

Robin Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes: Nature, Free Will, and the Passions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015, 220 pp.

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Robin Douglass' book is devoted to reconstruct Rousseau's engagement both with the political thought of Hobbes and with Hobbism as it was received in the context of eighteenth-century France. The author's main concern is that the previous and copious literature on the subject has too often conflated the two thinkers, without correctly underlining the peculiarity of each figure or properly contextualising Rousseau's interpretation of Hobbes. In particular, argues Douglass, Rousseau seems to have been understood as starting from entirely Hobbesian premises, which he either developed or corrected in just a few points. For instance, this was the case, to quote just two of the most prominent scholars who have written on the subject, of Leo Strauss and Richard Tuck. Strauss, in his *Natural right and history*, interpreted Rousseau as a disciple of Hobbes in so far as he would have made artifice and convention the only source of political right, instead of nature. Richard Tuck, in *The rights of war and peace*, depicted Rousseau as following Hobbes in the rejection of sociability as the foundation of natural right. Even if most scholars actually reject such a strong continuity between Hobbes and Rousseau, according to Douglass they have nevertheless neglected to explain the role of nature as a normative source for politics, thus *de facto* leaving room for a conventionalist reading of Rousseau.

According to Douglass, this widely-shared reading can be contested by a careful analysis of Rousseau's *Second Discourse*. Here, Rousseau's critiques of Hobbes are set out and through a scrutiny of three themes where the positions of the two authors greatly diverge: 1) the role of nature as a normative standard, which Rousseau actually tried to preserve; 2) the choice between determinism and free will; 3) the choice of the passions, namely fear or love, to be exploited by the law-maker in order to secure peace and cooperation in the political community.

If Rousseau's criticism of Hobbes has not been duly acknowledged by scholars, this is possibly because Rousseau also criticises the authors who actually contested Hobbism by opposing the self-interested sociability of the commercial society to the grim depiction of the state of nature offered by Hobbes. In denying both the possibility of a spontaneous order arising out of peaceful interaction of self-interested individuals (without any intervention from the State), and the moralising role of commerce in substituting the violence of passions with the rational interest to cooperate, Rousseau may appear as siding with Hobbes, when in fact he is actually condemning every kind of self-interest (including the one proper of Hobbes' natural law) as unable to provide for a foundation of peaceful coexistence.

This point can easily be missed without a proper picture of how Hobbes' ideas circulated and were received among Rousseau's contemporaries, an issue which is connected to the question if Rousseau had a direct knowledge of Hobbes' works. Douglass excludes in the preface that Rousseau could have read Hobbes' English texts since his knowledge of English was limited. Latin editions of *Leviathan*, *Opera philosophica*, *De cive* and *De corpore politico*, as well as some other works on mathematics and physics, were available in French libraries. Moreover, French translations were made of *De cive* (in 1642 by Sorbière and in 1660 by du Verdur) and of *De corpore politico* (1652 – 53, attributed to Sorbière but probably made by John Davies). Therefore, Douglass makes the point that it is highly possible that Rousseau, who preferred French over Latin, could have read Sorbière's translation of *De cive*, from which he seems to take Hobbes' description of an evil man as an *enfant robuste* (“a robust child”).

An account of Hobbes' reception in XVIII century is then provided in the first chapter of the book, where Douglass very carefully depicts how the eighteenth-century image of Hobbes was shaped by defenders of the goodness of the natural order such as Malebranche, Leibniz, Clarke and Montesquieu, by the theorists of the natural law tradition (especially Pufendorf and Burlamaqui), in whose books Hobbes' arguments are paraphrased and discussed, and in the accounts of Hobbes' philosophy made by Bayle in his *Dictionnaire historique-critique* and by Diderot in the voice "Hobbism" in the Encyclopedia. In the French-speaking context, Douglass finds a strong influence of Hobbes' anthropology in the neo-Augustinian account of human nature offered by Jansenist thinker Pierre Nicole. According to Nicole, after the Fall of Man, every human action is inevitably driven by self-love (*amour propre*), which leads men into a state of war where everyone tries to achieve its own desire at the expense of others. The same self-love allows to overcome such a state of war once it is enlightened by reason on the necessity to enter in the civil state. Being motivated by bare egoism, such a solution, however, is for Nicole at odds with justice and virtue, which should be grounded on charity and love.

In the second chapter of the book, the refusal of such a pessimistic account is made by Douglass the cornerstone of the *Second Discourse* in so far as its author argues for the existence in the state of nature of a morality grounded on empathy and compassion. Such a morality, dictated by nature, if revitalised in the civil state, can counter the disruptive effect of *amour propre* brought by the civilisation process. Nature and its gifts, first of all free will, are not definitively suppressed by an original sin, but have had more and more difficulty manifesting themselves in a context which encourages competition and conflict between men. Against Hobbes' conventionalism, Rousseau attributes to philosophy the task of making the voice of nature speak again, and of politics, the role of creating room where men can exist according to their own nature, i.e. as free beings. This does not mean a return to the pre-social state of nature, but to the possibility, traced in *Émile*, to develop a form of no more confrontational *amour propre*. *Amour propre* can be harmonised with the natural *amour de soi* when men are taught how to commensurate their wishes in proportion to their powers.

This possibility is further developed in chapter three, where Rousseau's contractualist project is interpreted as preserving free will by removing every person's dependence upon others' will and by instituting the sovereignty of the laws in place of the rule of men. In Hobbes we can find no concern for the preservation of individual will, which is to be fully alienated to the will of the Sovereign. Against this conception, Rousseau states that while it is possible to transfer power to a representative body, will cannot be alienated to anyone, unless we recreate that same form of dependence we wanted to sort out. Thus sovereignty remains within the People, which ratifies general laws, and power is delegated to executive magistrates. The modern notion of sovereignty, developed by the natural law theory culminating with Hobbes, is thereby conjugated with the republican tradition.

With Hobbes, social conflict is overcome by the institution of a political body. Unlike him, however, freedom is preserved, and not simply coerced, by the State. Rousseau is shown to closely follow Hobbes in the position of the problem of sovereignty (even closer to him than the French natural laws-theorists, who still rely on spontaneous sociability), but to depart from him in the methodology to solve it. After having proved that Rousseau is in this way able to preserve the inalienability of collective will, it remains however for Douglass the problem that this is not enough to secure the preservation of individual free will.

Such a free will can be secured only as long as there exists a common interest

in the community which can be expressed as general will. Such a common will can subsist only in the absence of particular interests incompatible with the possibility of living together, and if the individuals who compose the people are to be taught to conceive themselves as a member of a community. A strongly pluralistic reading of the general will, according to which particular interests opposed to the common one are admitted into a healthy dialectic between particular and universal, is therefore rejected by Douglass, who also refuses a monistic interpretation which would require unanimity for every decision. As long as the people consent to it, issues can be decided by a majority vote or by any other convened procedure; in this case the decision, whatever the outcome, is not seen as putting the common interest at the stake.

How individuals can be taught to conceive themselves as part of a political community is the concern of the last part of chapter three, devoted to the theme of religion, and of chapter four, which focuses on the political passions employed by Hobbes and Rousseau to secure the stability of the political community. Rousseau is shown to share with Hobbes the exigence of a religious unity of the political body and in the institution of a civil religion in order to counter a dissolution of the community driven by sectarianism and religious struggles. Rousseau, however, goes further: a civil religion becomes useful to cultivate the feeling of sharing a common citizenship and to dedicate to the fatherland the same love devoted to God. Since it preaches the separation of religious from civil authority and orientates man's final goals to an otherworldly destination, Christianity is condemned by Rousseau as an unpolitical cult.

Another feature shared by Hobbes and Rousseau is that reason is *per se* not sufficient to secure citizens' allegiance to the State. Consensus must be built through a wise employment of passions. While Hobbes' pessimistic anthropology makes it necessary to instigate fear in the subjects in order to enforce obedience and to humiliate the individuals' aspiration to glory, Rousseau's refusal to understand human nature as intrinsically corrupt allows him to employ *amour propre* as a positive force once it has been well shaped by education. If in the social world people always look for the others' appreciation, they must be taught to desire the approval of the whole community. It is thus possible to develop a sentiment of love for the fatherland which is not only compatible with, but requires the social passion of *amour propre*.

But if passions are shaped by education, what about free will? Douglass contends that for Rousseau, free will consists in the absence of coercion by other wills, but not in the lack of motives which determine our choices and which may derive from experience and education. *Émile's* negative education always leaves the pupil to choose for himself what to do: although most of the situations *Émile* has to face have been carefully orchestrated by the preceptor, he is never forced into obedience, nor explicitly corrected or blamed when he does wrong. It is the experience itself of the orchestrated situations which leads him to freely choose and act as his preceptor wishes.

The relationship between Hobbes and Rousseau is thus described with great ambivalence. Rousseau follows Hobbes both in adopting a theory of natural right and in promoting unity through passions and civic religion. These undoubtedly Hobbesian issues are however conciliated with a naturalist foundation of moral and politics, sensitivity to the problem of free will, and the republican tradition.

Douglass' punctual reconstruction of the circulation and reception of Hobbes in the French context is a helpful and much welcomed contribution to the scholarship. So are his well-grounded analysis of the transformation of the notion of Sovereignty,

of the general will – especially of the relationship between collective and particular will – and his exploration of the theme of civic religion in both authors.

The main weakness of the books, however, lies in the attempt to provide a harmonious conciliation between Rousseau's ethics, centred on the recovery of *amour de soi* in the civil state and culminating in the *Profession of faith of the Savoyard Vicar*, and politics, grounded in the de-naturalisation of man in order to make a citizen out of him. The de-naturalised citizen aims not to become an autonomous self-relying individual, and understands himself as part of a bigger whole instead. Rousseau himself states clearly, in the beginning of the first book of *Émile*, the incompatibility of these two forms of life. Douglass complains that the critics have neglected the role of nature and free will in Rousseau's politics. It is not clear however in what should nature as a normative standard exactly consist of from Rousseau's political perspective; Douglass himself seems, in chapters three and four, to identify “nature” as standard for the civil state simply with the removal of the contradictions of the civilisation process, a goal which politics actually attains not by recurring to the pre-social natural law of *amour de soi* and compassion, but only through the artifice of the institution of the State.

Even in the *Second Discourse*, the fiction of the natural man does not have the goal to provide a normative model of a desirable condition (in the state of nature, as the author states in *Rousseau judge of Jean-Jacques*, we were happy just because we ignored the evils we were facing), but to show the social origin of conflict and inequality, and in this way, the possibility to correct them.

Similarly, the metaphysical issue of individual free will, albeit fundamental for the ethics proposed by the Savoyard vicar, remains far removed from the political questions of building a consensus through education and of the construction of a collective will.

Moreover, Douglass seems to neglect his own warning not to identify Hobbes with Hobbism, and to merge the position of Hobbes, who never stated human nature to be intrinsically perverted, and of neo-Augustinianism, which stated justice (which pertained to men before the original sin) and interest (which is the only motivational driver in the post-lapsarian condition) to be incompatible. Since, according to Hobbes as well as to Rousseau, man is both matter and maker of the political community, and the fault of the State's dissolution never lies in men as matter but in the skills of the maker, the gap between the political philosophy of the two thinkers could be smaller than Douglass in this otherwise well-documented and interesting book is ready to admit.