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Returning to Hobbes: Reflections on Political Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

My paper ‘Hobbes and the Motivations of Social Contract Theory’ was published in this journal in 1994. In this contribution I explain the background that led me to write that paper at an early stage of my career, relating the explanation to my education as a student at UCL, and, briefly, at Harvard and contrasting the methodological approaches I experienced in the two departments. The Hobbes paper itself offers a type of ‘rational reconstruction’ of Hobbes, drawing on the logic of different social contract arguments, and while there is much in the paper I still agree with, it assumes an approach to Philosophy that I would not adopt now.

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My piece, ‘Hobbes and Motivations of Social Contract Theory’, published in (Wolff 1994), feels, in some ways at least, a world away. Although, ideally, to contribute to this issue I would now write a paper on how my views on the topic have developed over the decades, that paper was more of a record of a path later abandoned than part of a project that still runs. It is not a paper I would write now, or especially encourage others to write, as it reflects a style of doing philosophy that I was taught, but now regard as rather limited, bordering on arrogant. So in this short piece, rather than reflect on the content of the piece in detail I want to do two things. The first is to explain how I came to write that paper – or at least how I would now tell that story – and the second is to discuss some aspects of the conception of philosophy I inherited, and how in the work I now admire most that conception has been transcended. I suppose these two issues come down to: why did I write this

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paper, and how did I write it? Though these are separate questions I will mostly answer them together.

The question of why I wrote the paper is connected to my rather unconventional entry into academia as a lecturer in the Philosophy Department at UCL. Previously I had been an undergraduate at UCL, starting in 1980, and then, for two years, an MPhil student, which was a degree taken by three examination papers (for me Moral Philosophy, Political Philosophy, and Marxism) and a 25,000 word thesis, which I wrote on Exploitation. I had enrolled for my BA at the age of 21, having had an office job for the previous three years. Having done poorly at school I had to take another A level to qualify for entry (my two A levels are in Economics and Law). I took university studies seriously, and worked hard. I did well enough in my BA to get a grant to do the two year MPhil, and enrolled with the idea of working with G.A. (Jerry) Cohen. However, Cohen left UCL to take up a chair in Oxford in the January of my second MPhil year, and I worked with others to complete my thesis. Although I, and others, regard myself as a Cohen student, I only really worked with him as a graduate student for a little over a year.

At that time the maximum number of years of government funding in the UK for graduate work was three, and I had already had two years at UCL. There was simply no funding stream available in the UK that would have allowed me to go to Oxford to work with Cohen on a doctorate and I had no other resources available, and so I applied to study for a PhD in the US, where more funding opportunities were possible. I was successful in my applications and had a place, and generous financial support, to take a PhD at Harvard.

However, before I left for the US, UCL decided that they needed to replace Cohen, and chose to advertise for someone who could take over his very unusual teaching profile. This was 1985, and the UK had been through the Thatcher cuts to the universities, with Philosophy suffering so badly that it had become a national news story. Several departments had closed, vacancies were being filled by transfer of existing staff, and many highly talented and qualified philosophers, who otherwise would have had a reasonable expectation of a good academic job, were taking temporary or part-time positions, or leaving entirely. Hence if UCL had advertised with a different profile they would have been flooded with superb applicants. But they advertised for someone who could teach general philosophy tutorials over a wide range, and also lecture on political philosophy, and most distinctively, Marxism. This narrowed the pool considerably, almost to vanishing point, and after only two years post-graduate work I was, to my astonishment, invited to apply and then interviewed for the position. After some weeks of agonizing the committee offered me the job, but we also agreed I should go to Harvard for a year, to broaden my knowledge and to put a pause between my being

a student and an academic in the same department. I was just 25 when I received the offer, and had spent 3 years outside academia, though when I took up the job 16 months later I had reached the grand age of 27.

Particularly at the time of very restricted opportunities for Philosophy, this was an incredibly fortuitous start to an academic career. I did have one paper, broadly connected to my thesis, though not part of it, accepted for publication, and formed a plan to consolidate my work in my year at Harvard and launch my career properly. My idea was to take courses with John Rawls and Tim Scanlon (newly arrived at Harvard from Princeton) and to turn my thesis into a couple of publishable papers. But this was more of a hope than a plan, and I arrived at Harvard to find that both Rawls and Scanlon were on sabbatical for the entire year (in those pre-internet days such information never flowed). I also found an attitude then at Harvard that was very much anti-publication in early career, which was out of step with the rest of the profession and, in fact, damaging their students on the job market at that time. But I received no encouragement or support to write up my thesis chapters – in fact a sense of surprise that it was even thought reasonable – and also began to feel the chapters were very far from a state worthy of publication (although I eventually published what I should have published at that time as Wolff 1999).

My year at Harvard was a stark contrast to the way I had learned to do philosophy at UCL, where I was taught by people who themselves had been taught in a particular Oxford analytic style perhaps honed by Ryle and Ayer. A philosophical conversation began with someone stating a thesis, followed by the interlocutor finding an objection or counter-example. The propounder would find a reply, normally by explaining a little more of the complexity of the initial proposal, another counter-example would be conjured up, and on we would go, sometimes for hours. This looks like quite a competitive and aggressive approach, but for those used to it, it was simply a way of getting clear about the view under consideration by homing in on the details. That is what I thought ‘doing philosophy’ was.

At Harvard, though, there was much less interest in this approach. For one thing, people were rather reticent to voice their own views on any substantive issue. The department existed in the shadow of the greats – home grown in the presence of Rawls and Quine, and imported in the spectre of Wittgenstein. Questions were answered with materials from these masters, supplemented by Cavell, Putnam, and the highly influential but far less well-known Burton Dreben who were all physically present. The atmosphere of intellectual deference was supplemented by a Wittgensteinian pondering over the nature and usefulness of philosophy. Constantly in the air was the query ‘but is that really a *philosophical* question’ or ‘but do you mean it in a *philosophical* sense?’ None of this was congenial to the project of setting out necessary and sufficient conditions for the analysis of concept of exploitation, which had been my project. To put it starkly,

I was interested in the concept of exploitation. Members of the Harvard department had no interest in that, but would put pressure on the idea of necessary and sufficient conditions, on the concept of ‘analysis’, and indeed, on the concept of ‘concept’. My training had been all substance, but Harvard was all method, and highly sceptical about the ways in which I had been trained.

Although I found it hard to find my feet in this environment, and I was often confused and frustrated, it did me much good to be exposed to a different way of doing philosophy, and I’m sure the combination of second-hand Ryle and Ayer with second-hand Quine and Rawls has contributed to how I see and do philosophy now. I should say, though, that there was by no means a clean division and one of the most formative experiences for me was a seminar led by Putnam reading J.L. Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962). But the consequence was that no element of my original hope – study with Rawls and Scanlon and work up a couple of papers on exploitation – remained in place. As a result, when I returned to UCL to teach in 1986, rather than draft papers near completion in my suitcase, I had a blank yellow legal pad, much loved at that time in US universities for some reason, and no research plans. The legacy of Harvard was the conviction that my approach to philosophy had been naïve and my methodology of conceptual analysis flawed, but I had nothing to replace it with.

On returning to the UK and starting my post at UCL my most pressing concern was to begin lecturing from a standing start. I hadn’t given a lecture before but I had to write and deliver something like fifty in my first year, and a further thirty new lectures in my second year, and to work out and pursue a research agenda. As I no longer had confidence in my work on exploitation, the natural thing for me to do would have been to join in the then-raging ‘currency of egalitarian justice’ debate, started by Sen and Dworkin, with my teacher Jerry Cohen and Richard Arneson fanning the flames. The question was: in an egalitarian society, something must be distributed equally, but what is that thing? Happiness, resources, capabilities, opportunities, some combination, or something else again? But not only did I have no strong views to defend, I felt an unease – one that took me about 10 years to articulate and write about (Wolff 1998, 2010) – about the debate as a whole. But equally having got my job in Jerry Cohen’s shadow, I didn’t want to live my life as a mini-Cohen, working on his topics.

It was the perceived need to break free of Cohen’s imprimatur and a need to prepare lectures that led me in the direction of thinking about Hobbes. I had always been an admirer of Hobbes’s writing and imagination, if not his doctrines, and for a short-time I had the fantasy of reinventing myself as a Hobbes scholar, and also as a theorist of political obligation, which was a topic that Cohen had not written about explicitly. And I arranged things so that I could lecture on Hobbes too.

Yet reading a number of scholarly works on Hobbes made me realise my unsuitability for the task. My hand-me-down Oxford education had

made me adopt what I came to think of as a John Plamenatz approach to reading the classics of political philosophy: you read them, and read them again, and read them again, until they yield their meaning. If in need of inspiration, you read the most recent publications by other interpreters. The idea – associated with the Cambridge School – of understanding the author's biography, the debates the person was engaged in, their other works, in all original languages, the reception of their work, and other contextual resources where available, was disdained, although for no good reason I could see. The idea, then, was to read a text and to understand it more clearly than anyone who has read it in the previous centuries, by sheer force of intelligence and good judgement. But reading historically informed works on Hobbes made me realise my own limitations and I that I could never be a Hobbes scholar in that comprehensive, historically informed, way.

After a year or so of not getting very far, I had another stroke of great fortune. My then colleague Michael Rosen had been asked by Polity Press to write a book on Robert Nozick, for what was then their new Key Contemporary Thinkers series. He was not interested but asked me if I might be. At first I thought it a terrible idea, as I strongly objected to Nozick's work. But by the following day I'd changed my mind. It was a self-contained task, with a near guaranteed publication and a way of developing my writing. It allowed me to engage with questions of distributive justice that were in many ways my natural home, given that I had studied with Cohen, one's of Nozick's most trenchant and original early critics. But Nozick had also written at length about the justification of the state, and so thinking about that issue would allow me to develop my thoughts about political obligation.

I enjoyed writing my book on Nozick (Wolff 1991), aimed at students as well as researchers, and it sent me off in the direction in writing for students which now takes up a considerable part of my time. But it also allowed me to delve more deeply into the question of political obligation, and indeed the nature of the problem was the topic of one of my first papers, invited by the Aristotelian Society (Wolff 1990/91).

Around about that time I formed the idea of writing a book on political obligation. The leading work then, and maybe even now, was A. John Simmons's superb *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Simmons 1979), but I hoped to write something that was more of a discursive essay rather than a series of brilliant exercises in analytic political philosophy. It was in this spirit I spent a good deal of time reading and thinking about the different forms social contract theory could take. I didn't though, get very far with that book, though much of the research was used in a chapter in my *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, first published in 1996 (Wolff 1996), and some in the paper published in this

journal. I also published a string of papers on political obligation, of which the paper on Hobbes is one, and I will come back to this project shortly.

The paper on Hobbes, though, was almost written in the style I wrote about above: an interpretation of Hobbes that rested on the wits of the reader rather than the deep motivations of the writer. I say 'almost' as it was not an attempt authentically to reconstruct what was in Hobbes's head. Rather it was a type of 'rational reconstruction' of Hobbes' position, working out what he 'must' have meant. I suppose, on the face of it, the methodology is something like: if we want to preserve Hobbes's major insights and positions, and not attribute blatantly inconsistent premises to him, what is the best way of reading his work? And is it plausible, at least by the standards of rigour and argument of contemporary analytic political philosophy?

That project is certainly present in the published paper. But on re-reading it becomes clear that my interest is less in Hobbes, and more in the logic of social contract theories of different types, and how they are supposed to deliver substantive conclusions. Hobbes becomes a convenient vehicle for a wider discussion, and, there is much in that more general discussion about the nature of social contract arguments that I still endorse, and, I realise, I still say in classes if teaching the topic.

But as I mentioned this was one of a series of papers on political obligation, in which I was looking for a way of delivering something like the conclusion that all individuals living in a state have political obligations, while respecting a broadly liberal view in which people do not have obligations of this type unless they have consented to them, or done something else, voluntarily, to bring about such obligations. It was that combination that led A. John Simmons to a form of philosophical anarchism, given the difficulty of finding a broadly voluntarist foundation for universal political obligations, while I wanted to find a way of drawing a less anarchist conclusion. This was a struggle, and in several of my papers I grappled with the idea of 'independents' who were not caught by the standard arguments (no consent, no benefit, for example). I also delved more deeply into methodological aspects of the debate, a move foreshadowed by the Hobbes paper. My last main paper on the topic looked at pluralistic accounts of political obligations, playing with the idea that different people can have different political obligations for different reasons, published in a volume edited by Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram (Wolff 2000). But in the end I became convinced that my project had been to add epicycles to epicycles and that it was simply impossible to get a plausible account of political obligation in the modern world starting from liberal individualist assumptions, and it would be necessary to move to some sort of more holistic ontology. But first, I was reluctant to move in that

direction, or, perhaps more properly put, I didn't know how. And second, once you've done that, you no longer have much of a problem of political obligation. So I let that project lapse and attended to other things.

In conclusion, I have very mixed feelings about this paper. Reading it through there's not actually so much in substance that I now disagree with, and, as I mentioned, there are parts I still use. But I find it harder to say what the paper as a whole is aiming to do. I can, of course, say the words that it was to provide a 'rational reconstruction' of Hobbes's argument. But it is less clear to me what the value is in that project, and I would much rather read either someone explaining how Hobbes's writing emerged from its context and how it was received. Or a paper on the logic of the social contract and its prospects for delivering a theory of political obligation, perhaps using Hobbes as an example. But this paper does neither, even if it does ask some sharp question.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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