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Philip Pettit: Made with Words

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Introduction

I ARGUED IN A PREVIOUS BOOK that Thomas Hobbes was one of the earliest critics, and perhaps the most significant opponent, of the republican way of thinking about freedom and government (Pettit 1997). His ideas about freedom, although fashioned to fit with an absolutist view of the state, were entirely original and played a crucial part in the development of classical liberalism—a later, nonabsolutist alternative to republican theory—in the nineteenth century. It was that fact about his views that led me to become interested in Hobbes’s thought. And it is a good reason for being interested, since he sponsored a radical, conceptual innovation in thinking about liberty.

But there are many, many other reasons for taking an interest in Hobbes, as I have discovered since writing my earlier book. That discovery came about as a result of two graduate seminars on Hobbes that I taught at Princeton University with Dan Garber, first in 2003 and then in 2005. We set out to develop a picture of Hobbes in the round, taking account of his writings in the many different areas where he worked. I cannot overstate my gratitude to Dan for exposing me to the riches of Hobbes’s thought and the wealth of connections between his thinking in different domains. Nor can I overstate my appreciation for the contributions of our students to the seminars in which we found our way through the Hobbesian texts. They were sparkling, memorable events.

Unsurprisingly, I came to refine the details of my views about Hobbes on liberty, as will be clear from the discussion in chapter 8 (Pettit 2005). But more surprisingly, I came to think that Hobbes is one of the most significant and least appreciated of modern thinkers. I like to move between different areas of philosophical inquiry, building on the analogues and connections that bubble up in that exercise, and seeking out the bigger picture that such shuttle research makes possible. I found that in this respect, if not in his political views, Hobbes is about as congenial a master as I could wish for. He is the very model of a thinker who ranges over many topics, searching out commonalities and connections across the many domains he covers.

But it is not just the broad, webbed quality of his work that struck me in this recent reading. I was even more forcibly impressed by the way his thought develops around a single idea that was quite original to him.

This is the idea, in the title of my book, that human minds are made by words.¹ More specifically, it is the idea that by nature human beings are more or less as other animals, and that what makes them different, giving them the capacity for thought, is the impact of a cultural development: the invention of speech at some distant time in the past. Language is an invented technology, not a natural inheritance, according to Hobbes, and it is a technology that transformed our kind, introducing a deep cleavage between us and otherwise comparable animals.

This idea now has wide currency, of course. It often surfaces in scientific discussions of cultural evolution and the great break that appears to have occurred among anatomically modern human beings over fifty thousand years ago (Tattersall 2002).² And it is a recurrent motif in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantic thought, receiving typical expression in Percy Bysshe Shelley's line from *Prometheus Unbound*: "He gave man speech and speech created thought."³ But the idea appeared first in Hobbes and may ultimately derive from him. He is the inventor of the invention of language. He is the inventor of the idea that language is a transformative technology that has shaped our species, accounting for our characteristic features on both the positive and negative side of the ledger.

Hobbes's thesis about the transformative part played by speech shapes every aspect of his theory. It enables him to be a materialist about the human mind, giving him an account of what makes us special that he could invoke in place of a Cartesian dualism; it is no accident that he aired the thesis within three years of René Descartes' first excursion into these topics. It makes it possible for him to develop a theory of reasoning that equates it with the manipulation of words or symbols; a theory of personhood according to which persons are essentially spokespersons who can give their word to others and thereby "personate" themselves; and a theory of group agency that equates incorporation with rallying behind the words of a collective representative or spokesperson. The thesis allows Hobbes to analyze the predicament that makes peace and polity so hard to attain, tracing this to the effect on people's passions of having the words that enable them to worry about the future and fret about their standing relative to one other. And finally, it provides the materials with which he develops his story about the role that sovereign and commonwealth play as they marshal people's speech-derived capacities—their ability to reason, personate, and incorporate—in order to rescue them from their speech-derived predicament. So at any rate I try to show.

How many of these ideas remain worthy of attention in their own right? The idea that language is a transformative technology that provides a naturalistic explanation of what makes us special has not yet been mined, I suspect, for its full riches; this idea certainly retains

contemporary significance. But so does the idea that reasoning is an exercise that presupposes access to language (Pettit 2007a). So does the claim that persons are marked by the role they can play in committing themselves to one another and, more broadly, proving themselves fit to be held mutually responsible (Pettit 2001). And so does the theory of incorporation, which rightly emphasizes the crucial role of representation in the formation and maintenance of a group agent (Pettit 2003).⁴

What about the idea that the capacity for speech, enabling us to worry about the future and our standing relative to others, has a warping effect on our desires? Hobbes thinks that access to speech introduced *amour propre*, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous phrase—roughly, the desire for enduring preeminence—as distinct from the *amour de soi* that we share with simple animals, the natural concern for our day-to-day welfare. The role of such a concern for relative standing, whether in the relation between individuals or groups, is of first importance (Brennan and Pettit 2004). It appears in the resentment associated with relative dispossession, and the rage that disrespect and humiliation—even disrespect for others in one's ethnic, religious, or cultural reference group—can foster. Those who cherish the utterly implausible idea that our rational self-interest will generally block any otherwise unproductive concern with position and status sometimes describe themselves as Hobbesians. Their self-description couldn't be further off the mark. Hobbes would have regarded their psychology as shallow, and the policies it suggests as silly and dangerous.

This observation argues strongly for the continuing importance of Hobbes's ideas about human appetite and passion, though in his thinking about this topic he consciously or unconsciously makes an implausible move. While he rightly marks the concern that we human beings feel for our standing relative to others, he proceeds on the assumption that this always takes the form of a desire for superior standing; he ignores the fact that often we are content with the standing of equals. We may take pleasure in our power over others, as he contends, and the acknowledgment of that power—the honor, as he calls it—that usually follows. But we also take pleasure in not being under the power of others—in having a basis of protection and redress against them—and in its being a matter of general awareness that we enjoy that undominated standing; this enables us to command their respect and not have to live at their mercy. We crave the sort of nondomination that republicans have long equated with freedom—an equation that Hobbes roundly rejected—and the recognition or status that goes with this being a matter of common awareness (Pettit 1997, 2007c).

There is a crucial difference between the desire to be superior to others and the desire not to be inferior. It is not possible for everyone to be

superior to others, since everyone cannot be top dog or even be above average. But things can be arranged, at least within certain domains, so that everyone can have the satisfaction of not being inferior to others. Hobbes asserts that people are locked in inevitable conflict, as each seeks superiority in resources and reputation, and many are vain enough to think they can attain it. And it is that alleged fact—that state of nature—that enables him to present the absolute state, notoriously, as the only practicable or indeed legitimate regime. Yet things will look very different, even from within an otherwise Hobbesian perspective, if people are acknowledged to find a high degree of satisfaction in having equal standing with others. Let that be granted, and it is possible to be much more sanguine about what people can achieve on the basis of the Hobbesian resources of ratiocination, personation, and incorporation. The mixed constitution of the republican tradition that Hobbes mocked so relentlessly begins to look like a real political possibility—as indeed it has proved to be, with the successes of constitutional democracy.

I have written this short book in the hopes of persuading others of the originality and unity that the invention-of-language theme gives Hobbes's work. The line of argument is straightforward. Human beings are distinguished from other animals by the transformation that occurred as a result of the invention of language. This gave people three positive capacities, associated with ratiocination, personation, and incorporation, but it also had a dark side: it warped their appetites, focusing their attention on the future as well as the present, and on their standing relative to others as well as their private welfare. The dark side means that by nature—by the second nature that they share in the wake of language—human beings are put in a situation of inescapable competition. But their positive capacities show them a way out: that of incorporating under a sovereign to whom they ascribe more or less absolute authority.

This line of argument is reflected in the eight main chapters of the book. The first chapter presents Hobbes's view of the simple mind that human beings share with other animals, and the second shows the difference that words make to that mind. Chapters 3 to 5 then explore the bright side of that difference, looking at ratiocination, personation, and incorporation, and chapter 6 explores the dark side, looking at the warping effect that words have on desires. Chapter 7 presents Hobbes's view of the state-of-nature predicament to which their warped desires lead human beings, and chapter 8 outlines the solution that absolute sovereignty is supposed to provide.

The book, I should add, might well have had a ninth chapter. This would have explored the dark side of words in warping human beliefs

as distinct from human desires. It would have investigated the effects of words in leading people to profess parroted beliefs that they do not understand; to snare themselves in confused and incoherent commitments; and to let doctrines diversify and generate conflict under the pressure of amour propre. All of these themes get an airing in the book, but I decided against a separate treatment of the effects of words on belief because this would have required an investigation of Hobbes's views on religion. That investigation would have stretched my resources of scholarship as well as shifted the focus from issues of continuing philosophical concern to questions of a somewhat more arcane kind.

Not only is the book selective in abstracting from Hobbes's views on religious belief. It is also selective in the attention given to issues of interpretation. The book offers a brisk reading of the Hobbesian corpus, using footnotes to remark on where that reading departs from the views of a selection of commentators. The best argument for the controversial points in my interpretation may be that they hang together in a reading of Hobbes that makes him substantially more interesting and significant than he often appears—certainly more interesting and significant than he previously appeared to me. In order to highlight the unity of his thought, as that appears under this reading, I have provided a proposition-by-proposition summary of the chapters at the end of the book.

Following the approach associated with historians of thought like John Pocock, John Dunn, and Quentin Skinner, I am fully persuaded that “the history of thought should be viewed not as a series of attempts to answer a canonical set of questions, but as a sequence of episodes in which the questions as well as the answers have frequently changed” (Skinner 1988, 234). I have paid some service to this principle, indicating a number of striking occasions when Hobbes was focused on issues and pressures specific to the world in which he lived. Inevitably in a book of this short compass, however, I have often had to abstract from such contextual matters in order to concentrate on the unifying argument that I find in his work.

In referring to contemporary pressures on his thought, I often mention episodes in Hobbes's life, and it may be useful to recall the high points. These include his lifelong association with the Cavendishes from when he became a family tutor in 1608, as a young Oxford graduate of twenty; his early expertise in humanist learning and rhetoric; his brief period as secretary to Francis Bacon in the 1620s; the publication of his translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* in 1629; his exposure to the new sciences in the 1630s; the period he spent in Paris, associating with leading French thinkers, between 1640 and

1651; the exchanges, after his return to England, with contemporary scientists like Robert Boyle and John Wallis; and his retirement in a Cavendish country residence from 1675 to his death in 1679, at the age of ninety-one. This life pattern is worth keeping in mind as we look at Hobbes's ideas (for background and biography, see Schuhmann 1998; Martinich 1999; Malcolm 2003, chapter 1).

The ideas relevant to the concerns of this book had more or less stabilized from about 1640, when Hobbes circulated *The Elements of Law*. I shall try to vindicate this claim by using a wide range of Hobbesian sources in support of my interpretation and by occasionally commenting on apparent signs of second thought. There is some development in his views, of course, as I indicate at various points, but on the whole I find it remarkable how stable and unchanged the basic ideas remain throughout the texts I use (see also Tuck 1988a, 1988b; Schuhmann 2004).

The main texts on which I draw, with the English editions I use, and the abbreviations I employ in citations are as follows:

- EL *The Elements of Law*, circulated in 1640, published in 1651 (Hobbes 1994a)
- DCv *De Cive*, published in 1642, second edition in 1647, in Latin (Hobbes 1998b)
- L *Leviathan*, published in 1651, translated into Latin in 1668 (Hobbes 1994b)
- DCr *De Corpore*, published in 1655, in Latin, translated into English in 1656 (Hobbes 1839a)
- DH *De Homine*, published in 1658, in Latin (Hobbes 1998a)
- B *Behemoth*, written by 1670, published in 1679 (Hobbes 1990)
- D *A Dialogue between a Philosopher, and a Student of the Common Laws of England*, written between 1668 and 1675, published posthumously in 1681 (Hobbes 2005)

I have incurred a number of serious debts in the course of writing this book. I have already recorded my gratitude to Dan Garber and our students in the Princeton seminars that we taught together. I also owe a debt to Kinch Hoekstra, Quentin Skinner, and Richard Tuck for many exchanges on Hobbesian and related matters. And I owe a special debt to the three of them, as I do to Dan Garber and Duncan Ivison, for their detailed comments on an earlier draft. These friends and colleagues are outstandingly generous citizens in our frail and sometimes frazzled republic of letters. Had I acknowledged their influence point by point, I would have had to add hundreds of footnotes.

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