Book Review

Krom, Michael


Michael Krom’s valuable book challenges Hobbes’s reliance on rational self-interest: stable commonwealths need a wider range of motivations. Some things prized by Hobbes may even be irrational, undermining peace. Krom’s questions are important and his answers advance the literature. However, his language diverges from Hobbes’s, and some criticisms can be deflected.

Krom’s analysis is primarily textual and philosophical. He rationally reconstructs Hobbes’s ideas on reason and the passions in the state of nature and commonwealth, then tests consistency and plausibility. Krom mainly addresses *Leviathan,* Hobbes’s ‘most mature and complete work’, adding other texts ‘as a guide for interpretation’.1 However, Krom uses the *Philosophical Rudiments,* not the Tuck and Silverthorne edition of *De Cive* (imperfect though it can be), and could place more weight on Hobbes’s debate with Bishop Bramhall.

Krom writes clearly and links chapters well. He has a deft interpretative touch, a sensitive and reflective stance on Hobbes, and a respectful but critical approach to secondary authors. Although the three-page introduction is too brief, the book’s importance becomes evident as it progresses.

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The book, as a book, suffers from the hands-off approach now common with publishers. The index is modest, lacking separate entries for pride, charity or irrationality, despite their importance here. Endnotes are at the back of the book; for ease of use, each page of endnotes should have indicated which chapters/pages those endnotes refer to. And the printing is slightly uneven in my copy, making some pages harder to read.

I now turn to the substance of Krom’s book. Chapter 1 is a mostly sure-footed account of Hobbes’s philosophical underpinnings: motion, sense, mental discourse, imagination, speech, reason, prudence, science, geometry, and civil philosophy. Krom rightly sees that to understand Hobbes’s account of philosophy, we should look at what he does, not just at what he says. Chapter 2 gives a solid overview of the state of nature, the laws of nature, and the social contract. Both chapters are mostly scene-setting; Krom says little about interpretive debates, except when comparing three readings of the state of nature.

Chapter 3 picks up speed, seeking to ‘dissect the body politic’. Krom scrutinises Hobbes’s analogy between body politic and human body, and discusses the sovereign’s intermediaries. By taking Hobbes’s bodily imagery ‘more seriously than is usually done’, Krom casts new light on interesting issues. For example, Hobbes’s body politic ‘has no legs’ – commonwealths cannot move, after all. More importantly, Krom probes the alleged inconsistency of the sovereign being both heart and soul of the body politic. His answer: ‘in addition to being the soul of the commonwealth (reason), the sovereign is also the heart (passion).’

This sets up the problem driving the rest of the book: how well do reason and the passions coordinate in the Hobbesian commonwealth? Chapter 4 thus addresses the reason-passion relationship. Krom compares Hobbes’s account of the passions with its competitors, asks how passions like fear and pride affect the commonwealth, and examines diseases subverting the body politic.

One crucial omission is deliberation, which is central to Hobbes’s account of how we think. When Krom talks of deliberation, unfortunately, he uses a

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3 Krom, *The Limits of Reason*, 27–32.
4 Krom, *The Limits of Reason*, 61.
5 Krom, *The Limits of Reason*, 61.
7 Krom, *The Limits of Reason*, 60–1.