

# Leviathan in the Classroom. State and University in Thomas Hobbes

Francesco Cerrato

*The expression *Libertas philosophandi* does not appear in the Leviathan. Yet, Hobbes deals with the topic of the confrontation of ideas between men when he debates both on the “state of nature” and on civil society. After an analysis of the concepts elaborated in the first part of the Leviathan, in order to clarify the link between intellectual dialogue and human passions, this essay investigates the relationships that must be established between Civil State and Universities, which is the topic of chapter XLVI entitled “Of Darknesse from vain Philosophy, and Fabulous Traditions”.*

Keywords: *Science, Universities, Libertas philosophandi, State, Nature, Natural Wit.*

## 1. *Virtue, Wit and Science*

Which notion of *libertas philosophandi* can we trace in the *Leviathan*, given that this expression does not appear in the text? This is the question I will try to answer in this paper. First of all, I propose some considerations regarding the way Hobbes presents the discussion of opinions in the “state of nature”, the condition preceding the institution of political order. The premise for a better understanding of the different roles the “state power” is called for, both in the field of scientific research and in academic teaching, is to consider the features assumed by the exchange of ideas before the contract, within a relational dynamics where only “the right of nature” (“*jus in omnia*”) is effective. I will concentrate on these issues, and, in particular, on the analysis of chapter XLVI, whose title is “Of Darknesse from vain Philosophy, and Fabulous Traditions”.

In order to verify the characteristics of the exchange of ideas in the “state of nature”, I start from chapter VIII, where Hobbes provides the definition of virtue. Virtue is the Other’s recognition of a quality we own. As Hobbes writes: “vertue generally, in all sorts of subjects, is somewhat that is valued for eminence; and consisteth in comparison. For if all things were equally in all men, nothing would

be prized”<sup>1</sup>. Further on, Hobbes considers intellectual virtue: “vertues intellectuall, are always understood such abilities of the mind, as men praise, value, and desire should be in themselves”<sup>2</sup>. Hobbes continues: “they go commonly under the name of a good witte”. “These vertues are of two sorts; naturall, and acquired”<sup>3</sup>. Natural virtues only derive from natural wit, that is “that witte, which is gotten by use only, and experience”<sup>4</sup>.

This natural wit defines itself according to two main characteristics. Firstly, what Hobbes defines as “celerity of imagining, (that is a swift succession of one thought to another) and steady direction to some approved end”<sup>5</sup>. Secondly, natural wit is also defined as “good fancy”, namely the ability to establish links between things, to identify similarities and differences. In order to be effective, this ability will have to be accompanied by a “good judgment”, that is a good skill in “distinguishing, and discerning, and judging”<sup>6</sup>.

Besides the imaginative ability, which clearly consists, as emerges from the quotation, in the strength to elaborate reasoning, discussions, inductions and deductions, intellectual virtue is judged by Hobbes in relation to its capacity to produce effects<sup>7</sup>. This means that the ability to imagine and judge is not the only one to create intellectual virtue, since it also needs the accomplishment of a purpose through the force of will. In order to have intellectual virtue, it is always appropriate that: “besides the discretion of times, places, and persons, necessary to a good fancy, there is required also an often application of his thoughts to their End”<sup>8</sup>.

Since Hobbes defines intellectual natural virtues this way, we come closer to identifying what livens up the scientific discourse and discussion. However, those virtues can always be increased

<sup>1</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. N. Malcolm, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2012, 3 voll., vol. II, p. 104. For a reconstruction of the notion of wit in Hobbes’s philosophy and, in general, in English culture in the early modern age, see: P. Withington, *Tumbled into the Dirt: Wit and Incivility in Early Modern England*, “Journal of Historical Pragmatics”, 12 (2011), 1-2, pp. 156-177; R.D. Lund, *Wit, Judgment, and the Misprisions of Similitude*, “Journal of the History of Ideas”, 65 (2004), 1 pp. 53-74.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> On the Hobbesian notion of virtue and on the difference with the Aristotelian one, see: P. Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 1999, pp. 35-73.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

with the use of language, individual study and scientific practice. In this case they are defined as intellectual “acquired” virtues. As natural virtue consists in the Other’s recognition of our natural wit, so acquired virtue derives from “method, culture, or instruction”<sup>9</sup>. It is the result of “acquired wit”, “as for, (I mean acquired by method and instruction,) there is none but Reason; which is grounded on the right use of speech; and produceth the Sciences. But of Reason and Science”<sup>10</sup>. At this point, Hobbes adds that he has already discussed questions of language and science in chapters V and VI.

I cannot linger over Hobbesian definitions of language and science, so I will just recall that “*Speech*” is for Hobbes “the most noble and profitable invention of all other” “consisting of Names or Apellations, and their Connexion; whereby men register their Thoughts; recall them when they are past; and also declare them one to another for mutuall utility and conversation; without which” – Hobbes adds – there had been amongst men, neither Common-wealth, nor Society, nor Contract, nor Peace, no more than amongst Lyons, Bears, and Wolves<sup>11</sup>.

Differently, always in the Leviathan, “science” is conceived as the ability “attayned by industry”<sup>12</sup> to ascribe names to things in the correct way. “First in apt imposing of names” “till we come to a knowledge of all the consequences of names appertaining to the subject in hand”<sup>13</sup>. In chapter VII science is also defined as “conditional knowledge, or knowledge of the consequence of words”<sup>14</sup>. Finally, in chapter IX, in order to define knowledge, Hobbes makes a distinction between two different kinds of knowledge. The first one derives from the definite experience, the “knowledge of fact”; the second one, instead, is the knowledge of the consequence of one affirmation to another” and “is called science; and is conditionall”<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., p. p110.

<sup>11</sup> Among the several studies on the relevance of language in Hobbes’s anthropology and on his modernity, see the essay: P. Pettit, *Made with words : Hobbes on Language, Mind, and Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008. A very useful bibliography is the following: C. Rodríguez Rodríguez, *Una guía bibliográfica para el estudio de la filosofía del lenguaje en Thomas Hobbes*, “Logos”, VIII (2005), pp. 101-109.

<sup>12</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., p.72.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

“This – Hobbes continues – is the knowledge required in a philosopher; that is to say, of him that pretends to reasoning”<sup>16</sup>.

It is true philosophy, that is science, and is therefore defined as a causal knowledge whose purpose is the description of natural phenomena, in order to make sure predictions.

## 2. *Anxiety, Freedom and Leisure*

After having analyzed the definition of intellectual virtues, language, philosophy, and science, it is possible to say that virtue is the Other’s recognition of an ability that we possess. Specifically, in the case of intellectual virtue, it consists in the Other’s recognition of our ability to use effectively imagination and judgment. This ability surely has a natural, or better organic foundation, though it can be certainly increased by study, that is the practice of science and philosophy. From the recognition of his own virtue, that is from his own intellectual skills, man acquires pleasure, therefore men are naturally led to increase their natural wit with study, trying to refine their linguistic and deductive abilities with a good application.

Furthermore, we cannot forget a second aspect: Hobbes thinks that human nature, due to its same physical structure, is always led to make predictions. The anxiety of the time to come (identified as the cause of religion in chapter XX) is the constitutive element of experience, since it naturally pushes man to the practice of science, to the effort of making predictions. So Hobbes writes in chapter XI: “anxiety for the future time, disposeth men to enquire into the causes of things: because the knowledge of them, maketh men the better able to order the present to their best advantage”<sup>17</sup>.

Man is naturally oriented towards research and science and the ability to use wit is considered as a virtue, as an ability whose recognition is in the others’ hands and does not find satisfaction only in self-awareness. This means that the practice of science is not present in human experience only as an exclusive individual and solitary exercise, but it becomes a relational field ruled by competitive logic rules<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 160.

<sup>18</sup> On the political meaning of the Hobbesian notion of Anxiety see: A Ferrarin, *Artificio, desiderio, considerazione di sé. Hobbes e i fondamenti antropologici della politica*, Pisa, ETS, 2001; D.

Scientific discussion is a competitive relational field, because the original reason of its constitution is the mutual recognition of intellectual virtues<sup>19</sup>. This means that as a place of human comparison, even scientific relationships are burdened with passions. Therefore, as in any other human relation, we have to conclude that even scientific exchanges are places in which passions like vainglory, fear and hope are produced, since what is at stake is the mutual recognition of being intellectually virtuous<sup>20</sup>.

Yet, contrary to what happens for the battle for money or honor, merely intellectual competition does not represent a risk for the state stability. This is what Hobbes affirms in chapter XI, where he writes that: "desire of knowledge and arts of peace enclineth men to obey a common power: for such desire, containeth a desire of leasure; and consequently protection from some other power than their own"<sup>21</sup>.

Although the desire of having one's own virtue recognized fuels competitive and passionate dynamics, the idea that the desire of knowledge does not represent in itself a risk for the State comes back in chapter Forty-Six, when Hobbes describes the conditions that in ancient times had favored scientific and philosophical progress. The reason why scientific discussion is not dangerous in itself comes from the fact that, in order to be practiced, it always needs a condition of peace, and so a State. In fact, it is not by chance that the progress of science and philosophy has often historically occurred in the presence of a powerful state, able to guarantee peace and the needed leisure for intellectual discussion. "Leisure is the mother of philosophy; and common-wealth, the mother of peace, and leasure: where first were great and flourishing cities, there was first the study of philosophy"<sup>22</sup>. So, it happened in India, in Persia and in Egypt, and so it happened in Greece.

D'Andrea, *Prometeo e Ulisse. Natura umana e ordine politico in Thomas Hobbes*, Roma, La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1997. The intrinsic relationship between anxiety and knowledge of the future as causal knowledge is discussed in the essay by W.W. Sokoloff, *Politics and Anxiety in Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan*, "Theory & Event", 5 (1) (2001), pp.1-14.

<sup>19</sup> On the relationship between the Hobbesian view of social competitive relations and the growth of merchant society in England, see the classical essay by C.B. Macpherson, *The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962.

<sup>20</sup> On this particular aspect see: G. MacDonald Ross, *Hobbes and the authority of the universities*, "Hobbes Studies", X (1997), pp. 68-80.

<sup>21</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., vol. 2, p. 152

<sup>22</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., vol. 3, p. 1054. On the complexity of Hobbes's concept of leisure and its sources in English Literature see: Z. Gibbons, *Abused and Abusive Words: Hobbes on*

After the Athenians by the overthrow of the Persian armies, had gotten the dominion of the sea; and thereby, of all the islands, and maritime cities of the archipelago, as well of Asia as Europe; and were grown wealthy; they that had no employment, neither at home, nor abroad, had little else to employ themselves in, but either (as St. Luke says, Acts 17.21.) “in telling and hearing news,” or in discoursing of Philosophy publicly to the youth of the city<sup>23</sup>.

Thus, not only does philosophy appear as not subversive, but its presence is also the sign of a peaceful political situation in which scientific exchange can function as an additional vector of progress, as can be deduced from the definition of philosophy at the opening of the chapter.

By Philosophy is understood the Knowledge acquired by Reasoning, from the Manner of the Generation of any thing, to the Properties; or from the Properties, to some possible Way of Generation of the same; to the end to be able to produce, as far as matter, and humane force permit, such Effects, as humane life requireth<sup>24</sup>.

True philosophy originates from peace and promotes progress. Philosophical and scientific discussion flourishes in a peaceful context and makes men mutually unleash their competitive instinct, putting at stake only their virtue. From this side of the problem, we should probably consider Hobbes as a great supporter of *libertas philosophandi*, but, in truth, this is not the case.

From the predictive power of scientific research comes its own public utility. However, according to Hobbes, it is possible to make sure predictions only if one works within a kind of knowledge in which the use of language and, consequently, all definitions that compose it are unambiguous. In order to have science, that is a knowledge of the necessary implications, causes and effects, able to come to universal conclusions, a totally unambiguous use of language is needed.

Now we have come to the core of the problem. Hobbes hopes for the constitution of a place, where an effective exchange of opinions is possible, a sort of scientific community. Here, people work, as I have already explained, within a competitive dynamics, since

*Laughter and Leisure*, “English Literary History”, LXXXIII (2016), 3, pp. 681-709.

<sup>23</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., vol. 3, p. 1054.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1052.

they want to have their intellectual virtue recognized, but are also led to science by a mental pleasure for knowledge. This field generates progress, and since scientific research needs leisure, those who are devoted to it do not represent a risk for the state stability, but are rather their supporters.

However, such a confrontation must share a uniform philosophical orientation in order to promote progress; the different disciplines, from the science of bodies to the science of State, despite their differences in content, have to assume the same epistemological and methodological criteria. In order to reach a real scientific progress, it is necessary to form a community that uses the same language and shares some common epistemological assumptions.

Hobbes conceives science as a public space in which individual reasons and single research confront and show themselves to the community, which has the task to judge them, approving or censoring them. For Hobbes, the unanimity of consensus is not enough for setting up the truth. In order to have a sure outcome from the discussion of opinions, there has to be a political decision to guarantee the truth of language, otherwise it is as if the discussion worked without networks. To establish these conditions, the Leviathan has to work on language, and has to ensure the uniqueness of signs, avoiding misunderstandings.

Language is the tool through which scientific statements are formed in a syntactically correct way. Since it is in the form that science exists and elaborates its results, language becomes the testbed through which scientific community verifies the results of its own research. By ensuring the uniqueness of language, the Leviathan constitutes the public space in which scientific research can take advantage of a certain freedom and can also evaluate its results. This concept is first exposed in chapter Five, where Hobbes writes:

And therefore, as when there is a controversy in an account, the parties must by their own accord, set up for right Reason, the Reason of some Arbitrator, or Judge, to whose sentence they will both stand, or their controversy must either come to blowes, or be undecided, for want of a right Reason constituted by Nature; so is it also in all debates of what kind soever<sup>25</sup>.

As Emilio Sergio observed, scientific demonstration always requires the moment of consensus (“il momento del consenso”),

<sup>25</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., vol. 2, p. 66.

and it is up to politics to establish the logical-syntactic (mathematics) conditions “for the production of demonstrations free of controversies”<sup>26</sup>.

### 3. *The Leviathan at the University*

The process of construction of a free and peaceful scientific field of discussion is not in itself a painless operation. We must distinguish between true philosophy (as already mentioned before) and false philosophy. For the latter, Hobbes cannot but highlight the historical causes that led to it.

The development of philosophical schools in Greece – as he writes in chapter forty-six – did not bring any advantage, because there was no scientific aspect in that knowledge: “The naturall Philosophy of those Schools, was rather a Dream than Science, and set forth in senselesse and insignificant Language”<sup>27</sup>. According to Hobbes, such an absurdity also regards Aristotelian philosophy. As Hobbes writes:

I beleeve that scarce any thing can be more absurdly said in naturall Philosophy, than that which now is called Aristotles Metaphisiques, nor more repugnant to Government, than much of that hee hath said in his Politiques; nor more ignorantly, than a great part of his Ethiques<sup>28</sup>.

This futility becomes dangerous once the Aristotelian philosophy meshes with scriptural interpretation in scholastic philosophy. And the danger increases when, in the Middle Ages, Universities and religious schools started to flourish. “That which is now called an University, is a Joyning together, and an Incorporation under one Government of many Publique Schools, in one and the same Town or City”<sup>29</sup>.

As for Philosophy, Hobbes affirms:

It hath no otherwise place, then as a handmaid to the Romane Religion: And since the Authority of Aristotle is onely current there, that study is not

<sup>26</sup> E. Sergio, *Contro il Leviatano: Hobbes e le controversie scientifiche, 1650-1665*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2001, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., vol. 3, cap. XLVI, p. 1058.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1060.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1074.



properly Philosophy, (the nature whereof dependeth not on Authors,) but Aristotelity<sup>30</sup>.

Despite its poor scientific value, this kind of philosophy is indeed extremely dangerous for political stability and has to be controlled as much as possible. As early as the end of the first chapter, Hobbes proposes this belief, referring to the way scholastic philosophy defines its sensitive perception, highlighting that this philosophy is founded on the fantastic identification of separate species (in this case an alleged audible species and an intelligible species)<sup>31</sup>.

Hobbes heralds that in the course of the book he will clarify the relationships among Universities in which this kind of philosophy is taught, anticipating what has to be corrected, that is the frequent use of a meaningless language: “the frequency of insignificant Speech is one”<sup>32</sup>. Hobbes thinks that scholastic philosophy finds its anthropology in the use of the universals.

There is a certain Philosophia Prima, on which all other Philosophy ought to depend; and consisteth principally, in right limiting of the significations of such Appellations, or Names, as are of all others the most Universall<sup>33</sup>.

These are the fundamental definitions at which not only metaphysical knowledge is built, but also other disciplines. Among those universals Hobbes names:

Body, Time, Place, Matter, Forme, Essence, Subject, Substance, Accident, Power, Act, Finite, Infinite, Quantity, Quality, Motion, Action, Passion. Scholastic philosophy considers these concepts as they have been defined by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*, wrongly considering the books that compose this work not in a simple way, as Aristotle had done, “Books written, or placed after his naturall Philosophy”: instead, “take them for Books Of Supernaturall Philosophy”<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> On the philosophical teaching in the English Universities of the XVIIth century see: W. Schmidt-Biggemann, *New Structures of Knowledge*; R. Porter, *The scientific Revolution and Universities*, in *A History of the University in Europe, vol. II: Universities in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800)*, ed. H. De Ridder-Symoens, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 489-530, pp. 531-562; on the Oxford University see the essays by M. Feingold, *The Humanities and The Mathematical Sciences and New Philosophies* in N. Tyacke (ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford, vol IV: Seventeenth-Century Oxford*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 211-357, 359-448.

<sup>32</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., vol. 2, cap. I, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, vol. 3, cap. XLVI, p. 1076.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

In particular, what mostly contrasts modern science as intended by Hobbes is the belief sustained by scholastic knowledge that we can find: “in the world certaine Essences separated from Bodies, which they call Abstract Essences, and Substantiall Formes”<sup>35</sup>.

Therefore, what Hobbes refuses is the belief in the existence in nature of another reality than the physical reality of bodies. This derives from the fact that Aristotelian philosophy has been wrongly mingled with theology.

After having attacked the theory of separate essences, Hobbes reviews the mistakes regarding what he defines Aristotle’s “civil philosophy”. The wrong ethical positions, as well as the wrong positions of Aristotelian philosophy, are part of the same error, already observed in the critique of *Metaphysics*. Just like separate essences lead man to believe that eternal and non-corporeal entities exist and their reality is absolutely unprovable, similarly Aristotelian political philosophy is a knowledge whose epistemic logic is based on the unprovable assumption that objective good and evil exist. From these positions it is possible to get an idea of an objective justice to which civil law must conform.

In reality, men don’t realize or refuse to admit that if they reason this way, they keep calling good and evil, fair and unfair what they simply prefer or attack. From this misunderstanding comes a second error: men consider a legitimate thing to define the sovereign power as tyrannical, that is the power that doesn’t adjust to their expectations and desires.

From such an approach, it inevitably derives the belief for which: “And therefore this is another Errour of Aristotles Politiques, that in a wel ordered Common-wealth, not Men should govern, but the Laws”<sup>36</sup>. So, from the belief in the existence of separate essences, distinct from bodies, and in an objective truth regarding what is fair and unfair, comes, according to Hobbes, both the behavior of those who feel legitimate to criticize that power that doesn’t go with his own desires, and the pretension to consider the superior law in charge.

In order to prevent this double error and to make it possible that at the same time true science and the authentic scientific discussion – for which the only reality is the reality of bodies – can devel-

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

op freely, Hobbes, as already mentioned, affirms the necessity for a rigid state control on academic teaching.

Let them be silenced by the Laws of those, to whom the Teachers of them are subject; that is, by the Laws Civill: For disobedience may lawfully be punished in them, that against the Laws teach even true Philosophy. Is it because they tend to disorder in Government, as countenancing Rebellion, or Seditious? then let them be silenced, and the Teachers punished by vertue of his power to whom the care of the Publique quiet is committed; which is the Authority Civill<sup>37</sup>.

Hobbes doesn't think that Universities and academic teaching can have freedom and autonomy of action. As clearly emerges from the previous quotation, academic teaching and scholastic philosophy must be strictly regulated especially on the fundamentals, that are language and the metaphysical power based on the belief of separate essences. Therefore, we cannot affirm that for Hobbes *libertas philosophandi* must really be ensured.

There is a free scientific discussion that has to be ensured by the State, since it brings progress and shares the common language of modern science and takes place within the same epistemological field. It also arranges fundamental definitions for which in any case the last word must lie with the State. Once a homogeneous linguistic field is constituted, whose foundation is the idea that nature is exclusively composed of bodies, what requires a discussion among scientists is certainly the forms and modalities of representation of natural phenomena and not their essential constitution.

Such a scientific confrontation, though being a competitive relationship and not impervious to human passions, has to be ensured by the State, not only because that competition is not in danger, but especially because it can provide a technical improvement useful for all of humanity, deriving from that scholastic Aristotelianism.

On the opposite, Scholastic knowledge has to be censored, since it doesn't share the same fundamentals, and thinks of reality as divided in essences different in quality; it also conceives a relation between conceptual forms and reality as not simply descriptive but rather prescriptive.

On such a metaphysical idea of truth it comes out, in scholastic Aristotelianism, a political reflection in which the king's will can be

<sup>37</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, cit., vol. 3, cap. XLVI, pp. 1100, 1102.

criticized if it's not seen in line with a presumed model of justice. For this reason, the teaching of that knowledge must be strictly controlled and regulated.

Thus, Hobbes is not an advocate in abstraction of *libertas philosophandi* for two reasons: first of all, scientific research has to be functional to the improvement of common life and so it can never question the peace and stability of the State.

Secondly, there is a prior distinction that has to be made between true and false philosophy. Exchange and discussion are permitted only among those who choose to reflect and do some research in the field of modern science, sharing the adoption of the same language.

Vice versa, those who choose to stay in the field of Aristotelianism must be controlled, if not in their belief, certainly in all their external acts.