Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement.
By Alan Houston. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. 336p. $35.00.
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— Dennis C. Rasmussen, *Tufts University*

Of the major American founders, Benjamin Franklin has traditionally been among the least studied by political theorists, perhaps because his age and health prevented him from participating in the debate over the Constitution and the shape of the new republic with his usual vigor. His political thought has started to garner more attention in the wake of the recent wave of Franklin biographies, however, and Alan Houston's engaging study will prove a valuable addition to this emerging literature. (Other notable contributions include Jerry Weinberger's *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked* [2005] and Lorraine Smith Pangle's *The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin* [2007]; while Houston does not discuss either of these works, both would serve as a useful complement and contrast to his more historically oriented study.)

In contrast to those who portray Franklin as quintessentially American, Houston locates him in a broad Atlantic context, emphasizing that he spent more than 25 years of his life in England and France, drew much of his inspiration from works by European authors, and devoted considerable intellectual energy to questions and controversies that spanned the Atlantic (p. 5). He treats Franklin as a "public intellectual" whose political thought is revealed not only in his (relatively few) abstract writings but also in his concrete actions and practical proposals (p. 20).

The book is organized around five main topics: commerce, association, population, union, and slavery. In each case, Houston moves beyond the popular image of Franklin as the modest purveyor of homespun wisdom—an image that Franklin himself did much to encourage—to examine the real substance of his views. For instance, Houston suggests that we drastically underestimate the sophistication of Franklin's views on the theory and practice of commercial society if we restrict ourselves to Poor Richard's maxims and Max Weber's depiction of him as the embodiment of the emerging "spirit of capitalism." He shows that Franklin staked out a middle ground between the views of Thomas Hobbes and Francis Hutcheson on the natural sociability of human beings, adopting a position closer to those of Samuel Pufendorf and Adam Smith: Needs and interests, more than fear or love, are what connect people to one another (pp. 30–32). Yet Franklin was keenly aware that needs and interests alone are not sufficient to ensure a stable or flourishing economy. Hence, he frequently emphasized the political requirements for economic development, such as when he defended paper currency in colonial Pennsylvania as a means of promoting more efficient markets (pp. 41–45) and when he urged the Constitutional Convention to grant Congress the power to provide internal improvements, such as the cutting of canals (pp. 147–50). Franklin also realized that the habits of industry and frugality that he so famously lauded not only were personal virtues but were also indispensable for maintaining the stability of credit—the chief means of economic exchange in colonial America—as well as a key weapon in the growing conflict with Britain, which depended heavily on the export of luxury goods to the colonial market (pp. 46–59).

Houston also offers thoughtful discussions of Franklin's penchant for forming and promoting voluntary associations to confront the problems faced by the colonists because of their relative isolation from the seat of political power (including, in one crucial instance, the necessity of military defense; Chapter 2); his reflections on race, nationality, and immigration, some of which are apt to make modern readers more than a little uneasy (Chapter 3); his defense of the Albany Plan of Union (1754), which prefigured James Madison's famous argument for an extended republic in *Federalist* 10, and which Franklin thought would have postponed the separation of the United States from Britain for another century if it had been adopted (Chapter 4); and his evolving views on slavery (Chapter 5). The chapter on slavery, while by far the shortest of the five, offers a particularly vivid account of how Franklin—who owned a small number of domestic slaves for most of his adult life—eventually became one of the most outspoken abolitionists of the founding period.

Houston's analyses are consistently interesting and thoroughly grounded in extensive archival research. If the book has a shortcoming, it is that Houston never attempts to come to grips with Franklin's thought, or even his political thought, as a whole, assuming from the outset that Franklin "was not an abstract or a systematic thinker" and, hence, that he had no coherent worldview (p. 2). He assures us that Franklin does not fit easily into the categories of Lockean liberalism or classical republicanism, since he neither sought to base society on abstract natural rights nor advocated selfless devotion to the commonwealth (pp. 6, 219–20). In lieu of these familiar categories, he suggests that Franklin adopted a "politics of improvement," meaning that he was consistently devoted to development and civilization, whether in the form of lending libraries or republican government, fire departments or the abolition of slavery. Houston is at pains to distinguish "improvement" from "progress," with its connotations of naive optimism and historical inevitability. Franklin's "politics of improvement," as he outlines it, consists of a pragmatic assessment of the options that are available and practicable at any given moment (pp. 12, 15–16).

Yet Houston poses a number of pointed questions to even this more humble notion of "improvement"—for instance, whether development and civilization always contribute to human happiness and whether anything of importance is lost along the way (pp. 17–18)—without,

however, attempting to answer them, or to assess Franklin's answers to them. For instance, where Franklin notes that the American Indians seemed reluctant to give up their lives of ease and freedom to adopt European lifestyles, and even that many European settlers who were taken captive by the Indians were loath to return to "civilization," Houston simply remarks that although Franklin was "keenly aware of the complex, contingent, and sometimes ironic character of improvement," he never "doubted the virtues of civilization" (pp. 126–28). Even if readers looking for a comprehensive, critical exposition of Franklin's political thought may come away somewhat disappointed, however, all readers will thank Houston for helping to deepen and expand our understanding of this complex, and often underappreciated, political thinker.

Hobbes, Bramhall and the Politics of Liberty and Necessity: A Quarrel of the Civil Wars and Interregnum. By Nicholas D. Jackson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 360p. $104.00.
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— A. P. Martinich, *University of Texas at Austin*

Thomas Hobbes is widely regarded as one of modern political thought's foundational thinkers. In his book, Nicholas D. Jackson considers Hobbes against the backdrop of the philosophical and political controversies of his day and, in particular, in terms of his arguments with John Bramhall, bishop of Derry and later Armagh.

The contents of the book can be divided into two parts: uninterpreted facts regarding what Bramhall said and did on various occasions, and judgments about the significance of these facts. Jackson's book may be commended for the first. The bishop comes off as "a shrewd surveyor and assessor of property and profitability" in the author's words (p. 34), a politically engaged royalist and theological controversialist steeped in scholasticism. Beyond that, Jackson tells the familiar story about how in 1645 the then–Earl of Newcastle asked his fellow exiles, Bramhall and Hobbes, to discuss the issue of free will. Bramhall, the Arminian, was for it, Hobbes, the Calvinist, against it. After the debate, Bramhall wrote up his views for Newcastle, who then asked Hobbes for his reply. Neither man was to publish his thoughts at that time, in part because the topic was inflammatory. However, Hobbes's contribution, *Of Liberty and Necessity,* was eventually published in 1654 without, he claimed, his knowledge. Offended, Bramhall replied. More offended, Hobbes replied in *Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity and Chance.* Offended to the highest degree, Bramhall replied in *Castigations of Mr Hobbes his last Animadversions in the Case concerning Liberty, and Universal Necessity.*

Rather than directly proving that free will exists, Bramhall argues that it is presupposed in the Bible and is a necessary condition for morality. Hobbes argues that the Bible does not presuppose the theory of free will and morality does not require it. To sin is to break a law of God, and that neither says nor entails anything about free will. Hobbes is a "soft" determinist because he thinks that words such as "free" and "voluntary" can be given a straightforward sense and can be correctly attributed to human beings or their actions. Jackson reports many of the beliefs held by each man but does little to analyze their arguments, much less to evaluate them. This brings us to the kind of judgments and interpretations he does offer.

The author's general thesis is that the significance of the debate between Bramhall and Hobbes is that "the whole quarrel" between them was "a by-product or collateral intellectual skirmish of those rebellions and wars in the British Isles" (p. 1). Adherence to free will went with royalism, and adherence to predestination went with the parliamentarians. If Jackson's general thesis were right, then the free will debate would be a philosophical tail wagging a political dog. Further, describing the political activities of Bramhall—and, in Hobbes's case, the relative lack of political activities—does not prove that the debate over free will was a by-product of the British civil wars. The debate is perennial. It goes back to the church fathers, was a central issue during the Reformation, and was a principal point of contention in England between Calvinists and non-Calvinists throughout the seventeenth century. Jackson is not helped by the fact that views about free will and politics are logically independent of each other. Some parliamentarians believed in free will and some royalists did not. If there is a causal relation between free will and one's politics, the direction could go either way.

Jackson is amazed that Hobbes's works in political philosophy are not replete with partisan arguments for or against Charles I and Charles II, or for or against the rebels and the Commonwealth. While his amazement may be due to the fashion of treating Hobbes's works of political philosophy as political actions, Jackson might have considered that they are works of philosophy, not political tracts (cf. p. 273). Hobbes preferred monarchies and moderate episcopal churches, subject to monarchs; but he professed the legitimacy of other forms of government and hated any religious theory that he thought would subvert government, in particular, presbyterianism and episcopacy *jure divino.*

Jackson exaggerates the consequences of actions. He thinks that since Hobbes disagreed with Bramhall, who held the same view as the king, Hobbes was indirectly insulting the king; and that since he, while in exile, received money from the Cavendishes, he could be considered "the spokesman of the Cavendishes"; conversely, any criticism of Hobbes could be criticism of the Cavendishes. If Hobbes was "a pollutant," then the Cavendishes were "the *chemists* of such pollution" (pp. 270–71, Jackson's emphasis).

The author's prose is overheated. He says that Hobbes is "arrogating" something on several occasions when