

# Three Views of Hobbes= Leviathan B Strauss, Oakeshott, Voegelin\*

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This paper explores the views of three well known and original twentieth century political philosophers on the significance of Hobbes= achievement in Leviathan - - those of Leo Strauss, Michael Oakeshott and Eric Voegelin, to name them in the order in which their major Hobbes writings appeared. The intent is to see if any new insight, however modest, is to be gained by such a juxtaposition of their views, insight into either Hobbes= project or into their own respective projects. The differences between Strauss and Oakeshott over Hobbes have received considerable attention in the scholarly literature;<sup>1</sup> my aim here in particular is to see what is to be gained by bringing into the debate Eric Voegelin=s view of Hobbes in his 1952 work, The New Science of Politics. Oakeshott=s views are taken from the writing collected in Hobbes on Civil Association; Strauss=s from his 1935 The Political Philosophy of Hobbes, and the section on Hobbes in his 1953 Natural Right and History.

In brief, and to state the obvious, Strauss sees Hobbes as the propounder of a bourgeois morality, placing (comfortable) self-preservation over more political considerations about the common good; Oakeshott sees Hobbes as the last of the scholastic nominalists, creating a masterful account of civil obligation and authority based upon radically individualist pre-suppositions; and Voegelin sees Hobbes primarily as an opponent of Puritan gnosticism who bordered upon generating a new gnosis by closing off completely the political question from the spiritual sources of human life. The interesting, manageable questions which present themselves here for

inspection in my view, are these: (1) was Strauss essentially correct in characterizing the Hobbesian project as the creation of a bourgeois morality, in spite of Oakeshott's protests? (2) How fair is Voegelin's claim that Hobbes generated a new political gnosis, i.e., a new attempt at certain, elite knowledge in the realm of the political? And (3) are there areas of agreement among the three over Hobbes' project, (in spite of apparent differences) and over the characteristics of political modernity, generally?

I. Hobbes as propounder of a new bourgeois morality? Although Strauss does not explicitly refer again to a bourgeois morality in his treatment of Hobbes in Natural Right and History (1953), the argument is fundamentally the same as in Strauss's 1935 work, The Political Philosophy of Hobbes, namely, that in spite of Hobbes' personal admiration for the qualities of the aristocracy, his Apolitical philosophy is directed against the aristocratic rules of life in the name of the bourgeois rules of life. His morality is the morality of the bourgeois world.<sup>@2</sup> Strauss also suggests that the centrality of the terrors of the state of nature in Leviathan's argument is tailored to supplement the political weakness of the bourgeois, i.e., the failure to think and act as citizens except under duress: AThe bourgeois existence which no longer experiences those terrors will endure only as long as it remembers them.<sup>@3</sup>

In Natural Right and History, Strauss is still attempting to demonstrate that the arrangements of Leviathan imply the worldview of the modern bourgeoisie and modern liberalism (allied with modern science) in their emphasis on the primacy of individuality and individual rights grounded in the natural passion for self-preservation;<sup>4</sup> and in their demand for as much certainty and universality as possible in the actualization of Leviathan's arrangements in political life, through control over extreme cases: AMan can guarantee the actualization of the right social order

because he is able to conquer human nature by understanding and manipulating the mechanism of the passions.<sup>@5</sup> (In this case, the near universal passion or fear of violent death).

Now, Oakeshott=s general criticism of this account of the Hobbesian project is to argue that Hobbes was not attempting to impart a substantial moral vision (the bourgeois or any other), but rather, in the interest of civil peace, simply to build upon certain already existent human passions, pointing out the rationality or utility in assenting to legitimate authority: AFor the apprehension of shameful death and the aversion from it are not reasons why we have an obligation to endeavor peace; these are the causes of motives of our doing so.<sup>@6</sup> One of Oakeshott=s criticisms of Strauss=s 1935 views, then, is that Hobbes was not propounding any substantive moral vision about how men might otherwise live their lives when not explicitly endeavoring peace.

Another of Oakeshott=s criticisms is that Strauss did not fully see (at least in his first book) that pride was not always used by Hobbes in a derogatory fashion, referring to Hobbes view that a man might keep his word not from fear from consequences, but from Aa glory or pride in appearing not to need to break it.<sup>@7</sup> Oakeshott speculates that such rare characters (like Sidney Godolphin, to whose memory Leviathan is dedicated) might be the first social contractors precisely from such a pride, careless of the risks of being first to surrender some of their natural rights; and Oakeshott goes so far as to assert that Hobbes Ahimself understood human beings as creatures more properly concerned with honour than with either survival or prosperity.<sup>@8</sup> (In an unpublished paper Oakeshott even suggested in Hegelian fashion that it was not death but the loss of recognition entailed in death which was the predominant fear among individuals in the state of actions.<sup>9</sup>) Yet, in my view, Oakeshott=s reason for why Hobbes did not pursue this line

of thought as a civil strategy, undermines Oakeshott's own claim contra Strauss that Hobbes was not the propounder of a Bourgeois morality.<sup>9</sup> Oakeshott cites Hobbes' own view on the rarity of this kind of pride in keeping one's word for its own sake: 'This, he says, is a generosity too rarely to be found to be presumed, especially in pursuers of wealth, command and sensual pleasure; which are the greatest part of Mankind.'<sup>10</sup> In my view, it is the wide-spread fear of the substantive aspect of death (i.e. the end of physical life implied in this quotation) which undermines Oakeshott's claim that for Hobbes human beings were more concerned with honor than either survival or prosperity; and which undermines Oakeshott's Hegelian - like claim in the unpublished paper that it was the loss of recognition entailed in death which most men feared.

Similarly, Oakeshott's other criticism of Strauss on this point, is not strong in my view. It is that Hobbes was not suggesting a Bourgeois morality<sup>9</sup> in the sense of 'a single approved condition of human circumstances for all conditions of men' but, as we have observed, the motives for obeying the civil law, rather than with 'what a man might otherwise do with his life.'<sup>11</sup> Yet, as I have argued elsewhere on this point:

... this observation is true as far as it goes; but is it not somewhat disingenuous to say that Hobbes is not interested in what a man might otherwise do with his life, when Hobbes lays out a systematic theory of human life relating it all back to the conditions for 'endeavoring peace'? And can Oakeshott's objection here overcome the force of Strauss's implicit argument (and my explicit one) that Hobbes propounded a Bourgeois morality<sup>9</sup> in the sense that he taught his countrymen to think in such a way as to link all to the attempt to secure certain control over the

threats to continued physical existence and comfort, at the expense of other goods.... Is this not an attitude historically characteristic of the middling, commercial classes?<sup>12</sup>

In my view, Oakeshott and Strauss each emphasize something present in Leviathan, neither of which necessarily entails the other. That is, Hobbes has cobbled together in his political theory at least three elements which can be made logically consistent with one another, but which have not always been historically present with one another. Hobbes has articulated an incipient commercial, individualist morality (in which freedom is lack of impediment to motions such as buying, selling, raising a family, and so on), which draws upon Roman procedural and legal ideas about the legitimacy of authority (without the Roman love of political glory) for its sustainability, all of which is grounded on a modern scientific emphasis on certainty and control over extreme cases, in this case thorough reliance upon the near universal passion, fear of violent death. Strauss has chosen to emphasize the modern bourgeois and Baconian/scientific aspects of Hobbes' thought (and they are surely there); Oakeshott has chosen to fix on the Roman insight in Hobbes' account that perceived obligation to law is primarily a matter of assenting to the legitimacy of the procedures by which it was made (rather than with agreeing with its substantive vision of things), and that this is a proven and sustainable approach to civil order.

**II. Hobbes as Propounder of a new Agnosis@?** How does this account of different Oakeshottian and Straussian emphases in the Hobbesian synthesis square with Voegelin's indictment of Hobbes for laying the groundwork for a new Agnosticism@ in his attempt to counter the Puritan Agnosis@? Obviously, Voegelin, like Strauss, sees Hobbes as having done more much than simply give an account of the motives for endeavoring peace; rather, as having provided a substantial vision of a new moral order which was revolutionary.

In the New Science of Politics (1952), Voegelin is concerned to identify, name, and describe a comprehensive approach to knowledge and political action characteristic of modernity, which he calls modern gnoticism, and which has identifiable roots reaching back to Joachim of Flora in the thirteenth century. In brief, Voegelin sees this orientation arising to make up for the sense of loss entailed in the Christian de-divination of the pagan world of political action, and the relegation of (a reduced) public meaning in history to the realm of the spiritual, controlled by the Church. Although only one strand of modernity (co-existing with classical and Christian influences), modern political gnotisicisms, from Cromwell to Lenin, have all been characterized by the attempt to re-infuse the realm of political action and history with redemptive meaning, by creating a controlled and manipulated dream world collapsing the fundamental tensions and dualisms inherent in the structure of human reality; and promising some sort of human perfection through some version of an immamentized Christian eschaton existing in some sort of simplified contraction of the broad cultural differentiation achieved in the classical and Christian experiences.

Now, in the case of Hobbes, Voegelin argues that in order to counter the Cromwellian gnosis, he (Hobbes) laid the basis in Leviathan for a new, unsustainable contraction of human experience, symbolized in the coincidence of the respective truths of the English church and state:

... when he tried to fill the vacuum by establishing Christianity as the English civil theology. He could entertain this idea because he assumed Christianity if properly interpreted, to be identical with the truth of society .... He denied the existence of a tension between the truth of the soul and the truth of society .... On the basis of this assumption, he could indulge in the idea of solving a

crisis of world-historical proportions by tendering his expert advice to any sovereign who would take it.

... Hobbes reveals his own Gnostic intentions; the attempt at freezing history into an everlasting constitution is an instance of the general class of Gnostic attempts at freezing history into an everlasting final realm on this earth.<sup>13</sup>

Now, what is to be said about Voegelin=s characterizations of Hobbes in this regard, and, also, what might Oakeshott have said about these characterizations? In my view, Voegelin=s attempt to lump Hobbes into the mold of Gnostic thinkers who attempt to freeze history on earth is weak on this last point. Although Hobbes does say that Leviathan has provided a model for an everlasting constitution (less the fact of external violence), this is clearly a rhetorical trope, unlikely to influence any but the weakest minds capable of reading it. Voegelin=s more serious charge, in my view, is that Hobbes has laid the groundwork for a new political gnosis by severing all spiritual sources of political life, and severely compacting a richly differentiated civilizational inheritance, held together by spiritual and political tensions. Hobbes may have seen himself as providing a rhetorical technique and a political model for deflating and containing fanaticisms,<sup>14</sup> but, on Voegelin=s view, he is nurturing a new form of secular fanaticism by conflating the truths of the soul and the truths of society, and in the call for a state religion interpreted by the sovereign (even though Hobbes thought he had avoided this kind of thing in his conception of a very loose state religion which did not inquire deeply into the realm of the individual conscience).

Voegelin and Strauss would seem to agree on this general point, in spite of different formulations, that Hobbes has done something worrisome in encouraging his readers and

political contemporaries, to take all their bearings from the prospect of controlling and avoiding at all costs a worst case scenario - - violent death. For Voegelin, this approach compacts a highly differentiated inheritance, and closes off human open-ness to the divinely transcendent in experience; for Strauss, this approach reduces the human possibility by elevating to the level of an important life-goal what should at best be a means for higher things. And, on this point, it is difficult not to agree that any civilization which continuously and continually takes its bearings from avoidance of worst cases at all costs, is likely over time to dry up its spiritual, spirited, and creative sources and resources.<sup>15</sup> On this point, Voegelin and Strauss remind us that Leviathan is not a book for all seasons, but rather a book at its most appropriate during long periods of such civil and social upheaval, that most people would agree that sovereign power is not so hurtful as the want of it.<sup>16</sup> (And, even then, there are other, Polybian and Madisonian alternatives, more likely to sustain moderate political life over time, if fortunate enough to be instituted.) And, on Oakeshott=s view, we have seen, Leviathan is primarily about clarifying, and strengthening the motives for endeavoring civil peace, and there is no way to address the origins of the kind of grand questions raised by Voegelin and Strauss in connection with Hobbes, short of elementary logical and categorical errors of irrelevance.<sup>17</sup>

### **III. Areas of Agreement Concerning Modernity Among Strauss, Voegelin and Oakeshott?**

Oakeshott=s critique of modern Rationalism (though, as we have seen, not to include Hobbes),<sup>18</sup> Strauss=s critique of political modernity, and Voegelin=s critique of modern gnosticism all share common suspicions about the direction and methods of the politics (from left to right) of the past four centuries. Very generally, all see a politics incapable of attaining its own goals through its chosen means owing to fundamental confusions about the structure of political and human reality as it is lived and discovered by discerning practitioners.



Consider in this connection the following. Oakeshott criticizes what he calls modern Rationalism (the predominant post-Renaissance intellectual tradition) for destruction of evolved skills and moral habits in its misguided attempt to fashion a universally applicable method for the ubiquitous satisfaction of felt needs.<sup>19</sup> Strauss criticizes modern liberalism for the misguided and alienated attempt to achieve wide-spread human fulfillment through elevation to the status of goals or ends of what should be (by the Eudaimonian standard of nature) no more than political means (e.g., freedom and security).<sup>20</sup> And Voegelin criticizes modern gnosticism for its creation of dream worlds maintained only by authoritative manipulation and ideological distortion, in a misguided attempt to deliver expert knowledge capable of permanently collapsing the structural tensions of political existence.<sup>21</sup> Each of these twentieth century thinkers felt a fundamental uneasiness in the face of the various politics of the left and right they witnessed (though not equally so), and each sought in previous centuries for the origins and antecedents of the basic confusions they thought they saw. And each would probably have also agreed that a discerning reading of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Politics should be capable of forestalling and/or containing at least some of the confusion and mis-matched ends and means they observed in the politics of modernity.<sup>22</sup>

### **Notes**

1. For a discussion of some of the issues, see Wendell J. Coats, Jr., Oakeshott and His Contemporaries (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), 39-64
2. Leo Strauss, The Political Philosophy of Hobbes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 120-121.
3. Strauss, The Political Philosophy of Hobbes, 122.

4. Or, in the language of Natural Right and History, all bourgeois political duties, such as they are, are derived from individual natural rights grounded in the desire for (comfortable) self-preservation. For the view, (which I cannot follow entirely) that Strauss significantly modified his characterization of Hobbes in Natural Right and History, see Pit Kapetanovic, Die Hobbes-Rezeption bei Leo Strauss und Michael Oakeshott, unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Philosophy, University of Heidelberg, March 2000.

5. Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 194.

6. Michael Oakeshott, Hobbes on Civil Association (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 94.

7. Cited by Oakeshott, Hobbes on Civil Association, 122.

8. Oakeshott, Hobbes on Civil Association, 125.

9. Cited and characterized by Patrick Riley, in Michael Oakeshott, Philosopher of Individuality, @ The Review of Politics 54, no. 4 (Fall 1992), 657: ADeath itself is not the significant thing in Hobbes's argument .... The point is being killed .... It signifies failure in the >race= for precedence@ See, also, in this connection Oakeshott's 1974 review article, ALogos and telos,@ which interprets the Hobbesian state of nature as a highly Asocial@ condition. Michael Oakeshott, Rationalism in Politics, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 356.

10. Oakeshott, Hobbes on Civil Association, 124.

11. Oakeshott, Hobbes on Civil Association.

12. Coats, Oakeshott and His Contemporaries, 61.

13. Eric Voegelin, The New Science of Politics (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 159-60.

14. For a characterization of the influence of Hobbes= philosophic and rhetorical style on subsequent English philosophy, see the conclusion to Quentin Skinner, Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
15. That is, as a sustained focus, concentration on worst or extreme cases closes off opportunities for the highest and fullest human potential, one of the most common-sensical insights of the Eudaimonian philosophical inheritance, in my view. For the now unfamiliar criticism of Eudaimonian ethics (Athe life of the psychikos@) as spiritually deadening, see the epistles of St. Paul, especially First Corinthians, Chapter 2, and St. Augustine, The City of God, Book 19.
16. Though Hobbes would reply that reading of Leviathan in all seasons is precisely the remote and pre-emptive cure for such civil upheavals.
17. For Oakeshott=s views on the logical error involved in passing loosely across different categories of inquiry, see Experience and Its Modes (1933) and the first essay of On Human Conduct (1975).
18. Oakeshott thought Hobbes viewed human beings as primarily creatures of passion and faith who could be aided by a limited and carefully constructed form of nominalist reasoning understood as addition and subtraction of names. See, in this connection, the introduction to his 1946 edition of Leviathan.
19. See the title essay to Rationalism in Politics, either edition.
20. A.... Locke identifies the rational life with the life dominated by pain which relieves pain .... The painful relief of pain culminates not so much in the greatest pleasures as in having those things which produce the greatest pleasures=. Life is the joyless quest for joy.@ Strauss, Natural Right and History, 250-51.
21. AThe identification of dream and reality as a matter of principle has practical results which may appear strange .... Gnostic societies .... will recognize dangers to their existence when they develop, but such dangers will ... be met by magic operations in the dream world such as disapproval, moral condemnation, declarations of intention, resolutions .... The intellectual and

moral corruption which expresses itself in ... such magic operations may pervade a society with the weird, ghostly atmosphere of a lunatic asylum ....@ Voegelin, The New Science of Politics, 170.

22. I allude simply to the obvious difficulty in vulgarizing Aristotle=s ethical and political views in the direction of any sort of ideological extremism, and to the balance nurtured by a reading of his taxonomy of the moral and intellectual virtues.