s critics in the seventeenth century, and describes how he became subject to both substantive and *ad hominem* attacks. Hobbes’s critics often made personal assaults in order that they could avoid too much engagement with the substance of his philosophy. Making headway in a channel often revisited by Hobbes scholars, Condren points, for example, to Hobbes’s alienation from the Royal Society despite his apparent

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10 Condren, *Hobbes, the Scriblerians and the History of Philosophy*, 49.