

HOBBS TEACHES THE UNIVERSITIES

Panel on Liberal Political Theory

GERAINT PARRY

(University of Manchester)

“But are not (may some man say) the universities of England learned enough already to do that? Or is it you will undertake to teach the universities? Hard questions.” (Lev, xxx : 226; EW, III : 331

Unlike Plato, Locke or Rousseau Thomas Hobbes is not one of those political philosophers who feature prominently in the history of the philosophy of education. Moreover in the vast literature on Hobbes his comments on education, whilst sometimes noted, rarely receive extended discussion (exceptions include Marshall 1980 and treatments of the educational aspects of Hobbes’s account of rhetoric in Johnston 1986 and Skinner 1996). In one respect this comparative neglect is unsurprising. On one reading the key to the survival of Hobbes’s sovereign state is the exercise of coercive power. Covenants must be backed by the sword; clubs are trumps. The fear of every other individual in the state of war is replaced by the fear of the sovereign. The institution of the sovereign has fundamentally re-structured the incentives to action but the basic psychological motivation is unaltered. If the passion to reckon upon is fear this is because it is something which, it might seem, every human being can immediately experience and recognise without being taught to do so.

However matters are not quite so simple. First, those who are to exercise the coercive power of the state have to be taught how it is to be employed. The sovereign’s power depends on his ability to mobilise sufficient coercive resources to face down any potential opposition. For

this he requires an administration and, above all, an army. The army, however, cannot itself be coerced:

“For if men know not their duty, what is there that can force them to obey the laws? An army, you will say. But what shall force the army?” (Behemoth, p. 59)

Hobbes concludes that the only answer is for the nobility and gentry, who lead the armed forces, to be educated in their duty in the universities. Only the reformation of the universities so as to ensure that they teach students their obligation to the sovereign can guarantee a lasting peace.

A second reason why fear may not operate in a straightforward manner to ensure obedience is that it can become misplaced. In particular, men may wrongly come to fear the sovereign more than they fear his absence:

“And though of so unlimited a power men may fancy many evil consequences, yet the consequences of the want of it, which is perpetual war of every man against his neighbour, are much worse.” (Lev xx : 135; EW III : 195)

This misdirected fear was, for Hobbes, the major source of civil disobedience. It was fomented by a number of sinister forces. The ultimate remedy was to educate the population as to their own true interests and the key to achieving this would be to re-educate the various political leaders who had been leading the population astray.

For these reasons education is central to Hobbes’s objectives. In particular it is elite education at the English universities which becomes almost an obsessive concern and one which is announced in the opening pages of Leviathan. The absurdities of university language are illustrated and derided in the very first chapter which ends with a warning message:

“I say not this as disapproving the use of universities; but because I am to speak hereafter of their office in a commonwealth, I must let you see on all occasions by the way, what things

would be amended in them, amongst which the frequency of insignificant speech is one.” (Lev i : 7; EW III : 4)

This is a promise which Hobbes duly keeps. On all occasions along the way the responsibility (or, rather, the irresponsibility) of the universities is a recurring theme. It is with their political role that Hobbes concludes the final chapter of Part II on the commonwealth; they are accused in the final chapter of Part IV of forging the doctrines of the “Kingdom of darkness”; and the penultimate paragraph of the entire work invites the universities to put on their curriculum the true moral and political science which will inculcate in their students a proper sense of duty, i.e. the teachings of Hobbes himself. It is an argument he consistently maintains in The Elements of Law, Behemoth, A Dialogue of the Common Laws up to his polemic with the professors of the universities themselves.

Hobbes’s hope was that “this writing of mine may fall into the hands of a sovereign who will . . . by the exercise of entire sovereignty in protecting the public teaching of it, convert this truth of speculation into the utility of practice” (Lev xxxi : 243-4; EW III : 358). These apparently arrogant claims were seized upon by Hobbes’s contemporary opponents as revealing his true project. Clarendon said that these passages demonstrated the extent of liberty subjects would possess if Hobbes’s ideas were to be “inculcated into the minds of men by their Education” and pointed to the good fortune that Leviathan had fallen into the hands of a sovereign who had banned it (Clarendon 1995 [1676] : 298). John Wilkins and Seth Ward claimed to detect in Hobbes’s entire onslaught on the universities merely his frustration that he had not been able to persuade the sovereign to impose the teaching of Hobbes on the universities in place of Aristotle (Wilkins and Ward 1970 [1654] : 252).

These critics recognised that Hobbes's intention in his comments on education was to use the universities to impose a single, consistent moral and political doctrine upon the political and religious elite of the country which would have serious consequences for the liberty to defend a number of widely held positions in seventeenth century debates which Hobbes held to be dangerous to the political order. The universities were the teacher-training institutions of seventeenth century England where, in particular, the clergy learned the doctrines which they would in turn teach to aristocracy, gentry and people from the pulpits. They are the "fountains of civil and moral doctrine, from whence the preachers and the gentry, drawing such water as they find, use to sprinkle the same (both from the pulpit and in their conversation) upon the people ..." (Lev R and C : 496; EW III : 713). Controlling what the educational elite was taught would indirectly control what the army, the judges and lawyers, the landed gentry, the city and the common people were taught.

Hobbes defined teaching as "the begetting in another the same conceptions that we have in ourselves" (Elements of Law 1969 [1649-50] : 64; EW IV : 711; see the perceptive discussions in Skinner 1996 : 300-1, 356-7). In much the same way James Mill was later to describe education as making "certain feelings and thoughts take place instead of others" (Mill 1931 : 11). One had learned something when one knew it on the same basis of undeniable evidence as the teacher and was able in turn to transmit it. The model was to be found in mathematics and its counterpart was now to be discovered in Hobbesian moral science ready to be made available in university lectures and designed to promote public order. In teaching this science university teachers would be acting as servants of the state, receiving their appointments from the sovereign in his office of supreme teacher and pastor (Lev xlii : 369; EW III : 541).

Uniformity of teaching was intended to trickle down into uniformity of political and moral doctrines among the population. This interpretation, shared by some of Hobbes's contemporaneous critics (even if certain of their own "liberal" credentials may be questionable - especially since some, simultaneously, considered Hobbes too permissive), seems at variance with some of Hobbes's modern commentators who have invited us to recognise a more liberal Hobbes. Michael Oakeshott regarded Hobbes as the prime exponent of the theory of a civil association (Oakeshott 1975) in which persons are associated by virtue of a common recognition of law and where the state pursues no purpose beyond the maintenance of the civil framework. For Oakeshott Hobbes's treatment of university education is a digression "and he ought to have known better than to have made it" (Oakeshott 1989 : 124-5). Richard Tuck (1989 : 86-91) and Alan Ryan have, in somewhat differing ways, argued for the presence of what Ryan called "a more tolerant Hobbes" (Ryan 1988, also Ryan 1982). On these views Hobbes, confronted by the destructive plurality of religious opinions, bestowed on the sovereign the right to impose and teach a uniform doctrine for the sake of civil order alone. As is well-known, Hobbes was not interested in attempting to discipline or investigate (by torture for example) the private thoughts of subjects. He was also prepared, as has been noted by commentators from Clarendon to Tuck, to contemplate the possibility that complete toleration of private judgement in religion might be the ideal situation (Lev xlvii : 482; EW III : 696). Hence Tuck concludes that Hobbes's right to impose doctrine was essentially "negative".

The problem, as Ryan and Tuck fully acknowledge, is that these liberties which the sovereign may permit are entirely dependent on his interpretation of what is required for the preservation of the state. There can be no restraints on the sovereign - no "juridical defence" as Mosca would have termed it. Although private thoughts may be permitted, public expression is

severely regulated. Yet the public avowal of such thoughts and the ability to join with fellow co-religionists in their celebration is of the essence for most believers. Hobbes's famous concession to toleration may be an ideal but is hedged around by the proviso that it must be "without contention" and not result in a situation where the extent of one's worship of Christ is measured by one's support for a particular minister of religion. In much the same way Hobbes's inclusion in his list of liberties to be expected under a civil sovereign of the right to "institute their children as they think fit" (Lev xxi : 138; EW III : 199) is, as with all such liberties, not absolute but "in some places more, in some less, according as they that have the sovereignty shall think most convenient" (Lev xxi : 143; EW III : 206).

It remains true that a prudent sovereign should act circumspectly in all such interventions in the liberty of subjects. It may also be the case, as Tuck contends, that Hobbes's orientation was negative rather than positive. Nevertheless it can be argued that Hobbes could not be satisfied with the security which a prudent, negative policy was likely to produce and was impelled towards a more positive, interventionist view of the sovereign's role in the establishment of doctrinal uniformity of observance. Considerable support for this may be provided by his views on the failures of university education and the potential for radical reformation.

THE FAILURES OF THE UNIVERSITIES

Hobbes's contention was that the universities, ever since their first establishment, had been dominated by teachers who, as adherents to certain churches or religious doctrines, had exalted the church above the sovereign. Although the specifics of their teaching varied and their intellectual sources differed the common factor was that they taught their students - the future teachers of the people - to question the authority of the state over matters of religion

and, it followed, to shed doubts on the obligation of subjects to their sovereign. The solution must be to rid the universities of such teachers.

There were four broadly defined groups of doctrines inculcated through the universities, each propounded in the interests of a particular church, sect or profession. The first was advanced by the clergy, originally Roman Catholic but taken up by the English church, and was couched in the language of scholasticism. A second was propounded by more radical protestants and was based on an appeal to private conscience and judgement. The third was constitutionalist, associated with the interests of the common lawyers and placed the law above the sovereign. The fourth was republican or democratic and was advanced through the teaching of the classics. All were examples of what Hobbes listed in Leviathan as seditious doctrines which poisoned the commonwealth (Lev xxix).

Hobbes of course expended a great deal of wit on ridiculing the meaningless language of the “school men”. He was, however, not so much concerned with the “insignificant speech” of the universities in itself as with the political programme he detected behind it. The obscurantism of the scholastics was deliberately designed to hide this programme from the people and the sovereign. Hobbes inferred this sinister intent from the very origins of European universities as papist institutions. The university teachers accordingly saw their task as being to dispute on behalf of the Pope and encroach on the rights of kings. “Blockheads”, such as Peter Lombard and Duns Scotus, sought “with unintelligible distinctions to blind men’s eyes” (Behemoth: 40-1; EW IV : 214). Elaborate superstructures of ideas were developed by such as Bellarmine to justify the supremacy of the church and its clergy over the civil sovereign. They treated rulers as sheep and not shepherds and sought, through powers of excommunication and the use of canon law, to exercise what was properly the province of the civil ruler. They would permit popes to depose rulers, contrary to the consent of their subjects

(Lev xiii : 336-66, 373-97; EW III : 489-536, 547-84). All these ideas were inconsistent with a true interpretation of Christ's simple teaching and it was this divergence which necessitated the resort to obscure academic language to hide their real purposes.

Hobbes did, with some reluctance, concede that with the Reformation and the reforms of the universities under Henry VIII and Elizabeth the papacy could no longer mount the same threat through the universities. But the papal clergy had merely been displaced by the Anglican for whom "the pulling down of the Pope was the setting them . . . in his place" (Behemoth : 56-7; EW VI : 234-5; also Lev xlvii : 478-9; EW III : 689-92 where this is more circumspectly expressed). They also insisted on their independence from the sovereign and their right to define the distinction between the civil and religious spheres. In this they were joined by the Presbyterians with their quasi-democratic church government and its implications for popular civil government. Here Oxford and Cambridge were joined in the rogues' gallery by the University of St Andrews, "the place where the Scottish ministers first learned to play the fool" (Behemoth : 171; EW VI : 378).

The Presbyterians took the first step on a slippery slope and hatched much more radical protestant sects. These were fed by some university teachers and by English scholars who returned from the continent after the persecutions under Mary, having imbibed ideas which diverged from Luther and Calvin just as these had from the Pope (Behemoth : 136; EW VI : 333). The core of their teaching was that each man was directed by his conscience as to religious truth and right and wrong. This ran counter to Hobbes's assertion that "the law is the public conscience" (Lev xxix : 212; EW III : 311). It was associated with claims that faith was a matter of divine inspiration rather than something to be learned by education and discipline from the sovereign. The danger lay in the private ambitions of the ministers who laid claim to leadership on the basis of a supposed direct line to God and who guided their

followers to suppose that in disobeying their sovereign they could be obeying Christ - what, Hobbes asked, “have we then gotten by our deliverance from the Pope’s tyranny, if these petty men succeed in the place of it..?” (Behemoth : 172; EW III : 379).

Many of these radicals are accused of combining their “democratic” theology with republican ideas picked up from their study of the classics which formed part of the university curriculum in rhetoric and moral philosophy (Costello 1958; Feingold 1997a; Johnston 1986; Skinner 1996). They learned from Cicero and Seneca to admire ancient republics and to believe that liberty was to be identified with popular government, instead of consisting, whatever the form of government, in the absence of external impediments and the silence of the law. Students were persuaded by Aristotle that there was some real distinction between “monarchy” and “tyranny” which enabled dangerous politicians to re-label regicide as tyrannicide and to hold up traitors such as Brutus as heroes (Lev ii : 10; EW III : 8). The consequence of such justifications of rebellion has been “the effusion of so much blood as I think I may truly say: there was never anything so dearly bought, as these western parts have bought the reading of the Greek and Latin tongues” (Lev xxi : 141; EW III : 203). Hobbes “cannot imagine how anything can be more prejudicial to a monarchy than the allowing of such books to be publicly read without present applying such correctives of discreet masters as are fit to take away their venom . . .” - a task which, as a great classical scholar, he was well-equipped to perform. Hobbes’s final target were those who advocated legalist or constitutionalist doctrines which sought to subjugate the sovereign to the rule of law. Characteristically Hobbes directed his attack on those he believed sought to benefit from the arguments - the lawyers who claimed to be the interpreters of the law and, by implication, the judges of the sovereign (Lev xxi : 213; EW III : 312-3; A Dialogue of the Common Laws : 55; EW VI : 5).

In the case of the lawyers responsibility for miseducation belonged less to Oxford and Cambridge than to the Inns of Court, described by Sir George Buck in 1612 as “the third university of England” (citation from Charlton 1965 : 169). The errors of the universities lay in their teaching the Aristotelian preference for the rule of law over the rule of men from which the false inference was widely drawn that the sovereign was subject to the law rather than being its maker. They were thus led to suppose that their obligation was to the law rather than the sovereign’s will, whereas they should have been taught that his will was the law (Lev xlvi : 465-6; EW III : 583-4). In the past the universities had also been tools of the clergy through their teaching of canon law, which Hobbes dismissed as counsels of advice masquerading as law consequent upon the influence of the papacy and the weakness of earlier rulers. However the abolition of canon law in England and the ban on its official teaching in the universities at the Reformation rendered this threat somewhat less relevant to Hobbes. The Inns of Court were however a real danger, training professional lawyers and providing much instruction to the landed gentry in property law and as Justices of the Peace. Hobbes directed his critique at both the intellectual basis of the education of the common lawyers and on some of their interpretations of the law. The common lawyers, exemplified by Sir Edward Coke, purported to possess an “artificial reason” based on study of cases and precedents on which they grounded their ability to interpret and declare the law (A Dialogue : 54-5, 61-2; EW VI : 4-5, 14-5; Lev xxvi : 176; EW III : 256). For Hobbes, underlying this was an attempt by the lawyers to advance their professional monopoly in their black arts. Accordingly he set out to undermine their claim to a special esoteric training by arguing that it could be rendered superfluous by the establishment of clear positive law. If law was recognised as the command of the sovereign, was clearly drafted, fully promulgated and properly indexed there would be no necessity for any lengthy education. Any sensible man

could learn to be a judge in a couple of months (A Dialogue : 56; EW VI : 6). All that was needed was an understanding of equity, which was identical with the natural law, and an appreciation of the intentions of the sovereign legislature.

By contrast the common lawyers, in seeking precedents which added error to error and pursuing obscure cases before fellow judges, were in fundamental conflict with the aims of lawmakers who sought clear, simple laws and speedy justice (Lev : 229-30; EW III : 336). In doing so they were responsible for formulating some of the most seditious doctrines which weakened the commonwealth, such as the idea that there is fundamental law or that private property was so absolute and exclusive as to deny the superior right of the sovereign to tax or otherwise tamper with it without the owner's consent (Lev : 198, 213, 217; EW III : 313, 319; Behemoth : 158; EW VI : 361). This supremacy of salus populi had, Hobbes alleged, never been questioned by the people until "they were abused in it by Seditious Teachers, and other prating Men" intent on establishing popular government "where the most ignorant and boldest talkers do commonly obtain the best preferments . . ." (A Dialogue : 64; EW VI : 18).

EDUCATIONAL REFORMATION

Faced with these educational failings the solution had to be a complete reformation of the elite education provided by Oxford and Cambridge which had hitherto "been to their nation, as the wooden horse was to the Trojans" (Behemoth : 40; EW VI : 213). Men had to be "brought to a love of obedience by preachers and gentlemen that imbibe good principles in their youth at the universities"; without this "we shall never have lasting peace, till the Universities themselves be . . . reformed" (Behemoth : 59; EW VI : 237). The universities are not to be abolished but "disciplined", although Hobbes does contemplate the establishment of a new

secular university devoted to the natural sciences and to true moral and civil science rather than to divinity which aims to “cry down the civil power” (Six Lessons to the Professors of Mathematics, EW VII : 345). He also claims that Gresham College was where one would find modern studies.

The sovereign’s authority to reform education stemmed from his office. It was part of his responsibility for public safety that he had the right “of appointing teachers and examining what doctrines are conformable or contrary to the defence, peace, and good of the people”. It was his task to ensure that his subjects were not misinformed about the sovereign’s rights or about the connection between their own interests and their duty (Lev lxxx : 220-5; EW III : 2323-31; Marshall 1980). This authority also arose from the sovereign’s ancient position as supreme pastor - one never questioned by Christ, despite papal claims to the contrary (Lev xlii : 366-7; EW III : 539).

The educative role of the sovereign is also derived from his status as supreme arbitrator of linguistic usage. Hobbes held that language was a tool which was readily used to advance particular interests (Lev xvii : 108; EW III : 157). This was especially true of the vocabulary of moral discourse which is employed subjectively. In the absence of any agreed common good or of a right reason which could discover it every man lays claim to be the judge of good and evil - which Hobbes identifies as the first amongst the seditious doctrines which threaten the commonwealth (Lev xxix : 212; EW III : 310). This anarchy of meanings can only be overcome by the agreement of all to set up an arbitrator whose reason will be taken “for right reason” and whose conclusions as to definitions of moral and political terminology will be treated as if they were true and binding (Lev v : 23; EW III : 31; A Dialogue : 67; EW VI : 22). It was not that the sovereign could make a doctrine true or false but that subjects were to accept publicly his determination and his right to prohibit the public teaching of doctrines,

“whether false or true” (An Answer, EW VI : 329). The usages of just, unjust, property, law are to be those of the sovereign lexicographer (see Wolin 1961 : 264-8; Ryan’s case for a more tolerant Hobbes turns partly on a less extreme interpretation of Hobbes’s nominalism. See Ryan 1983).

It is essential that the population is brought to see the world in this way. This does not involve the reconstruction of humanity through education to think new thoughts, as in Rousseau, so much as an education which re-directs human beings to recognise that their long-term interests coincide with their duty (see Parry forthcoming). Education supplies them with the “prospective glasses” of moral and civil science which enables them to focus on the long-run instead of the “multiplying glasses” which magnify immediate dangers (Lev xviii : 188, EW III : 170). The effect may be a cultural transformation (Johnston 1986) but not a change in human nature.

If the population is to look at the political world in this way their teachers must also be taught to do so. This is what requires the removal of “Aristotelity” from the university syllabus and its replacement by true moral and political science, or “Hobbeity” as Wilkins and Ward perceptively called it (Wilkins and Ward 1970 [1654] : 252). In anything that pertained to the security of the state, university teachers were to act as state servants. Their students would graduate as “well-principled preachers”. Their rhetoric (see Johnston 1986, Skinner 1996), grounded on true science, would confirm the people in their straightforward understanding of duty, which earlier university-educated preachers and teachers had undermined.

University professors protested. Hobbes was out of date. The papist accusations were grossly damaging and unfounded. Aristotelianism was no longer dominant. No university teacher was to be found who held the views Hobbes declared to be absurd and widely shared. Modern studies were far from neglected and Hobbes’s own geometry showed that his

judgement on these matters could hardly be trusted (for the state of university modern studies and responses to Hobbes and other critics see Feingold 1997a; Feingold 1997b; Curtis 1959; contributions to Ridder-Symoens 1996; Debus 1970). The ensuing polemic between Hobbes and his university opponents was conducted in language which was, to say the least, robust. Hobbes re-affirmed his dark suspicions of popery (Reputation of Mr Hobbes, EW IV : 329; Six Lessons EW VII : 344-5), considered the language of his critics to exemplify the Aristotelian obscurantism they disavowed and declared that they challenged civil order: “Down, I say; you bark at the supreme legislative power” (Six Lessons, EW VII : 350). Hobbes refused to budge. He had asserted in The Elements of Law that if the true doctrine concerning the law of nature were taught in the universities there was no doubt “but that young men, who come hither void of prejudice, and whose minds are yet as white paper, capable of any instruction, would more easily receive the same, and afterward teach it to the people, both in books and otherwise, than now they do to the contrary” (Elements of Law : 183-4; EW IV : 219). In his self-defence against charges of arrogance in wishing to use the universities to have his doctrines taught he remained adamant: “I desired not therefore that anything should be imposed upon them, but what (at least in my opinion) was good both for the Commonwealth and for them. Nay, more, I would have the state make use of them to uphold the civil power, as the Pope did to uphold the ecclesiastical.” (Six Lessons, EW VII : 344)

For Hobbes therefore elite education was a key to social and political reproduction. His ultimate aim might have been the negative one of civil peace. Nevertheless this could in itself justify the most extreme steps, going so far as to believing that it would have been politic to have massacred the one thousand Presbyterian ministers who had incited the murder of the King and whose teaching had led to one hundred thousand deaths (Behemoth : 95; EW VI :

282). In much more moderate vein in the closing passages of Leviathan he suggests that an appropriately educated and therefore docile population will enable the sovereign to reduce the size of the army since it would only be required to defend the state from foreign and no longer from internal, enemies (Lev Review and Conclusion : 496; EW III : 713). Nevertheless these negative objectives can only be attained if the sovereign is prepared to engage in a positive project of re-education.

Hobbes's answer to the second of the "hard questions" he posed, as if to himself, was perhaps uncharacteristically coy:

"... it is not fit, nor needful, for me to say either aye or no; for any man that sees what I am doing may easily perceive what I think."

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Geraint Parry is W.J.M. Mackenzie Professor of Government, University of Manchester.

Publications include Political Elites, John Locke and, jointly, Political Participation and Democracy in Britain. He is an Hon. Vice-President of the PSA. Currently he is working on a study of educational and political thought.