THE LEVIATHAN AS TEACHER:
THOMAS HOBBES' EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

A (VERY) WORKING PAPER

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Thomas Hobbes is not known for having much of a philosophy of education. His discussions of education are scattered throughout his works on other topics – the scientific method, human nature, and, of course, or the sovereign Leviathan-state. But a careful read through these texts show that education was very much on his mind.

I argue, in fact, that Hobbes' teaching on education was *central* to his overall political philosophy in ways that are not fully appreciated. (For the sake of brevity, I focus here only on the *Leviathan*.) The typical Hobbes scholar acknowledges his jabs at university scholasticism, his dismissal of classical liberal arts, and his embrace of Enlightenment Era materialistic determinism, but then moves on the real meat of his work as a matter of political philosophy. But this is to miss his point, possibly because we ourselves have become accustomed to state-sponsored, state-coerced public education. To appreciate the depth of his ideas about education, we have to consider him on his own terms and see what a novel thing state-mandated learning was for his time.

Why did Hobbes never write a treatise on education the way later Enlightenment figures did, especially John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau? We can speculate about a variety of reasons, but the least we can say is that Hobbes' teaching on education was subordinate to his teaching on the state just as education itself should be. We might even say that his political works, especially the *Leviathan*, *was* his educational treatise. John Locke's *Thoughts on Education* was a stand-alone meditation on education that had little to do with his political teaching; Rousseau's *Emile* was completely divorced from politics, probably because Rousseau sensed how unlikely his social contract was in his own time.

Hobbes, by contrast, was a more experienced teacher than they were, having been a tutor to several aristocratic families. He undoubtedly went through the soul-searching as all teachers

who ask what good they are truly doing their students. Most of the *Leviathan* was written while Hobbes was a tutor to young Charles the II living in exile in France, so the book was undoubtedly shaped by his encounter with the prince and his meditations on what it meant to teach. Above all, Hobbes saw an inherent connection between education and civil society, meaning any consideration of education for its own sake was precisely the error that he wished to correct. The political salvation that came from a Leviathan-state was the great gift he had offer his students, and anything beyond that would be a betrayal of his fundamental duty. In Hobbes' teaching, the classical separation between politics and ethics came to an end, and anyone who followed him can at last be said to "read in himselfe, not this, or that particular man; but Man-kind" (83).[1]

I. The Problem with Education

Education in Hobbes' time (at least liberal education) was deeply rooted in ancient traditions. Children of tutors were taught the rudiments of subsequent learning, while college students at places like Oxford and Cambridge were taught Greek and Latin grammar through ancient literature, logic and rhetoric, followed by the natural sciences and metaphysics. All of this was rooted in the works of one authority, Aristotle. Everyone, though, including the most ignorant, learned the Bible, whether through their own reading or oral traditions maintained by the church. Universities were willing to support the handful of adventurous scholars who could explore knowledge more experimentally, but everything had to be reconciled with that dual authority: the reason of Aristotle and the revelation of Scripture. Education, whether at the level of elementary grammar or the heights of philosophic speculation, could never depart from its

[1] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985). All subsequent citations will be from this text.

self-evident goal: to compel each student toward the end shared by all humans, both intellectually and morally. It was what Aristotle called happiness, and what the Bible called the sanctification that came with the presence of God.

This might have the happy byproducts of good citizenship, national loyalty, and patriotism, but the point was still something quite beyond the realm of politics. It was a human good that could appreciated quite apart from political life, and in some ways, even against it depending on the regime.

This explains Hobbes' frequent attacks on "the Schools" and "School men" with their single-minded mission of teaching according to these expectations. "The naturall Philosophy of those Schools, was rather a Dream than Science," he famously wrote – partly because they were theoretically untrue by Hobbes' modern standards, but more so because of their plainly destructive effects, and their tendency to render the state unable to maintain itself, leaving the people to suffer under political instability (686). The state may have all kinds of virtuous citizens who were free from the tyranny of their own passions, but they do not provide a strong state – and, given their independence of mind and ability to gain a popular following, they might even work against it.

These practical notions of freedom based on virtue acquired from "the Histories, and Philosophy of the Antient Greeks, and Romans" were especially deadly, since they inspired a reckless political liberty and the pursuit of self-government. A closer look at the ancient histories shows that the people involved were not noble defenders of freedom but a mass of "masterlesse men," suffering under "perpetuall war, of every man against his neighbor," yet all the while proudly defending "a full and absolute Libertie in every Particular man" (266). It was, in other words, an insane desire to go back to the state of nature.

This could hardly be appreciated in a world that was shaped so much by classical philosophy. Hobbes wrote: "[W]e are made to receive our opinions concerning the Institution, and Rights of Common-wealths, from Aristotle, Cicero, and other men, Greeks and Romanes," who had long praised civic liberty as somehow synonymous with human flourishing. Their influence was so complete, Hobbes points out, that even grammarians could not teach their specific topic without constant examples from Homer and Virgil. Hence,

> men from their childhood have gotten a habit (under a false shew of Liberty,) of favouring tumults, and of licentious controlling the actions of their Soveraigns; and again of controlling those controllers, with the effusion of so much blood; as I think I may truly say, there was never any thing so deerly bought, as these Western parts have bought the learning of the Greek and Latine tongues. (267-268)

Far preferable, according to Hobbes, was the modern kind of liberty: a quiet enjoyment of private life, the promise of security, comfort and ease, which were the greatest promises of a Leviathan state.

The root of this problem, though, from the universities who perpetuated the classical-scholastic tradition. They were known for their strange mixture of rigid doctrine and political subversion; they produced a large quantity of talented tutors (like Hobbes himself) as well as divines and other public figures who had the greatest impact on the popular mind. It was "manifest, that the Instruction of the people, dependeth wholly, on the right teaching of Youth in the Universities," Hobbes observed. But did the current universities, though chartered and supported by the kings of England, do that? "Hard questions," he said. Historically, it had only been since the reign of Henry VIII that the "Power of the Pope, was alwayes upheld against the Power of the Common-wealth, principally by the Universities," yet even after King Henry, universities never quite lost their Catholic sense of superiority to civil authorities – "and 'tis no wonder, if they yet retain a relish of that subtile liquor, wherewith they were first seasoned, against the Civill Authority" (384).

Hobbes was aware of how university professors would understand his own writing. Despite England's separation from Rome, they still tended to view philosophy as the "handmaid to the Romane Religion," and to accept no philosophy that was incompatible with Aristotle – this making it not philosophy at all, but "Aristotelity," as he called it. Here, "if any man by the ingenuity of his owne nature, had attained to any degree of perfection therein, hee was commonly thought a Magician, and his Art Diabolicall" (688).

But his criticism of current education went even deeper than this: he identified the roots his civilization in the coming together of Greek philosophy with Hebrew revelation – Athens and Jerusalem – and declared each of them "unprofitable" for the true tasks of designing a modern state. Greek philosophy, on one hand, embraced serious theoretical treatments of politics, but refused to find a way to apply it, other than the transformation of individual souls. Plato, for example, required that admission to his Academy depend on a geometry test, yet the content of the Academy had nothing to do with the real *use* of geometry, "[f]or Nature worketh by Motion; the Wayes, and Degrees whereof cannot be known, without the knowledge of the Proportions and Properties of Lines, and Figures." The Hebrew Torah, on the other hand, was harmless on its own, but the Jews who applied it "by their Lectures and Disputations in their Synagogues" made it into a "Phantasticall kind of Philosophy, concerning the incomprehensible nature of God, and of Spirits; which they compounded of the Vain Philosophy and Theology of the Graecians" (687). The coming together of reason and revelation was, then, nothing more than a double folly. Just as there had been a reformation in the church, it was time for a reformation in philosophy, by ensuring the final separation of Jerusalem from Athens, and ensuring that the approach to education followed this new enlightened approach.

II. Teaching the Truth about Human Nature

Following the ancient maxim to "know thyself," Hobbes makes his anthropology the foundation of his political thought. Over the course of several opening chapters in the *Leviathan*, Hobbes explains how we receive impressions through our senses; these are combined into imagination, meaning that wisdom is nothing but a greater accumulation of impressions into imagination useful for making predictions; and imagination forms trains of thought which are mistaken for rational arguments. In short, "[t]here is no other act of mans mind, that I can remember, naturally planted in him, so, as to need no other thing, to the exercise of it, but to be born a man, and live with the use of his five Senses," Hobbes writes. All of this is in great contrast with the teachings of the "Schools," which Hobbes take issue with repeatedly, full of men who "trust in books" who are like birds who "flitter at the false light of a glasse window, for want of wit to consider which way they came in" (105). Far better is a view of human beings that can actually be *applied and used*: beings whose whole consciousness comes from impressions and senses can receive the knowledge they need to be pure citizens, and hope for nothing more.

The overarching question here, though, is what exactly the value of this teaching is for students. Is it good for young people to view themselves as biomechanical machines, motivated fundamentally by fear, and drawn only to sensual delights? Aristotle could say with confidence that his own teaching, especially knowledge of our highest good, would be of great benefit to the one who pursues it. But could Hobbes say the same thing? It is if the idea of the human good is also limited to the level of civic needs, or "those qualities of man-kind, that concern their living together in Peace, and Unity," or what Hobbes calls "felicity." It is not peace, because peace is an end; felicity is instead simply the absence of turmoil. Accepting such an end depends on

recognizing “a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death” (161).

So much of Hobbes’ teaching seems designed to appeal to that toughest kind of audience: the teenager. His teaching is something clear and understandable for those who have witnessed such a scene. It begins precisely with the most natural emotion in the face of such things: fear, especially “fear of violent death” that he is so famous for. The fear among private citizens must be surpassed by the fear put into the young. For the young man, fear tends to be shame in the eyes of their friends, but Hobbes’ whole mission is to remedy that by reminding them that shame or praise will mean nothing to those who are dead. Exhortations to virtue and self-control are nearly impossible in the face of juvenile sensibilities, and they are so easily ignored; examples from history and poetry may get through to some, but so many others remain hot-blooded, anxious and confused. Only meditation on mortal fear can get through to a mob of teenage boys. They are, after all, the ones most likely to loot and pillage when civil society collapses; educating them rightly about their own inclinations and how the state is designed to exercise enough force to “keep them all in awe” is the surest way to guarantee felicity.

The great obstacle to teaching them this is “[v]aine-glory which consisteth in the feigning or supposing of abilities in ourselves, which we know are not.” This is most common among those “young men… nourished by the Histories or Fictions of Gallant Persons.” Old stories of courage and valor fuel their delusions. These things are “corrected often times by Age, and Employment,” but, of course, there are always more teenagers to replace the previous ones – or, worse, the making of a liberty-obsessed society that refuses to grow up (125).

The rebellious tendency in teenagers is itself the root cause of rebellion against stable governments, and this is precisely what education did in Hobbes’ day by assigning ancient texts,

"from which, young men, and all others that are unprovided of the Antidote of solid Reason, receiving a strong, and delightfull impression, of the great exploits of warre, atchieved by the Conductors of their Armies, receive withall a pleasing Idea, of all they have done besides"; or, worse, become filled with the "vertue of their popular form of government: Not considering the frequent Seditions, and Civill Warres, produced by the imperfection of their Policy"; or, worst of all, get it into their heads that they can overthrow kings and "make it lawfull, and laudable, for any man so to do; provided before he do it, he call him Tyrant" (369). They play off the nobler desires in the young mind to fight for what is good and noble, but they are incapable of keeping that fight from turning into one atrocity after another. Greek and Roman philosophers had insisted, of course, that such passions could be trained, and that the same driving force in young men that made them monsters could also make them gentlemen. But Hobbes finds this wholly inadequate: fear of the state and its punishments is far more useful for all.

III. Teaching the Necessity of the State

Hobbes insisted that education is central to the duty of the Leviathan, as the "sovereign representative," to educate the public. It is, in fact, "against his duty, to let the people be ignorant, or mis-in-formed of the grounds, and reasons of those his essentiall Rights." Hobbes' teaching on human nature and the purpose of the state are not only his contribution to political philosophy but the basic things that all people must know. Without it, "men are easie to be seduced, and drawn to resist him." The grounds of these rights "need to be diligently, and truly taught" because they are the most fundamental way that the state maintains itself. Indeed, "they cannot be maintained by any Civill Law, or terrour of legal punishment" (376). Government attacks on dissidents or shocking public executions are only signs that the sovereign failed to do

its more fundamental duty; the real task of the state's self-preservation should occur in the classroom. If students are taught clearly the reasons *why* they should submit, they will never need to be forced into submission as adults.

But can ordinary people understand Hobbes' teaching? Can we picture housewives or tutors teaching a book as large and dense as the *Leviathan*? Not at all according to Hobbes: it was not his book but the pride of learned and privileged classes that made his doctrines hard to accept, "whereas the Common-peoples minds, unlesse they be tainted with dependance on the Potent, or scribbled over with the opinions of their Doctors, are like clean paper, fit to receive whatsoever by Publique Authority shall be imprinted in them." As it was, common folk are expected to understand the "great Mysteries of Christian Religion," and such irrational doctrines as the trinity and the incarnation, so how could they not accept a strong teaching on their own nature and the need for sovereignty over them?

Still, Hobbes insisted that there was nothing particularly difficult about his work, nor did it take a great assertion of power to teach the people what the simplest exercise of reason can show them. By simply studying themselves, the people can easily admit that their deepest desire is for safety, comfort and ease and the enjoyment of private life, and recognize the value of a sovereign state that provides these things if they simply submit to it: "[in] the instruction of the people in the Essentiall Rights (which are the Naturall, and Fundamentall Lawes) of Soveraignty, there is no difficulty" (379). Of his book, *Leviathan*, Hobbes said, "it is short, and I think clear" (408).

So what are these short, clear, easy teachings? Students should be trained to love their own nation more than any other; know how to not be deceived "by the flattery of Popular men, to be seduced from their loyalty" (380-381); and to not dispute the sovereign in his decision-

making. If it happens that the "people cannot be taught this, nor when 'tis taught, remember it," certain national holidays should be set apart to cease all business and meditate on the sovereign and his laws (381). In this, Hobbes is aware that the true foundations of the state rest on the deep customs and mores of the people. But he is also sure that a well-designed sovereign does not leave culture and mores to chance but takes them entirely under his own control. With education, the state creates the culture that makes the state possible.

This means, of course, one simple prescription: Hobbes' *Leviathan* "may be profitably printed, and more profitably *taught in the Universities*, in case they also think so, to whom the judgment of the same belongeth," Hobbes wrote.

> For seeing the Universities are the Fountains of Civill, and Morall 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, there ought certainly to be great care taken, to have it pure, both from the Venime of Heathen Politicians, and from the Incantation of Deceiving Spirits (728, emphasis added).

The religious image is clear: just as the people need the sacrament of baptism, so too do they need at least a "sprinkling" of Leviathan wisdom as their initiation of the community that worships the Mortal God.

Conclusion

Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* is indeed taught in universities today, but not the way he wished: rather than a superior and authoritative text, it is taught somewhere between Niccolo Machiavelli's *Prince* and John Locke's *Second Treatise*, as only a step in the great dialectic of western political thought. His work is a small piece of liberal education: it provides the provocative "what if," a healthy challenge to our constitutional system and our bias in favor of freedom and self-government. We think of Hobbes when we see the riot police responding to violent mobs, the behavior of looters after a hurricane, or any number of post-apocalyptic or old

western films. But we dismiss him as paranoid, and hang on to notions of democratic liberty, the romantic rebel, the inherent goodness of all people.

Still, one Hobbesian impression remains: the assumption that education is so much in the public interest that government must take responsibility for it with coercive laws requiring students to attend, the support of tax money, and the assurance to the people that these schools really are performing the critical task of preparing students for citizenship. Even when it clearly fails to teach basic knowledge, public education remains a dire necessity; its shortfalls only show the need for more funding and more public support. This lasting Hobbesian impression might explain why critics of privatized education and school voucher programs are so harsh: allowing citizens to decide for themselves something that is obviously a public concern is like throwing us back into the horrors of the state of nature.