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COMMENTARY ON WILLIAM MATHIE'S "RHETORIC AND REASON IN THE CIVIL SCIENCE OF THOMAS HOBBS"

Philippe Azzie
Department of Political Science
Carleton University
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Professor Mathie begins his paper on Hobbes and rhetoric by recalling the ambiguous condemnation of rhetoric in classical political philosophy. In so doing, he reminds us that rhetoric, which can be described as reasoning with the many or the multitude on the basis of persuasive speech, is a perennial or permanent problem for political philosophy. Hobbes, like his predecessors, sees rhetoric as a rival to political science, and denies the equation of political science with the art of rhetoric. But Hobbes goes further, and accuses the classical political philosophers themselves of being, in fact, rhetoricians because, in his opinion, they are more interested in entertaining the affections of their listeners than instructing them (*Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society*, Epistle Dedicatory). Hobbes' belief that traditional political philosophy is ultimately indistinguishable from rhetoric supports his claim that political philosophy is no older than his own civil science. However, as Professor Mathie has suggested, Hobbes' own condemnation of rhetoric is itself ambiguous. I must say that I find this position more persuasive than that of Quentin Skinner and David Johnston who seem to suggest that Hobbes simply changed his mind about rhetoric. Moreover, by showing how Hobbes addresses the problem of rhetoric in the actual institutional prescriptions of *Leviathan*, I believe that Professor Mathie makes a genuine contribution to the literature on Hobbes and rhetoric, which tends to focus mostly on his use of rhetorical devices. Since I find myself in agreement with Professor Mathie's analysis, I will restrict my comments to raising a few questions concerning Hobbes' understanding of rhetoric that arise on the basis of his paper.

These questions revolve around the issue of the power of rhetoric. Here I would like to refer to the *Gorgias* which Professor Mathie discusses at the beginning of his paper. The discussion between Socrates and Gorgias brings to light a recurring tension between rhetoric and justice. Wherever the so-called power of rhetoric manifests itself, it reveals itself as unjust. Similarly, Hobbes sees a tension between rhetoric and justice. Wherever the power of rhetoric manifests itself, it leads to or threatens the dissolution of the Commonwealth. As Professor Mathie has said, this suggests that Hobbes condemns rhetoric because he sees its power as unlimited. In other words, his understanding of the power of rhetoric seems to be similar to that of Gorgias.

Of course, another question that might arise here is whether Hobbes exaggerates the unlimited power of rhetoric to dissolve commonwealths in order to counter the claims of those like the character of Crassus in Cicero's *De Oratore*, who praise the power and importance of oratory for preserving political communities (Cicero, *De Oratore* 1.8.30-35). As we know, the overriding goal of Hobbes' science of politics is the preservation of the Commonwealth, and so if Crassus is correct that rhetoricians preserve communities, Hobbes' science of politics seems unnecessary or superfluous since rhetoric does in fact turn out to be political science. In other words, does Hobbes exaggerate the power and danger of rhetoric in order to bolster the legitimacy of his own science of politics? And since exaggeration, according to Hobbes himself, is of the essence of rhetoric (*Elements of Law*, 2:5.4), is his attack on rhetoric itself rhetorical, just as Socrates' attack on Gorgias was somewhat rhetorical? Whether rhetorical or not, Hobbes' attack seems intended to have precisely the opposite effect to that of Socrates. One consequence of the latter's critique, as professor Mathie points out, is to reduce the magnitude of rhetoric as a proper object of public fear, while the consequence of Hobbes' critique seems to be to increase it.

And yet Hobbes' supposed fear and condemnation of the unlimited power of rhetoric seems to be only one side of the coin. The other side seems to be a confidence in the power of persuasion to instill proper belief or opinion in the common people. This seems to suggest that Hobbes, like Gorgias, ultimately believes that rhetoric is neutral or a power that can be used for good or evil. Both possibilities, the good and the evil, seem to have found expression in the institutional prescriptions of *Leviathan* discussed by Professor Mathie. In the chapter entitled "Of Counsel", Hobbes tries to inoculate against the dangers of debating in great assemblies by distinguishing between "command" and "counsel". On the other hand, in the chapter entitled: "Office of the Sovereign Representative" we see Hobbes express confidence in the possibility of establishing what amounts to a new decalogue based on the power of persuasion to instill proper belief.

I would like to look at each of these institutional prescriptions in particular and raise some questions about what they suggest concerning Hobbes' perception of the power and danger of rhetoric. I begin with the second of these prescriptions. The actual need to use some type of rhetoric or persuasive speech, as Professor Mathie points out, arises out of Hobbes' belief in the ineffectiveness of both instruction and compulsion. The many cannot be taught or instructed because reasoning is long and complicated, and most people are either too distracted or too busy to bring sufficient attention to bear on these issues. On the other hand, neither can they be compelled to obey through fear of punishment since this is also ineffective. Take, for example, the laws of nature. The many cannot be compelled to believe them but neither can they be instructed about them. Hobbes' solution is to contract them "... into one easy sum, intelligible, even to the meanest capacity ..." (*Leviathan*, 2 ;15). The significance of persuasion is, therefore, directly related to the ineffectiveness of both compulsion and instruction. The question is whether or not Hobbes overestimates the power of persuasion.

It is legitimate, I believe, to ask whether Hobbes' optimism is at least partly related to his apparent belief that existing opinions do not reflect the irreducible plurality of perspectives about justice and the complexities of political life, but are instead little more than false teachings and erroneous doctrines that have been imposed on the many. If existing opinions or beliefs reflect little more than false doctrine imposed from the top down, they can conceivably be replaced by true doctrine imposed in the same manner. There does not seem to be, in Hobbes' estimation, any legitimate pre-philosophical or pre-scientific opinions and beliefs with which his teaching or some popularised version of that teaching will have to come to terms and which might limit the persuasiveness of his own teaching. Unlike Aristotle, for example, who takes into account the existing common or reputable opinions about politics as at least partially correct, Hobbes begins by excluding these opinions right from the start as "false for the most part". Hobbes wants to operate a revolution in the world of opinion so as to avoid revolutions in the world of politics. One wonders, however, whether persuasion alone can effect this revolution or whether this might not require something on the scale of the proposal in Plato's *Republic*, that everyone over ten years of age be expelled from the city.

As far as the prescriptions described in the chapter entitled: "Of Counsel" are concerned, we might ask, once again, whether Hobbes overestimates the dangers of oratory. Hobbes prescribes an institutional arrangement, based on the distinction between "command" and "counsel" so as to inoculate the Commonwealth against the dangers of deliberation in large assemblies. These dangers are based on the belief that public deliberation in large assemblies enhances the natural disposition to vanity that is bred in human nature and that manifests itself through displays of eloquence. But cannot these assemblies themselves contribute something to controlling the activity of demagogues and the dangers of eloquence? Contrary to Hobbes, Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* suggests that deception and manipulation are less likely in deliberative oratory because matters debated in the assembly are of interest to all, and so people are likely to be more vigilant when their own interests are at stake in the decisions they must take. This means that they are less likely to be deceived by clever speakers. More sober perhaps than

Hobbes, Aristotle believes that because persuasion is not all powerful, it is possible to control the excesses of eloquence without having to pay the price of the denigration of public deliberation. Perhaps those common or reputable opinions to which orators must appeal if they are to effect persuasion do as much to control and limit the dangers of eloquence as they do to enhance it.

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