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Hobbes, Aristotle, and the Politics of Metaphysics

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Devin Stauffer's latest book, *Hobbes's Empire of Light*, will rank among the more important of recent contributions to the study of Hobbes. The author covers the most pressing issues in the field and, while always fair, is clear in his conclusions. Indeed, it is a model of both close reading of the primary sources and judicious attention to the vast, and ever-expanding, secondary literature.

The three central chapters of the book address Hobbes's theological writings. No word of Hobbes's pen seems to have been ignored and the secondary literature the author has consulted is extensive. However, all these powers seem wasted on their target. I admit to a strong bias in the author's favor on this topic. I have never found the "Christian Hobbes" a convincing reading of the texts. That is not to say these chapters can be overlooked without a loss. They are central to the argument of the book. They are just not as necessary for some readers. My only quibble with this section is that the author does not deal with the thinness of Hobbes's criticisms of Christianity. His rhetorical powers are formidable, but there is little more than what one finds from the village atheist sitting at the end of the bar.

Scholars have been frustrated for generations with the fact that Hobbes rarely if ever confessed to any positive influences on his philosophy. His targets, however, he was more than willing to name. Yet Stauffer seems to be the first to make it nearly systematic. What I am referring to is the recurring contrast he draws between Hobbes and Aristotle, at least in the first chapters of the book. This comparison drops out in the chapters on religion.

Stauffer compares Hobbes to Aristotle, pointing to their differences and pointing sometimes to an argument or method of Aristotle's that he thinks Hobbes might have used. For instance, he posits a difference between Aristotle's method of looking at the political world to discern from the opinions and debates of the participants possible insights regarding politics itself. Hobbes, he notes correctly, did not follow this procedure. He argues that Hobbes had to deal with the complicating factor of Christianity, something Aristotle did not. Aristotle could ignore religion, and largely did, without that seeming to affect his argument at all. Hobbes, by contrast, could not ignore the Christianity because it was of a different order from paganism. This is of course why the three central chapters of the book address Hobbes's encounter with this problem.

Stauffer's first chapter ends with Hobbes's materialism. Ranging as it does from a strict dogmatism to something a bit more prudential, it becomes the dominant feature of Hobbes's worldview as developed in this book. Stauffer follows Leo Strauss in describing Hobbes as a methodical materialist rather than a metaphysical materialist. Hobbes had to content himself with the former simply because he could not demonstrate the latter (39). Again, I have nothing to dispute in this interpretation. Where I would press the author is in both his readiness to accept Hobbes's dismissal of metaphysics and willingness to accept Hobbes's claim that he actually took any of it seriously.

As Stauffer points out, Hobbes claimed we could simply dispense with the verb "to be" and all of its forms and not be the worse for it (23-24). While clever—Hobbes was always clever—it is far from an adequate encounter with the science of being. The author's curious claim that Aristotle (22), himself, never intended to develop anything like a rigorous study of being does not get him

off the hook. Instead, it seems more clearly a case of Hobbes merely waiving away something he did not want to address. Later, Stauffer finds no evidence that Hobbes ever tried to understand religious experience from the inside (181). Likewise, there is no evidence he even for a moment took seriously that metaphysics could be more than vague talk about nonsense. That hardly does justice to the phenomenon, by which I mean not only the science of metaphysics but also our encounter with the world.

Hobbes's response to the challenge of metaphysics resembles Machiavelli's response to the problem of free will in chapter 25 of *The Prince*, and the two are not unrelated. Machiavelli decided to split the difference between free will and determinism simply to get on with life. Hobbes dismissed the metaphysical problems in order to get on with his political project. While Stauffer tries to reconstruct a closely reasoned argument that Hobbes's works might divulge a systematic account of nature, he must admit, in the end, that the real issue for Hobbes always comes down to the political (24). And so he argues that Hobbes's main problem with Aristotle was not the Aristotelian preference for democracy (a peculiar reading of the *Politics* that deserves further treatment) but the hostage to fortune presented by his "metaphysical" work (28). Talk of essence and accident, *telos* and *pros hen* equivocity simply made it ripe for hijacking by later Christian—specifically Catholic—theologians.

The final two chapters of the book turn to Hobbes's political project, the heart of which Stauffer elegantly summarizes as follows: "*if justice is radically simplified, then it is rational*" (230). A simplified and rational account of justice might also be less likely to be hijacked. The similarity to his approach to the question of being cannot be set aside. While a methodical materialism might suffice where a metaphysical materialism is impossible to demonstrate, so too a much truncated notion of justice will be able to be implemented. But how satisfying would either be?

Stauffer opens his book with a general observation of discontent with the political project of modernity. It is only at the end where he explains why this might be the case. He lists four areas in which Hobbes's counsel to sovereigns is to be far more mild than they need to be by right (251-55): the personal freedom of subjects, their commercial activities, criminal punishment, and sexual morality. (One can see Machiavelli's influence here, too, but Stauffer does not distract the reader with this.) It is the world we now live in, for better or worse, the worse being "the shallow, frenzied ways in which modern men try to distract themselves from their own dissatisfaction" (276). But whence that dissatisfaction?

Stauffer makes the suggestive remark that Hobbes's attempt to unite politics and philosophy necessarily diminishes both while simultaneously making exaggerated claims for each. This is surely right, but the causality could be reversed. Hobbes systematically built Machiavelli's anti-theological ire into an anti-metaphysical ire that has characterized modern philosophy ever since. Yet if theology and metaphysics are impossible and methodical materialism is all we are left with, those shallow, frenzied distractions seem entirely appropriate. But if there is more to life the way to discover what that might be requires first understanding how we got here. For that project, this remarkable book is indispensable.