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THOMAS HOBBES

Leviathan

REVISED STUDENT EDITION

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Introduction

I

Hobbes's *Leviathan* has always aroused strong feelings in its readers. Nowadays, it is generally reckoned to be the masterpiece of English political thought, and a work which more than any other defined the character of modern politics; from the late seventeenth century to the early twentieth century, all great writers on political theory have measured themselves against it. But when it first appeared in the bookshops of England, in late April or early May 1651, it seemed to many of its readers to be deeply shocking and offensive, both in its unsentimental account of political power and in its extraordinarily heterodox vision of the role of religion in human society. Even people who had formerly admired Hobbes and his philosophical writings were affronted by the book; one of Hobbes’s old acquaintances, the Anglican theologian Henry Hammond, described it later that same year as ‘a farrago of Christian Atheism’, a description which (as we shall see) was close to the mark.

These old friends were particularly angered by the book because it seemed to them to be an act of treachery. They had known

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1 See the letter from Robert Payoe to Gilbert Sheldon, 6 May 1651: 'I am advertised from Ox. that Mr Hobbes's book is printed and come thither: he calls it Leviathan. Much of his de Civ: is translated into it: he seems to favour the present Government, and commends his book to be read in the Universities, despite all censures that may pass upon it. It is folio at 8s.6d. price, but I have not yet seen it.' [Anon], ‘Illustrations of the State of the Church during the Great Rebellion’, *The Theologian and Ecclesiastic* 6 (1848) p. 223.

Hobbes as an enthusiastic supporter of the royalist cause in the English Civil War between King and Parliament; indeed, he had been in exile at Paris since 1640 because of his adherence to that cause, and *Leviathan* was written in France. When the book appeared, however, it seemed to justify submission to the new republic introduced after the King's execution in January 1649, and the abandonment of the Church of England for which many of the royalists had fought. His friends' shock at this volte face coloured contemporary reactions to Hobbes, and has affected his reputation down to our own times; though they may have misinterpreted some of Hobbes's intentions in writing *Leviathan*.

The first task in assessing what those intentions were, and a basic question to raise about any text, is to ask when the book was written. Our first information about the composition of the work which later became *Leviathan* comes in a letter of May 1650. In it, one of these old royalist friends wrote to Hobbes with a request that he translate into English one of his earlier Latin works on politics, so that it could have an influence on the current English political scene. Hobbes apparently replied that 'he hath another trifle on hand, which is Politique in English, of which he hath finished thirty-seven chapters (intending about fifty in the whole,) which are translated into French by a learned Frenchman of good quality, as fast as he finishes them'. This 'trifle' was to be *Leviathan*, and when his friend learned what it contained he wrote 'again and again' to Hobbes pleading with him to moderate his views, though with no success. *Leviathan* has forty-seven chapters rather than fifty, but Hobbes's programme of May 1650 was obviously fulfilled, though a French translation never appeared, and may not have been completed.

The fact that Hobbes wanted one tells us, incidentally, that he believed the book to be as relevant to the contemporary French political disturbances as to those of England. The years 1649–52 were the years when the 'Fronde', the confused uprising against the absolutist government of France, was at its height, and Paris itself had been seized by the rebels early in 1649: not only Englishmen needed instruction in the duties of subjects. We do not know how long Hobbes had taken to write the thirty-seven chapters which he had finished by May 1650 (approximately 60% of the total work), but if he wrote them at the same speed as the last ten chapters he would have started to compose the book at the beginning of 1649 – interestingly, at the time at which King Charles I was being tried for his life.

It is true that there are a number of passages in *Leviathan* which speak of the Civil War as still in progress (notably one on p. 311), and that only right at the end (in a famous passage on the new ecclesiastical regime in England in the last chapter, and in the Review and Conclusion) does Hobbes talk as if there is a settled government in England once again. Since the Civil War is conventionally thought to have ended by 1649, it might be deduced that Hobbes must have written much of the book well before the execution. Similar passages in the Latin *Leviathan* of 1668 (see below), which are not always straightforward translations of the English text, have sometimes even been taken to imply that the Latin version is based on an earlier draft than the English version, though there is no good reason for thinking this.4

But we tend to forget that the execution of the King and the declaration of a republic in England were not seen by contemporaries as the end of the war, for there remained a strong army in Scotland which was opposed to the actions of the republicans in England. That army was conclusively defeated by Cromwell at Dunbar in September 1650, and the great historian of the Civil War Edward, Earl of Clarendon (himself a royalist) recorded that it was this victory which 'was looked upon, in all places, as the entire conquest of the whole kingdom'.5 Though the royalists were still able to mount a resistance based in Scotland, which began in the spring of 1651 and ended ignominiously at the Battle of Worcester in September 1651, *Leviathan* was obviously completed in the political climate following Dunbar, when the war at last seemed to be over. It was at this time, in particular, that Hobbes penned the Review and Conclusion with its explicit call for submission to the

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1 [Anon], 'Illustrations of the State of the Church during the Great Rebellion', *The Theologian and Ecclesiastic* 6 (1848) pp. 172–3.

4 For example, the Latin text at one point speaks of 'the war which is now being waged in England', whereas the English version has 'the late troubles' (p. 170). *Leviathan*, trans. and ed. F. Tricault (Paris 1971) pp. xxv–xxviii. But 'late' in seventeenth-century English does not necessarily mean 'now completed'; it can also mean 'recent'.

new regime. The bulk of it had however been written during a time when the ultimate victor was not so clear, and when a Scottish army devoted to the King might still have enforced its wishes upon the two kingdoms. So when reading Leviathan we have to bear in mind Hobbes’s uncertainty about the result of the civil wars in both England and France, and his hope that the arguments in the book might have some effect upon the outcome; in particular, we have to remember that Hobbes wrote it while still attending the court of the exiled King Charles II, and that he probably originally intended the King to be the dedicatee of the book (see the Note on the Text). It was in part a contribution to an argument among the exiles.6

II

The next question to ask is, what kind of life, both intellectual and practical, had Hobbes led by 1649? He was already a thinker of some note, though less notoriety; indeed, many men of his time would have already ended their writing career at his age, for he was 61 in April 1649. He had survived a serious illness two years earlier which came close to killing him, but he had another thirty years to live – he died in December 1679. He had been born in Armada year, 1588, into a relatively poor family in Malmesbury (Wiltshire). His father was a low-grade clergyman (probably not even a university graduate) who became an alcoholic and then abandoned his family; Hobbes’s education at the grammar school in Malmesbury and subsequently at a hall in Oxford (that is, a cheaper and less prestigious version of a college) was paid for by his uncle. Hobbes was clearly recognised as an extremely bright pupil, particularly at the central skill of the Renaissance curriculum, the study of languages. His facility at languages remained with him all his life, and he spent much time on the practice of translation: the first work published under his name (in 1629) was a translation of Thucydides, and one of the last (in 1674) was a translation of Homer. He was a fluent writer in Latin as well as English, and could also read Italian, French and Greek. These skills were allied to a sophistication of style, represented by his capacity to write poetry in two languages as well as elegant prose. As with all Renaissance writers, his education was first and foremost a literary one.

Men with these skills were sought after in Renaissance Europe, for they could provide important assistance to anyone involved in public life. They could draft letters and speeches, reply to foreign correspondents, educate the older children of a household in the techniques of public life, and generally act rather like aids to modern Senators in the United States. This was indeed to be Hobbes’s career throughout his life, for on graduating from Oxford in 1608 he was recommended to the post of secretary and tutor in the household of William Cavendish, soon to be the first Earl of Devonshire and one of the richest men in England. Thenceforward Hobbes (when in England) lived in the houses of the Earl, at Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire or Devonshire House in London, and he died at Hardwick still an honoured servant of the family, or ‘domestic’ as he once termed himself. He was not always employed directly by the Earls of Devonshire, for at various times there was no person in that family who was playing a part in public life; but at such times he would work for their neighbours in Derbyshire, and in particular for their cousins the Earls of Newcastle who lived at Welbeck. One of his duties was taking the heirs to the Earldoms on a Grand Tour of Europe, and between 1610 and 1640 he spent four years on the Continent. Because he was travelling with a young man of great social standing, he had access with his master to the most important political and intellectual figures of Europe, meeting (for example) the leaders of Venice in their struggle with the Papacy, Cardinals at Rome, senior figures in Geneva, and Galileo. His practical and personal knowledge of European politics was unrivalled by any English thinker of his generation (and arguably by only one on the Continent, the Dutchman Hugo Grotius).

Although careers of this kind (though not quite as international in character) would not have been uncommon anywhere in Western Europe since the beginnings of the Renaissance, the particular intellectual concerns which Hobbes seems to have had most at heart would have seemed unfamiliar to the men of the early Renaissance.

In the eyes of the first humanists, the point of an education in the
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classics (particularly the Roman writers) was to equip a man for the kind of public service which their heroes such as Cicero had performed: the best way of life (they believed) was that of the active and engaged citizen, fighting for the liberty of his respublica or using his oratorical skills to persuade his fellow citizens to fight with him. ‘Liberty’ meant for them freedom both from external oppression by a foreign power, and from internal domination by a Caesar or any other figure who would reduce the republican citizens to mere subjects. Even Machiavelli, often associated by later ages with the techniques of princely domination, extolled these values in his Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy, while The Prince itself does not completely eschew them; it contains, for example, notable pleas for the ruler to rely on the mass of the people, who will never let him down, and to govern through a citizen army, the central institution of Renaissance republicanism.

But by the end of the sixteenth century, many European intellectuals had turned away from these values, though they retained a commitment to understanding their own time in terms of the ideas of antiquity, and a hostility to the kind of scholastic theories which had preceded the Renaissance. In place of Cicero, they read (and wrote like) Tacitus, the historian of the early Roman Empire; and in Tacitus’ writings they found an account of politics as the domain of corruption and treachery, in which princes manipulated unstable and dangerous populations, and wise men either retreated from the public domain or were destroyed by it. Tacitus described in detail the techniques of manipulation which (he implied) all princes will use, and his Renaissance readers were equally fascinated by them; the study and analysis of these techniques gave rise to the remarkable literature of works on ‘reason of state’ which flooded the bookshops of Europe between 1590 and 1630. As the sixteenth century drew to its close, after decades of civil and religious war, and the corresponding construction of powerful monarchies to render the threat from civil war harmless, this political literature made extremely good sense of contemporary life.

Alongside this literature, and intersecting with it in various interesting ways, was another one, in which the themes of ancient Stoicism and Scepticism were explored in tandem. The advice of the Stoic philosophers who were Tacitus’ contemporaries had indeed been that the wise man should retreat from the forum and avoid emotionally committing himself to any principles which would lead him to hazard himself in the political struggle, and we find this advice reiterated by late sixteenth-century writers such as Justus Lipsius in the Netherlands and Michel de Montaigne in France, in the context (often) of an explicitly Tacitist account of politics. But it had seemed to many ancient authors who had debated these issues that mere emotional detachment was not enough: as the sceptics, the followers of Pyrrho and Carneades, urged, it was impossible to be fully detached if one continued to believe that the moral or political principles in question were true. So the sceptics argued that the wise man would protect himself best by renouncing not just emotion, but also belief, reflection, particularly on the multiplicity of conflicting beliefs and practices to be found in the world, would quickly persuade him that his beliefs were indeed insufficiently founded. Since, in antiquity, ideas about the natural world were intimately bound up with ideas about human action and morality – for example, the Stoics believed that men were enmeshed in a world of deterministic physical causation, and could therefore not freely alter their situation – the sceptics also wanted to free the wise man from the burden of commitment to scientific theories. So they argued that all existing physical sciences were incoherent, and could not take account of such things as the prevalence of optical illusions; even pure mathematics were vitiated by (for example) the notorious difficulties involved in making sense of Euclid’s fundamental definitions (a line without breadth, etc). Lipsius and Montaigne both sympathised with this extension of the original Stoic programme, and Montaigne in particular became famous for the richness and force of his sceptical arguments.

Hobbes’ duties in the Cavendish household included studying this new literature, and showing his pupils how to contribute to it. They were all particularly interested in the work of their contem-

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10 For an account of this movement, see my Philosophy and Government 1572-1651 (Cambridge 1993) pp. 31-64.
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porary, an old friend of the Cavendish family, Sir Francis Bacon; in the 1630s it was still known that Hobbes highly regarded Bacon's works, and that he had even for a time acted as Bacon's amanuensis (he was probably loaned to Bacon by the Earl of Devonshire shortly before 1620).  

Bacon was one of the first and most important figures in England to import this new kind of humanism: he wrote history in a Tacitist style himself, and also published the first volume of 'essays' to appear in English, modelled on the *essais* of Montaigne. But there was a degree of ambiguity in Bacon's approach, which in many ways remained a feature of Hobbes's outlook also. Bacon certainly believed that politics was in general an arena of princely manipulation, and that the sceptics were right to stress the inadequacy of conventional science; moreover, like the other philosophers in this genre, he believed in the necessity of psychological self-manipulation in order to fit oneself mentally for the modern world. But he also still believed, like an early Renaissance man, that individual citizens ought to engage in public life, and that they should psychologically prepare themselves to do so. Moreover, Bacon argued (conspicuously against Montaigne) that the pursuit of the sciences was useful for active citizens, if the sciences could be properly put on a new foundation.

Hobbes was of course educating young men who were destined for political office, and he and his pupils seem to have found Bacon's blend of Tacitism and civic engagement rather appealing: together they wrote imitations of Bacon's essays and discourses, and Hobbes himself (it has recently been convincingly argued) composed his first long treatment of politics in the form of a discourse on the first four paragraphs of Tacitus' *Annales*, in which Tacitus gave a succinct account of the career of the Emperor Augustus. It was published together with some of his pupil's essays in an anonymous volume of 1620, by a publisher wanting to cash in on the craze for Baconian essays, and it contains many themes familiar from *Leviathan*. These include the remark that a 'Popular state . . . is to the Provinces not as one, but many tyrants' (compare *Leviathan* p. 135) and the observation that all men are 'of this condition, that desire and hope of good more affecteth them than fruition: for this induceth satiety; but hope is a whetsome to mens desires, and will not suffer them to languish' (*Leviathan* p. 46). It also reveals one of the roots of Hobbes's life-long concern with the idea of liberty; the first sentence of the *Annales* reads: 'In the beginning, kings ruled the city of Rome. Lucius Brutus founded freedom, and the consulate,' and it was often used in the Tacitist tradition as a peg upon which to hang a discussion of the true meaning of liberty. In his discourse, Hobbes remarked that Brutus had not really been justified in overthrowing the Roman monarchy, but that Tarquin's private crimes gave colour to his expulsion, & to the alteration of government. And this is by the author entitled, Liberty, not because bondage is always ioyed to Monarchy; but where Kings abuse their places, tyrannize over their Subjects [etc] . . . such usurpation over mens estates, and natures, many times breaks forth into attempts for liberty, and is hardly endured by mens nature, and passion, though reason and Religion teach us to bear the yoke. So that, it is not the government, but the abuse that makes the alteration be termed Liberty.

Augustus, on the other hand, is praised throughout the discourse for his skill in manipulating his citizens, and in particular for con-

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12 See for example his long discussion of the appropriate techniques in his *The Advancement of Learning, Of the Proficience and Advancement of Learning, divine and humane* (London 1605); *Works*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Deron Heath V (London 1858) pp. 23-30.

13 The technical statistical evidence for Hobbes's authorship of this discourse, together with a shorter piece, 'Of Law', and an interesting guide to contemporary Rome, is to be found in N.B. Reynolds and J.L. Hilton, 'Thomas Hobbes and Authorship of the *Horæ Subsecüæ*, *History of Political Thought* 14 (1993) pp. 361-80. The internal textual evidence, some of which I cite below, seems to me equally convincing, at least as far as the discourses on Tacitus and Rome go.


15 *Horæ Subsecüæ* p. 256.

16 Ibid. p. 201. Another example would be the fierce attack on ever buying-off political opponents - 'to heape benefits on the sullen, and averse, out of hope to win their affection, is unjust and prejudicial' (*Horæ Subsecüæ* p. 266, compare *Leviathan* pp. 441-2).

17 *Utrum Romanum a principio reges habuerint, Libertatem, & Consulatum L. Brutis instituit.*

18 *Horæ subsecüæ* pp. 228-9. The term 'colours', incidentally, was a technical term of rhetoric much favoured by both Bacon and Hobbes.
he had displayed already in the use of persuasion and rhetoric to gain power was given full rein. In particular, he advanced a startlingly simplified claim about the character of rhetoric. The ancient rhetoricians had usually supposed that there was no fundamental conflict between oratorical skill and the pursuit of truth, but Hobbes dismissed this: the principles of rhetoric are the common Opinions: that men have concerning Profitable, and UnProfitable, Just, and Unjust; Honourable, and Dishonourable... For as in Logick, where certain and infallible knowledge is the scope of our proof, the Principles must be all infallible Truths: so in Rhetoric the Principles must be common Opinions, such as the Judge is already possessed with: because the end of Rhetoric is victory; which consists in having gotten Belief.  

The rhetorician, on Hobbes's account, employed some of the same techniques which the manipulative prince had used to secure victory over his people. The role of 'common Opinions' here is important; when Hobbes gave moral advice to his pupils, he was often concerned with making sure that their conduct fitted 'what the world calls' virtue. As we shall see later, it remained characteristic of Hobbes's developed moral philosophy that he took as his starting-point a generally agreed description of some state of affairs.

However, by the time he published his A Briefe of the Art of Rhetorique he had already begun to broaden his interests away from this humanist literature. In 1634 he had visited Paris with the son of the Earl of Devonshire, and had become aware of the critique of this kind of humanism which was being advanced particularly by writers connected with the French friar Marin Mersenne, including above all René Descartes. Under their influence he began to write philosophy proper for the first time, and he quickly produced the first of the great works which made his reputation. By 1641 he had drafted (in Latin) a long work entitled The Elements of Philosophy (Elementa Philosophiae), divided into three relatively freestanding
'sections', of which the first was devoted to metaphysics and physics, the second was devoted to human action, sense perception and morality (understood as an account of human mores or manners and customs), and the last was devoted to politics. It is an important fact about Hobbes that, having produced this draft very quickly, he spent almost twenty years fiddling with it, and that all through the period when he was writing Leviathan he was also rewriting and thinking about The Elements of Philosophy, which he believed to be his principal work.

He arranged for copies of the third section to be printed in 1642 at Paris, under the title The Citizen (De Civis), and distributed them among his friends, but he could not be persuaded to publish (in the proper sense) any of his philosophy until 1647, when the great Dutch firm of Elzevirs published a revised version of De Civis and Hobbes suddenly acquired a Europe-wide reputation. A version of the first section, entitled Matter (De Corporis), was finally sent to the printers in 1655, after Hobbes had returned to England, and the second section, Man (De Homine), in 1658. The three sections were finally published in their proper relationship and under their original title in 1668, as part of Hobbes's complete Latin works which appeared that year. A Latin translation of Leviathan accompanied them, clear evidence that Hobbes continued to believe that The Elements of Philosophy and Leviathan were compatible and equally important accounts of his philosophy. At the same time as he was preparing the first version of the Latin Elements of Philosophy, Hobbes also composed an English summary (and, one may conjecture, in some passages a translation) of the last two sections, which he called Elements of Law, Natural and Political. He was circulating this extensively among his English friends by May 1640, and it remains the best short introduction to Hobbes's ideas, belonging as it does to the period when they were still newly minted.

III

Commentators on Hobbes have often argued among themselves about the relationship between his early humanist interests and his later scientific and philosophical ones, and in particular over the question of whether the political ideas of De Civis and Leviathan are derived from his scientific theories; the position of De Civis in The Elements of Philosophy, after all, suggests that it was intended to be read as an extension of the theories presented in the first two sections. It was one of the great services of Leo Strauss to open up this question, and to urge that Hobbes's own account of the matter, in which his civil philosophy is consistently presented as growing out of his natural philosophy, may be misleading; Strauss believed that, in its essentials, Hobbes's political theory remained a humanist one, and was (if anything) distorted by its presentation in a deductive and scientific form. But as I remarked earlier, a dichotomy of this kind between 'humanism' and 'science' is false: in the eyes of late sixteenth-century humanists, the status of the natural sciences was bound up with moral philosophy. The sceptics were hostile to the vain pursuit of scientific truths because they believed that they led people to epistemic and therefore moral commitments which would endanger them; while Bacon, on the other hand, welcomed at least a new kind of science precisely because it would enable people to lead a better life as active and effective citizens.

The same was true (though it is often overlooked) of Descartes; in his Discourse on the Method he carefully presented an image of himself as a typical humanist, 'brought up on letters' and leading an active and indeed military life, and he explained the point of his whole project in the following terms: 'I had always had an extreme desire to learn to distinguish true from false in order to see clearly into my own actions and proceed with confidence [marcher avec assurance] in this life'. So it was a natural extension of all Hobbes's earlier concerns for him also to inquire into the foundations of the sciences, and it should not come as a surprise that the themes of his early humanism persisted into this new context. In particular, given Hobbes's earlier closeness to Bacon, it should not be surprising that he welcomed the possibility of what one might term a 'post-

28 See Leo Strauss, The Political Philosophy of Hobbes (Oxford 1936). Strauss wanted to use Horae Subsecutae as evidence for Hobbes's early political beliefs, though he was deterred from doing so on learning that the essays were attributed to other authors; but we can now see that his instincts may have been right. There are some useful remarks on Strauss in J.W.N. Watkins, Hobbes's System of Ideas (London 1973) pp. 14-17.

sceptical' science – that is, a natural science and a moral philosophy which in some fashion answered the sceptics' objections without denying the reasonableness of the sceptical arguments.

At the heart of the scientific project, for both Hobbes and Descartes, was the question of human sense perception. They both accepted the sceptics' argument that we can have no direct and truthful experience of the external world, and that all we can perceive is the internal activity of our own brain; this is the point of Chapter 1 of Leviathan, in which Hobbes makes (inter alia) the familiar sceptical points against the naive realism of the Aristotelians. Descartes in a famous passage of his Discourse on the Method (June 1637; Hobbes was reading it already in October of that year) had argued that this might imply that the external world did not exist, and that we might all be dreaming; this was the notorious 'hyperbolical doubt' which Descartes set himself to answer with his equally notorious a priori demonstration of God's existence, and the consequent claim that a benevolent God would not mislead his creation. Hobbes was clearly very impressed by the hyperbolical doubt, and a version of it appears in all the drafts of the Elements of Philosophy, in the form of a conjecture that the entire external universe may recently have been annihilated without us being conscious of its disappearance, since our inner mental life might simply continue as before.

In his early drafts, he apparently took the robust view that there is no entirely adequate criterion to distinguish between waking and dreaming, and that this does not matter, since in either case we can suppose that our mental life has been caused by some material forces outside us, by the time he wrote Leviathan, he had modified this stance, and had come to believe that (as he says in Chapter 2) 'I am well satisfied, that being awake, I know I drame not; though when I drame, I think my selfe awake.' He had always given some rather low-level and imperfect reasons for distinguishing between dreams and waking thoughts, such as the greater incoherence of dreams, but the stress he now put on the capacity to distinguish between them was related to the prominence he gave in Leviathan to the role of ghosts and other incorporeal beings in man's imaginative life, an issue which I deal with later. Hobbes had come to think by 1650 that a belief in ghosts was the consequence of a mistake about the status of dreams, and that to eliminate the belief required a clearer distinction between dreaming and waking than he had hitherto provided.

But though Hobbes might be impressed by the hyperbolical doubt, he never sympathised with Descartes's answer to it. In all his works, Hobbes firmly denied the relevance of a conventional concept of a benevolent God to any philosophical enquiry. Reflection on the nature of the universe, he believed, would lead men to a concept of its creator – the being or event which started the mechanical processes which have persisted ever since. But no rational reflection could tell us anything about the character of this being. It was natural for human beings to honour and admire the power of whatever caused the universe, and that admiration could take the form of attributing to it desirable human properties such as benevolence; but we should understand that (as he put it in one of the best accounts of his religious beliefs) such attributions are more 'oblations' than 'propositions', that is, they are ways of honouring, comparable to prostrating oneself or making a sacrifice, but they do not have any genuine truth content. God's benevolence could therefore not be used to solve any philosophical puzzle, and this determination to exclude a conventional notion of God from his philosophy persisted throughout all Hobbes's later works, including Leviathan. The phenomenon of religion, however, remained of

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27 His critique of Thomas White (1643) already contains the claim that 'the ethnics' generated the idea of demons and other incorporeal substances out of their dreams, but adds cautiously that 'since it cannot be known by natural reason whether any substances are incorporeal, what has been revealed supernaturally by God must be true'. Thomas White's De Mundo Examined, trans. H.W. Jones (Bradford 1976) p. 54.

28 This distinction comes from Thomas White's De Mundo Examined trans. Jones p. 434. The same work contains a remarkable application of this theory to the problem of evil: to describe God as all-powerful is to give him the highest honour, while to describe him as the author of evil would be to dishonour him. The two descriptions do not conflict, because neither is strictly speaking a proposition.

29 For his explicit use of this point as an answer to Descartes, see his 'Objectives to Descartes's Meditations', published along with Descartes's text in 1641, as a result of an invitation from Menasse to contribute to the volume. Descartes, The Philosophical Writings n, trans. Corningham, Stoudt and Murdoch pp. 121-37 (see especially pp. 131-2).
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At the heart of the scientific project, for both Hobbes and Descartes, was the question of human sense perception. They both accepted the sceptics' argument that we can have no direct and truthful experience of the external world, and that all we can perceive is the internal activity of our own brain; this is the point of Chapter 1 of Leviathan, in which Hobbes makes (inter alia) the familiar sceptical points against the naive realism of the Aristotelians. Descartes in a famous passage of his Discourse on the Method (June 1627; Hobbes was reading it already in October of that year) had argued that this might imply that the external world did not exist, and that we might all be dreaming; this was the notorious ‘hyperbolical doubt’ which Descartes set himself to answer with his equally notorious a priori demonstration of God’s existence, and the consequent claim that a benevolent God would not mislead his creation. Hobbes was clearly very impressed by the hyperbolical doubt, and a version of it appears in all the drafts of the Elements of Philosophy, in the form of a conjecture that the entire external universe may recently have been annihilated without us being conscious of its disappearance, since our inner mental life might simply continue as before.

In his early drafts, he apparently took the robust view that there is no entirely adequate criterion to distinguish between waking and dreaming, and that this does not matter, since in either case we can suppose that our mental life has been caused by some material forces outside us, by the time he wrote Leviathan, he had modified this stance, and had come to believe that (as he says in Chapter 2) ‘I am well satisfied, that being awake, I know I dream not; though when I dreame, I think my selfe awake.’ He had always given some rather low-level and imperfect reasons for distinguishing between dreams and waking thoughts, such as the greater incoherence of dreams, but the stress he now put on the capacity to distinguish between them was related to the prominence he gave in Leviathan to the role of ghosts and other incorporeal beings in man’s imaginative life, an issue which I deal with later. Hobbes had come to think by 1650 that a belief in ghosts was the consequence of a mistake about the status of dreams, and that to eliminate the belief required a clearer distinction between dreaming and waking than he had hitherto provided.

But though Hobbes might be impressed by the hyperbolical doubt, he never sympathised with Descartes’s answer to it. In all his works, Hobbes firmly denied the relevance of a conventional concept of a benevolent God to any philosophical enquiry. Reflection on the nature of the universe, he believed, would lead men to a concept of its creator — the being or event which started the mechanical processes which have persisted ever since. But no rational reflection could tell us anything about the character of this being. It was natural for human beings to honour and admire the power of whatever caused the universe, and that admiration could take the form of attributing to it desirable human properties such as benevolence; but we should understand that (as he put it in one of the best accounts of his religious beliefs) such attributions are more ‘oblations’ than ‘propositions’, that is, they are ways of honouring, comparable to prostrating oneself or making a sacrifice, but they do not have any genuine truth content. God’s benevolence could therefore not be used to solve any philosophical puzzle, and this determination to exclude a conventional notion of God from his philosophy persisted throughout all Hobbes’s later works, including Leviathan. The phenomenon of religion, however, remained of

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28 His critique of Thomas White (1643) already contains the claim that ‘the ethincs’ generated the idea of demons and other incorporeal substances out of their dreams, but adds cautiously that ‘since it cannot be known by natural reason whether any substances are incorporeal, what has been revealed supernaturally by God must be true’. Thomas White’s De Mundo Examined, trans. H.W. Jones (Bradford 1976) p. 54.

29 This distinction comes from Thomas White’s De Mundo Examined trans. Jones p. 434. The same work contains a remarkable application of this theory to the problem of evil: to describe God as all-powerful is to give him the highest honour, while to describe him as the author of evil would be to dishonour him. The two descriptions do not conflict, because neither is strictly speaking a proposition.

30 For his explicit use of this point as an answer to Descartes, see his ‘Objections to Descartes’s Meditations’, published along with Descartes’s text in 1641, as the result of an invitation from Mersenne to contribute to the volume. Descartes, The Philosophical Writings ii, trans. Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch pp. 121–37 (see especially pp. 131–2).
major concern to him, and I shall discuss his views about it later. Though Hobbes himself said in Leviathan that his own views about the relationship between perception and an external world were ‘not very necessary to the business now in hand; and I have else-where written of the same at large’ (p. 13), he nevertheless still felt obliged to begin the work with a short summary of his theory. It is so short, unfortunately, that it has often misled readers. It is clear from his longer works on the foundation of the sciences that his distinctive theory was that our thoughts and mental life are constituted by material objects. Such things as mental images and other ‘ideas’, which for Descartes had been immaterial and which therefore had a problematic relationship to a possible material world, were for Hobbes simply part of that world. Since material objects cannot move themselves, our changing inner mental life must be the result of a chain of material causation stretching back an indefinite distance, and involving (we may presume) both internal bodily processes such as the circulation of the blood, and external events such as the impact of light on our eyes. We can, however, have confidence in the truth only of propositions which relate to the final perceptions, since we have direct acquaintance only with them; the rest of a natural science must remain hypothetical. There were two important implications of this for his moral and political theories.

The first was that the traditional notion of free will is absurd, since all intentions and actions must be caused by previous material processes. Hobbes wrote a great deal on this issue, and it is the subject of a striking passage in Leviathan (pp. 145-7); but it is important to understand what he meant by his denial of free will. He did not mean that we should not deliberate purposively about our actions and make choices, and, indeed, was particularly irritated when one of his opponents assumed this; as he responded, ‘when it is determined, that one thing shall be chosen [by an agent] before another, it is determined also for what cause it shall so be chosen, which cause, for the most part, is deliberation or consultation, and therefore consultation is not in vain’. Because, on this account, deliberation was not in vain, neither was deliberation about how to deliberate: Hobbes’s moral philosophy presupposed the ability to perform complicated thinking about what kind of person we want to be and how we should live. We merely have to understand that this subjective sense of freedom to choose how to live is no more based on real freedom than our subjective sense of colour is based on real colour. Hobbes’s confidence that deliberation and persuasion are causally efficacious was related to his long-standing humanist interest in rhetoric and political manipulation: the view of human agents in the Tacitean tradition was precisely that they were open to causal manipulation of a more or less reliable kind, and Hobbes’s developed philosophy in this area (as in all the others) incorporated the insights of this tradition.

The second implication was that it was quite impossible to have a realist ethics. Again, it was a mistake to suppose that situations or agents outside our own minds had any moral qualities independently of our own judgment: descriptions such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ were projections of our inner sensations onto an external world, just like ‘red’ or ‘green’. As Hobbes said (p. 39), ‘whatever is the object of any man’s Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth Good: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, Evil’. If human beings could be brought to recognize the inherently subjective character of these moral descriptions, there would of course be no disagreement among them about moral matters, any more than there is disagreement about avowedly subjective questions such as the taste of foods. Hobbes seems to have believed that a perspective on our moral language of this kind was possible for philosophers, and for all men when they had moments of quiet reflection; but he also seems to have assumed that it could not be permanently maintained. Moral language, like colour language, constantly tempted its users to attribute to the external world a set of imaginary attributes, and as a consequence to dispute with one another about the world. Moreover, such disputations was not exclusively about what we would regard as ‘moral’ matters: men would equally dispute about questions of interest and profit (and, indeed, about matters ranging from the very definition of a man to quite trivial questions such as weights and measures). The analysis

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34 This last remark is an interesting indication that he was assuming that The Elements of Philosophy in some form would soon be available to his audience.
of this conflict and an account of its resolution constitute Hobbes’s mature civil philosophy.

It is important first to understand the point of philosophy, in Hobbes’s eyes. Modern political philosophers have often assumed that their job is in some way to give a rationale of the actual political attitudes or practices of their society, and have treated Hobbes as an ally in this endeavour; his ‘realistic’ or ‘pessimistic’ assumptions about human nature apparently make him a plausible recruit. But Hobbes himself believed that the correct understanding and application of his philosophy would transform human life. From the beginning of his project he proclaimed the benefits which he was offering mankind: already in the Elements of Law he described his conclusions as ‘of such nature, as, for want of them, government and peace have been nothing else to this day, but mutual fear’ – a useful reminder of the fact that (contrary to many people’s belief) Hobbes wished to free people from fear. He reiterated his hopes in De Cive: if moral philosophy could be as well founded as geometry, then

I do not know what greater contribution human industry could have made to human happiness. For if the patterns of human action were known with the same certainty as the relations of magnitude in figures, then ambition and greed, whose power rests on the false opinions of the common people about right and wrong, would be disarmed, and the human race would enjoy such secure peace that (apart from conflicts over space as the population grew) it seems unlikely that it would ever have to fight again.

(Engine Dedicatory 6)

The same utopian ambition is manifest in Leviathan (e.g. p. 254), and indeed it is (as we shall see) even more extravagant there than in the earlier works.38

How, then, did Hobbes believe that philosophy could overcome the debilitating conflict which was hitherto inherent in human life, given the absence of any objective standards by which to measure what was right or wrong, or even what was beneficial or harmful to a human being? The first step was a recognition of the true

38 It may be relevant to compare Hobbes’s ambitions in this respect with the equally utopian ambitions of Bacon – who was, after all, the author of an avowedly utopian political work, the New Atlantis.

nature of the conflict, namely that it was indeed a conflict of belief. Again, it is tempting to suppose that Hobbes thought that the collisions of the state of nature were collisions between the differing interests of the people concerned, but, as he carefully explained in Chapter 6 of Leviathan, even the passions by which we appear to be moved have in most cases a vital cognitive component – so that, for example, joy arises from ‘imagination of a mans own power and ability’, while grief stems from ‘opinion of want of power’ (p. 42). The only desire which has no cognitive content is the fundamental desire to preserve oneself from death; all other passions and desires involve some belief about one’s position in the world and the threats which one might be facing. If there were genuinely scarce resources of a basic kind, then there would be an irreducible conflict of interest; but Hobbes believed that in the world as presently constituted, there was no such shortage. The New World offered the prospect of a vast increase in production:

The multitude of poor, and yet strong people still increasing, they are to be transported into Countries not sufficiently inhabited: where nevertheless, they are not to exterminate those they find there; but constrain them to inhabit closer together, and not range a great deal of ground, to snatch what they find; but to court each little Plot with art and labour, to give them their sustenance in due season. And when all the world is overcharged with Inhabitants, then the last remedy of all is Warre; which provideth for every man, by Victory, or Death.

(p. 239)39

The wise man should therefore, on Hobbes’s account, recognise that all conflict was at bottom a conflict of belief, and should also recognise that all beliefs which might be the material of conflict were inadequately founded.

To analyse this conflict and its resolution, Hobbes turned to what we should recognise as a rather surprising language, that of natural rights and natural laws. Neither the late humanism in which he grew up, nor the new philosophy of the Mersenne circle, was particularly sympathetic to this language, which was traditionally

39 This is also the justification for the annexation of aboriginals’ land provided by Locke: see J.H. Tully’s ‘Rediscovering America: The Two Treatises and Aboriginal Rights’ in his An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts (Cambridge 1993) pp. 137-76.
associated with scholastic philosophy; and, indeed, many of Hobbes's central concerns continued to be discussed in France (by writers such as Pascal) without much use of these terms. But the language had recently been used by two authors to describe 'post-sceptical' moral theories. The more important of the two was the Dutchman Hugo Grotius, though Hobbes was probably also influenced by the other (who later became his friend), the Englishman John Selden. In his De jure Belli ac Pacis of 1625, Grotius had argued (expressly against the sceptics) that a natural law theory was possible, provided it was based on a narrower set of moral principles than had been customary in the Aristotelian tradition. Grotius argued that the fundamental law of nature was the mutual recognition of the basic rights possessed by human beings, and in particular their rights to defend themselves against attack and to acquire the necessities of life. No society, argued Grotius, could ever be found or imagined which did not build into its laws and customs a respect for the right of self-preservation and a condemnation of wanton or unnecessary injury. Selden, in a couple of books written in the 1630s and partly directed at Grotius, agreed with the broad outlines of this theory, but argued that the implications of the right of self-preservation could be much more far-reaching than Grotius had assumed, and could (for example) include a very general right to make war on other people in pursuit of the agent's own goals.

Hobbes clearly recognised the compatibility between this kind of natural rights theory and his own moral philosophy, and he proceeded to interpret the fundamental conflicts of belief in terms of a 'state of nature' in which each individual made his own judgements about everything, including the desirable means to his own preservation, and in which he would be recognised by everyone else as having a 'right' to do so. This mutual recognition of the right to self-preservation stemmed (on Hobbes's account) from each person understanding the salience in his own conduct of the desire for self-preservation, but it should be stressed that Hobbes's theory did not require us always to act on the basis of the principle of self-preservation. He was well aware that on occasion people could sacrifice themselves for their parents, or for their religion. But it would always seem justifiable to act on this basis: self-sacrifice could not be obligatory, and self-preservation was always understandable. Because anything might in principle appear necessary to the individual's preservation, this right in nature to use one's own judgement could also be viewed rather dramatically as a 'right to all things', though certain things (including pointless cruelty) were always seen by Hobbes as unlikely ever to be justifiable in terms of an agent's preservation.

A comparison between Grotius and Hobbes in this area is instructive. On the one hand, Hobbes accepted Grotius's argument that, in such a state, everyone would recognise that each individual was justified in preserving himself, so that there would be a basic agreement in the state of nature about the foundations of a moral theory; but on the other hand, he was quite unlike Grotius in observing that such a basic agreement was not enough in itself to generate a settled moral order, since there would still be radical disagreement about everything else, including most importantly the actual circumstances in which people might be justified in preserving themselves. As a consequence of this disagreement among people, the state of nature would inevitably be a state of war: I would defend myself against you in ways which you believe are unnecessary, since you believe that you are not in fact a danger to me, and so on. But it is important to stress that on Hobbes's account, if this secondary disagreement about the implementation of the right can be eliminated, then (just as in Grotius) there will be a secure basis for a moral consensus, since all men will accept the reasonableness of the proposition that each man has a fundamental right to preserve himself.

There has been much argument about whether Hobbes's state of nature was intended to be purely hypothetical, a kind of thought-experiment, or whether he supposed that it could be or had been a practical possibility. At different times in his works, Hobbes gave

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46 It is worth pointing out that the term 'state of nature' as used in this context seems to have been an invention of Hobbes—neither Grotius nor Selden use the term, though each of them clearly uses the concept.
examples of the state of nature: the regular ones were the international relations of states, and the condition of the aboriginal peoples of North America and the primitive peoples of Europe. He also added the example of Cain and Abel in the Latin Leviathan, prompted (perhaps) by a discussion with a young French admirer in the 1650s about just this issue. We do not have Hobbes's own letters on the subject, but in 1657 the Frenchman acknowledged receipt of a letter from Hobbes explaining what could count as examples of the state of nature, and continued:

I am very satisfied with your reply to my last queries . . . The examples you give of soldiers who serve in different places and masons who work under different architects fall, in my view, to illustrate accurately enough the state of nature. For these are wars of each against each only successively and at different times; whereas the one I was discussing was at one and the same time.

Having meditated a little on the subject, I found that, in my opinion, there is now and has always been a war of minds, so far as opinions and feelings are concerned, and that this war is exactly like the state of nature. For example: doesn't it often happen among the members of a single parliament that each man, having a different view and being convinced that he is right, obstinately maintains his view against each of his colleagues? So that there is a war of minds, waged by each against each. Similarly, in philosophy there are so many teachers of doctrines, and so many different sects. Each thinks he has found the truth, and imagines that each and every one of the others is wrong . . .

It is not clear precisely what Hobbes meant by the example of mercenary soldiers or travelling masons, nor how he responded to the extremely perceptive suggestions of his correspondent; but it is clear that he envisaged the kind of conflict which constituted the state of nature as something which could straightforwardly arise in practice, and which had frequently done so. Indeed, his heuristic power was precisely that it represented a real threat, which civil society was designed to pre-empt.

Men, on Hobbes's account, were to abandon the state of nature by renouncing the right to all things — that is, in effect, renouncing their own private right of judgement about what conduced to their preservation, except in such obvious and extreme cases that there could be no disagreement about the necessary means. 62 Hobbes's description of this process was that they were led to do so by their recognition of the force of the 'law' of nature, and the status of this law has proved to be perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Hobbes's whole theory. If it is true that there is radical disagreement about all moral matters, and no objective set of moral principles, how can men be persuaded to abandon their own moral and prudential judgement by reflection on an apparently objective law? During the middle years of this century, there was a popular theory (associated particularly with the name of Howard Warrender) which held that Hobbes's law of nature was indeed an objective principle which overrode the subjective disagreement represented by the right of nature, and which might best be understood (though Warrender was cautious on this point) as the law of God. 64 Such a view was particularly encouraged by the passage at the end of Chapter 15 of Leviathan in which Hobbes says that the laws of nature are but 'theorems', whereas Law, properly is the word of him, that by right hath command over others. But yet if we consider the same Theorems, as delivered in the word of God, that by right commandeth all things; then are they properly called Lawes' (p. 111).

The easiest way to understand Hobbes's argument at this point is to go back to what I have argued is the non-juridical theory underlying his use of the language of rights and duties. The wise man will recognise the fragility of his own beliefs in any case where there is genuine disagreement with other people; he will also recognise that insisting on the truth of his beliefs in these situations will

62 Hobbes's best discussion of this issue is in De Gove iv.18, where he points out that nobody (not even a sovereign himself) will deny that someone who is under attack at the hands of the sovereign has the right to resist; 'a person found by an agreement is normally trusted to perform (for trust is the only bond of agreements), but when people are being led out to punishment (whether capital or not), they are held in chains or escorted by guards; that is the clearest indication that they are not seen as sufficiently obliged by an agreement not to resist... Nor need the commonwealth itself require of anyone, as a condition of punishment, an agreement not to resist, but only that no one protect others.' See also Leviathan pp. 152-3 and 154.

lead to conflict. The way to peace and tranquility therefore lies through the renunciation of those beliefs, just as the Renaissance sceptics (and, often, their Stoic allies) had taught. Our own profound commitment to self-preservation will teach us that using our own judgement about what conduces to preservation in debatable cases is self-defeating. This is only superficially paradoxical: it is analogous to Ulysses and the Sirens, or any of the other theories about how a higher-order set of wants prescribes the lower-order wants which one should try to induce oneself to have. If this is the structure which underpins Hobbes's juridical arguments, then there is no puzzle about the relationship between the right of nature and the law of nature: in our 'calmer moments' (as he said in De Cive iii.26) we will see that we should deprive ourselves of the capacity to act on our independent and contentious judgement, as long as others do likewise, so that we can align our judgements with those of other men in order to form a civil society.

If this is right, then the force of the 'law' of nature does arise from considerations of self-interest, or at least from those of self-preservation. Why, then, does Hobbes describe it as a law, given that he has apparently earlier described self-preservation as a 'right', and (as he said), 'Law, and Right, differ as much, as Obligation, and Liberty; which in one and the same matter are inconsistent'? The answer to this question has two parts. The first is that, strictly speaking, Hobbes does not define the right of nature simply as a right to preserve oneself: in the words of Leviathan, it is 'the Liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himselle, for the preservation of his own Nature' (my italics). In other words, it is the right to use one's own judgement about preservation which is in fact the right of nature, not the bare right of self-preservation. The right of nature rests on the recognition of the salience for everybody of their own survival, but like any right it is renounceable, and its renunciation is at the heart of Hobbes's theory. The second part is that, as the quotation about 'theorems' illustrates, Hobbes was indeed in two minds about describing the law of nature as a law; the 'word of God' in that quotation (as the equivalent passage in De Cive iii.33 amply illustrates) means Scripture, which does not of course have any power over natural men. His hesitation may well have stemmed from an awareness of the fact that (as we have seen) be elsewhere allowed that men were not always motivated by the desire for survival: the law of nature is indeed a 'theorem' which establishes the relationship between survival and the renunciation of the right of nature, but it does not affect people who have no desire to preserve themselves.

The way in which we renounce individual judgement, according to Hobbes, is that we enter into a contractual relationship with our fellow men and erect a sovereign whose judgements we will henceforward count as our own. It is fair to say that the contract in Leviathan has little independent moral force: we stick with our agreement to align our judgements because (as long as everyone else does so) there is no reason for us to defect from the arrangement. This has often puzzled readers of Leviathan, and Hobbes tried to answer their doubts (presumably, doubts originally expressed by readers of De Cive) in a notoriously baffling passage about 'the Fool' (pp. 101-2). Hobbes took the figure of 'the fool who hath said in his heart: There is no God' (Psalm 14.1) and depicted him as saying also that there is no justice, and that if the kingdom of God may be ' gotten by violence', it could not be wrong to seize it. (This startling image comes from Matthew's Gospel xi.12, 'from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force'; a passage whose interpretation is apparently still obscure.)

The important fact about this passage is that the fool is not concerned simply with increasing his own utility by (for example) burglary, but with vastly increasing his own power through the seizure of either an earthly or a heavenly kingdom. Hobbes, as we have seen, took the only generally accepted basis for rational conduct to be the securing of one's own preservation, and not any increase in personal utility, however slight (this is a vital difference between Hobbes and modern rational choice theorists, and renders any attempt to recast Hobbes's arguments into choice-theoretic terms highly misleading). So the only question Hobbes thought worth
asking was, suppose I could seize the sovereignty, would I not be better off in terms of my survival than if I remained an obedient citizen? And the answer he gave was then straightforward, which was that there is no benefit from being the sovereign rather than a citizen, and there is a greater risk of destruction if one embarks on treason rather than loyally obeying the laws. There is no advantage in being the sovereign rather than a citizen, because it does not matter (on Hobbes’s theory) who makes the judgements about our preservation, as long as we all make the same judgements — I should not think that there is anything special about their being my judgements rather than someone else’s, since all judgements (in contentious matters) are equally ill-founded.

IV

There is no doubt that the picture Hobbes drew of the relations between citizen and sovereign in civil society is a strange and disconcerting one. His ideal citizen would, like the wise man of much ancient philosophy, have become a man without belief and passion, accepting the laws of his sovereign as the only ‘measure of Good and Evill actions’ and treating them as ‘the publicke Conscience’ which was entirely to supplant his own (p. 223). A natural response to this picture is to say (with Hume) that it is ‘fitted only to promote tyranny’, a response apparently confirmed by (for example) Hobbes’s disdain for any distinction between the free republic of Lucca and the rule of the Sultan of Constantinople (p. 149). In De Cive he was even more blunt, declaring that to be a citizen is no more than to be a slave (seruo) of the sovereign (Chapter viii; see also Leviathan p. 142). This casualness about the difference between the free man and the slave is again reminiscent of a great deal of ancient philosophical writing about the life of wisdom, which (the Stoics for example argued) could be lived as well by a slave as by a master. But in Hobbes’s case, it is not always clear that his theory points unequivocally in the direction of tyranny; it has often proved possible to read Hobbes as a surprisingly liberal author.47


The liberal interpretation of Hobbes begins from his theory of the sovereign as the representative of the citizens. Hobbes described the relationship in Leviathan as follows: the prospective citizens in the state of nature

appoint one Man, or Assembly of men, to beare their Person; and every one to owne, and acknowledge himselfe to be Author of whatsoever he that so beareth their Person, shall Act, or cause to be Acted, in those things, which concern the Common Peace and Safety; and therein to submit their Wills, every one to his Will, and their Judgements, to his Judgement. (p. 120)

In this passage, Hobbes deliberately used the language which was commonly used also by those theorists who wanted to limit the powers of sovereigns, or even introduce quasi-republican government. The idea that a sovereign ‘bears the person’ of the citizens was, for example, an allusion to a passage in Cicero’s De Officiis (1.124) where Cicero, an enthusiast for the Roman republic and an opponent of Caesar, remarked that a magistrate should understand that he ‘bears the person of the civitas’ (a word Hobbes used in his Latin works as a synonym for ‘commonwealth’ in his English ones), and that the magistrate’s office had been ‘entrusted’ to him (ea fidei tuae commissa). The magistrates of the Roman republic had of course been elected by the people, and it was natural for republican theorists to describe the officials of a republic as ‘representatives’ or ‘agents’ of the people.

Moreover, in the Elements of Law and De Cive, Hobbes had gone to some lengths to depict the original sovereign created by the inhabitants of the state of nature as necessarily a democratic assembly, which could only transfer the rights of sovereignty to a single person or small group by a majority vote of its members: so Hobbes’s theory was in its origins heavily involved with the forms of electoral politics.48 (It is worth, again, comparing this with Grotius: Grotius too was famous among contemporaries for basing sovereignty upon a cession of power by individual citizens, but he never used the explicitly electoral model which Hobbes employed.) On the face of it, this is not true in Leviathan, and some scholars have made much of the difference; but it is not clear that the gulf

48 See Elements of Law ii.2.1-10; De Cive vii.3-16.
between the earlier works and Lebiahan is as great as it might appear. Hobbes still presupposed that something like a majority vote among the inhabitants of the state of nature would be necessary to create any sovereign other than a democratic assembly. 40

In a sense, in Lebiahan Hobbes was working towards a theory rather like some later discussions of democracy and voting (for example, the theory in Rousseau — who was aware of some similarities between himself and Hobbes), in which he was trying to answer the puzzle about how someone can be said to be our 'representative', or how (in a direct democracy) we can be said to have 'consented' to the decision of our assembly, when we were outvoted and our apparent wishes were ignored. His answer, like Rousseau's and like most modern theorists', was that we have a prior and unanimous commitment to be bound by the result of the electoral process, and that it is this unanimity which renders legitimate the representative or the law in question. 41 In the absence of such a commitment, a people were (in Hobbe's terminology) merely a 'multitude', a disordered crowd with no legal personality. A theory of this kind was compatible with Hobbes's belief that individual citizens had few rights against their sovereign — as Hobbes was well aware, democracies can be extremely brutal towards their own citizens.

40 See the beginning of Chapter 18: 'A Common-wealth is said to be Instituted, when a Multitude of men do Agree, and Covenant, every one, with every one, that to whatsoever Man, or Assembly of Men, shall be given by the major part, the Right to Present the Person of them all (that is to say, to be their Representative) every one; as well he that Voted for it, as he that Voted against it, shall Authorise all the Actions and Judgements, of that Man, or Assembly of men, in the same manner, as if they were his own... ' (p. 121). Professor M.M. Goldsmith drew attention to this passage in his introduction to his edition of the Elements of Law (London 1966) p. xix, though he took it to be merely a relic of Hobbes's earlier position, and contrasted it with the passage from Lebiahan p. 145 in which Hobbes says, 'It is manifest, that men who are in absolute liberty, may, if they please, give Authority to One man, to represent them every one; as well as give such Authority to any Assembly of men whatsoever, and consequently may subject themselves, if they think good, to a Monarch, as absolutely, as to any other Representative.' But there does not seem to me to be a significant divergence between these passages, since in the latter one Hobbes is not concerned to discuss the actual mechanism by which the men 'in absolute liberty... give Authority' to their chosen representative; majoritarianism may simply be implicit in this passage.

41 The actual term 'representation' comes into Hobbes's works in the French translation of De Gic, what is new in Lebiahan is simply the elaborate account of 'authorisation' which supplements the notion of representation.

Hobbes consistently endorsed another view which is fundamental to modern democratic politics, which is that it makes sense to say that sovereignty can lie with a people even when they do not directly exercise it. In all three of his works, he envisaged the possibility of a monarch elected for life but not empowered to nominate his successor, and observed that in this case, although the people had no practical part in government, 'sovereign power (like Ownership) remained with the people; only its use or exercise was enjoyed by the time-limited Monarch, as a wajfeumity' (De Gic vii. 16, see also Lebiahan p. 156, Elements of Law n.24—10). During this period the people are, as he said, 'asleep'. The critical test which distinguished a regime of absolute monarchy from one of popular sovereignty was whether the electoral assembly of the people had the right to meet on the monarch's death to determine a successor, and, correspondingly, whether the monarch had the legal right to appoint his own successor by will (Lebiahan pp. 136–8, De Gic ti.11—19). This was an extremely hazardous test to use as the basis for a royalist theory, since the right of at least the King of England arbitrarily to define his own successor was far from clear. It had, for example, seriously been contemplated by Elizabeth's ministers that on the Queen's death a Parliament should gather to determine the succession, and possibly even decide to leave the throne temporarily vacant. Hobbes confidently asserted both that the King had such a right and (more plausibly) that no Parliament could meet without being summoned by the King, and that there was therefore no other candidate for the sovereign representative in England than the monarch; 42 but his fundamental theory was one which, later, radical democrats such as the Jacobins or the 'philosophic radicals' of early nineteenth-century England could easily turn to their own ends.

It should also be said that the representative character of the sovereign, strictly interpreted, entailed that the sovereign's powers...
Introduction

were not as far-reaching as might be thought. The sovereign’s rights were purely those of any individual in the state of nature; and as we have seen, an individual on Hobbes’s account had the right only to do those things which he sincerely believed conducive to his preservation (though virtually anything might turn out to qualify). Similarly, a sovereign in his capacity as their representative was strictly entitled only to enforce on his subjects those things which he believed necessary for their preservation. He might of course go beyond this limit, and subjects would have to accept his judgement; but he would in fact have had no natural right to do so, and he would be breaking the law of nature (as Hobbes made clear in his remarks on David and Uriah, p. 109). In such a situation the sovereign would act without right in ordering something on his subject, and the subject would act without right in resisting; while Hobbes was primarily concerned with the realm of rights and duties, his view of what might happen once that realm was left behind is contained in his melancholy observation at the end of Chapter 31 that the ‘Negligent government of Princes’ is punished with ‘Rebellion; and Rebellion, with Slaughter’ (p. 193). In addition, because a sovereign was the representative of his subjects, he had to take seriously the task of ensuring for them the necessities of life – Hobbes’s sovereign had not only the right but also the duty to intervene in the economic system if its free workings threatened the survival of any of his citizens (pp. 128–9).

But in Hobbes’s eyes the most important area of potential intervention by his sovereign was religion; it was the discussion of religion in the last two Parts of Leviathan which finally broke his links with his old royalist friends (though it must be observed that it may well have been welcomed by other royalists). This was where the argument of Leviathan differed most obviously from that of the Elements of Law or De Cive; in other areas, the differences can almost always be understood as an attempt by Hobbes to give greater clarity to his original ideas.2 But on religion, he seems to have directly repudiated what he had argued in the earlier works, and in doing so he pushed Leviathan in a remarkably utopian direction. It is reasonable to say that it is Parts iii and iv of Leviathan which constitute the prime purpose of the work.

In the Elements of Law and De Cive, Hobbes was careful to avoid a direct confrontation with the Anglican Church (among whose ministers he counted many friends). Whereas on most matters the sovereign had the right to determine his subjects’ beliefs, both religion in general and Christianity in particular were special cases. These issues were explored most thoroughly in De Cive, where Hobbes argued that ‘natural’ religion is an inevitable feature of human psychology: it is a recognition of the existence of a first cause, and a feeling of awe and wonder at the power of such a cause to produce the universe (a close later parallel would be with Kant’s sense of wonder at the starry heavens above). This natural religion does not straightforwardly result in conventional theism, as we know nothing of the nature of the first cause; but conventions in different societies about the expression of awe and wonder give rise to theological language, though such language is purely emotive in character and has no truth values. (A similar argument is found in Chapter 31 of Leviathan.) The sovereign is therefore the key figure in deciding how this awe should be expressed; all religion is thus in principle ‘civil’ religion, a claim contemporaries associated with Machiavelli, and deeply distrusted.

But in De Cive their distrust was forestalled by the special role which Hobbes accorded to Christianity. He argued there that if one had faith in the principles of Christianity (a faith which by its nature was not rational, philosophical or natural), then one would accept earlier scepticism about the value of the rhetorical arts in his remark in the Review and Conclusion that ‘Reason, and Eloquence... may stand very well together’. I am not entirely persuaded by this: as we have seen, Hobbes was always aware of the power, and therefore the danger, of rhetoric, and there are still passages in Leviathan where he expresses anxiety about it. See for example his remarks about the Orators who are the ‘Favourites of Sovereign Assemblies’ and have ‘great power to hurt, but [have] little to save’ (p. 132), and the similar remarks about the way orators fan the flames of men’s passions in an assembly, p. 181. The salient difference between Leviathan and the earlier works in this area was that Leviathan was as much addressed to a ruler as to a citizen, and that (as Hobbes had observed more than thirty years before in his Discourse upon the Beginning of Tacitus) an effective ruler might well use the techniques of rhetorical manipulation to govern his people.

2 David Johnston in The Rhetoric of Leviathan (Princeton 1986) and Quentin Skinner in ‘Scientia civili’ in Classical Rhetoric and in the Early Hobbes (in Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner, eds., Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain (Cambridge 1993) pp. 97–93) have argued that another change between the earlier works and Leviathan was the greater value Hobbes now put on rhetoric. Skinner in particular has claimed that Hobbes ‘in the sharpest volte face to be found at any point in the evolution of his civil philosophy’ (p. 93) explicitly recanted his
the special character of the messages passed down from Christ himself through the apostolic succession of the priesthood. Even a sovereign (if Christian) must respect this, and interpret holy scripture ... by means of duly ordained Ecclesiastics” (xvi, 28). So in the vital area of religion, Hobbes’s sovereign was obliged to endorse the orthodoxy of the apostolic church, and enforce its teachings upon his citizens; and there is nothing in the theology of Hobbes’s early works which clearly contradicts this orthodoxy. Though in each of them, for example, he described the soul as material (though of course not ‘gross’, i.e. not fully apprehensible by the senses), he was at pains to insist that it was nevertheless immortal.

In Leviathan, however, this qualification was tossed aside. Christianity was brought into line with the other religions of antiquity, and the sovereign could interpret Scripture or determine doctrine without paying any attention to ordained clergymen: this was the principal point of Part III, where Hobbes inter alia expressly denied any significance for the apostolic succession (pp. 297–300). Hobbes used Cardinal Bellarmine, the major spokesman of the papal theory of ecclesiastical power over temporal sovereigns, as his explicit target; but implicitly (as he signalled e.g. on pp. 341 and 388) his target was as much the claims of Presbyterians both in England and Scotland to a comparable power for their Church. (Bellarmine had been used as a stalking-horse for Presbyterians in a bitter controversy in both Holland and England a few years earlier, which Hobbes must have known about.) Instead, the sovereign had to apply to the religion of his commonwealth the same set of considerations which governed his approach to its secular affairs.

Hobbes urged the sovereign to consider two things when promulgating doctrine. The first was the general question of social peace and the avoidance of sectarian conflict; and here he now argued that if a regime of toleration looked likely to do this job better than one of enforced uniformity, then the sovereign should implement such a regime. In a famous passage Hobbes eloquently welcomed the religious toleration brought about by the coming to power of the Independents in England (p. 385); this passage was, unsurprisingly, excised in the Latin Leviathan, but Hobbes continued to the end of his life to fight laws against heresy. The second thing he urged on the sovereign was, however, much more extraordinary, and most readers of Leviathan have shied away from its implications: it was that the sovereign should consider declaring the public doctrine of his country to be a radically reconstructed version of Christianity, based on a new interpretation of Scripture.

The salient feature of this new religion was its account of life after death. There were, it should also be said, some other remarkable features — for example, on pp. 338–41 Hobbes outlined the startling theory that the Trinity referred to the three great historical ‘representations’ or ‘personations’ of an unknown God — the first by Moses (God the Father), the second by Christ (God the Son) and the third by the Apostles (God the Holy Ghost). He fended off some of the Unitarian implications of this theory by continuing to describe Christ as ‘God and Man’ (p. 340), but on the face of it he was moving well away from orthodox Trinitarian Christianity. However, it was Hobbes’s account of heaven and hell which was most far-reaching, for he devoted prolonged exegetical labours to establishing the materiality of the soul, the terrestrial character of an afterlife, and the fact that there will be no eternal torments for the damned. In Hobbes’s vision, faith in Christ (i.e. faith that he represented God) and obedience to the laws of nature were sufficient to guarantee one eternal life, while breach of faith or obedience condemned one to an eternal death (that is, a second death which was to follow the bodily resurrection of all men and their sentencing by God at the Day of Judgement) (pp. 315, 431–4). He therefore urged the sovereign to teach the non-existence of Hell, and the minimal character of the acts necessary to gain admission to Heaven.

It should be noted, however, that in private even at this time Hobbes could be extremely critical of the political role which the clergy had played — see his letter to the Earl of Devonshire in July 1641, Correspondence, ed. Malcolm pp. 129–30.

For this controversy, see David Nobbs, Theocracy and Toleration: A Study of the Dispute in Dutch Calvinism from 1600 to 1650 (Cambridge 1938).
Why does Leviathan suddenly take off into this fanciful direction? The costs to Hobbes were extremely high: he lost friends, money (for he had hoped for support from the exiled King, whose mathematical tutor he had briefly been in 1646–7) and a home (he was forced to return to England in 1652 as a result of the furore raised by the Anglicans in Paris over his book). The theological speculations of Leviathan were not idle ones: there is a passion behind them which needs some explanation. Those historians who have asked themselves this question (notably J.G.A. Pocock) have on the whole replied that the theology of Leviathan was part of Hobbes's programme to ensure that the sovereign was the unquestioned moral and religious authority in the commonwealth. On this view, Hobbes was concerned to remove the possibility of a priesthood which could offer rewards or threaten punishments beyond the scope of a civil sovereign. But it is difficult to see in that case why Hobbes should have treated Heaven and Hell so differently: he did after all give the key of Heaven (effectively) to the sovereign, so why did he withhold from him the key of Hell? The claims of a priesthood to independent authority do not seem particularly relevant to this most salient feature of Hobbes's theology.

What Hobbes's theory does do, however, is liberate men from unnecessary fear. A great deal of Parts III and IV of Leviathan, and indeed almost the whole of Part IV, is devoted to establishing that we should not be frightened of entities such as ghosts or fairies, which do not exist, but which have filled men's imaginations down the ages. Hell is another of those entities: the idea of Hell has added a whole set of imaginary fears to men's lives, in addition to the natural and ineradicable fear of death. Hobbes's religion offered instead a new hope — of eternal life — and no new fear, for all that the damned were to suffer was what natural men would suffer.

Clarendon wrote to Nicholas on 27 January 1652: 'I had indeed some hand in the discomfitting my old friend Mr. Hobbes, nor was my Lord Lieutenant [the Marquis of Ormond] at all slow in signifying the King's pleasure' (Clarendon State Papers iii, ed. Thomas Monkhouse (Oxford 1796) p. 45. Mercatorius Politicus in January 1652 reported that Ormond had refused to allow Hobbes to see the King when Hobbes turned up at court to receive (as he hoped) the King's thanks for a presentation copy of Leviathan — see below p. lii. See also Nicholas's letter to Clarendon, Correspondence of Sir Edward Nicholas 1, ed. George F. Warner (Camden Society New Series xi, 1886) pp. 584–6.

Anyway. The religion could thus present itself as part of the grand Hobbesian enterprise of liberating men from terror, both of one another and of the unknown spiritual realm. At this point, the theory of Leviathan stands forth clearly as utopian, resembling very closely the utopias of the eighteenth or even the nineteenth century, in which a new religion was seen as a necessary part of reconstructing society.

If we take Hobbes's religion seriously in this way, we should at the same time remember that it was a proposal for a new civil religion — that is, Hobbes was suggesting that the sovereign should institute his religion because of its beneficial social and psychological effects, and because it was an extension of what the society already believed, and not because it was true. The accusation that Hobbes was an atheist, frequently made after 1660, centred on this point: for contemporaries not unreasonably supposed that if the sovereign could determine any religious dogmas, including those of Christianity itself, and if natural religion had so little of a personal God in it, then conventional theism itself had vanished from Hobbes's writings. Hammond's description of Hobbes's theology as 'Christian atheism' seems to me to be extremely acute.

On the face of it, the court of the exiled Prince of Wales at Paris in the late 1640s was an improbable place for speculations of this kind, which (if they resembled anything) looked most like the idiosyncratic theologies of some of the sectaries who were in the thick of the struggle against the Prince's father. But the royalists, both before their side's military defeat and after it, were always split over the question of the Church. Many of them (including particularly Hobbes's old friends such as Clarendon) fought for the King in order to preserve the Church of England; but others, especially the advisors round Queen Henrietta Maria, thought that the King should abandon his church in order to secure his political position (as the Queen's father, Henri IV of France, had done — 'Paris is worth a Mass'). If, as I suggested at the beginning, much of Leviathan was written while Hobbes was still in some sense a royalist (and some further evidence for this is given in the Note on the Text), its message was intelligible within this context; it would then resemble some of the royalist works produced at the end of the Civil War which called for a rapprochement between the King and
the Independents, though it went much further and into much wider territory than any of those works. However, the last chapters and the Review and Conclusion illustrate that Hobbes had effectively abandoned both kinds of royalism by April 1651, perhaps because he recognised that it was among the victorious sectaries that he would now find more sympathetic readers. It might also be noted that the English Catholics in France who were natural supporters of the Queen included a number of people who were equally bold in their metaphysical speculations, and who constituted a group of Catholic sectaries not unlike the Protestant sectaries of their home country; at least one of them, Hobbes’s old intellectual sparring-partner Thomas White, made the same choice as Hobbes in the 1650s and returned to England to live under the regime of the Independents.

V

After he had published Leviathan, Hobbes learned very quickly that he would no longer be acceptable at an exiled court which had recently come under the sway of Clarendon again. He attempted to persuade Charles II of the merits of the book, but he was repudiated, largely at the instigation of Clarendon (see the discussion of the text, below). The ignominious failure of Charles’s Scottish venture (which Henrietta Maria and her supporters had enthusiastically backed) left Hobbes with few influential friends at court. He returned to England in January or February 1652, and lived there for the rest of his life. He spent the 1650s working on his general philosophy, and in combat with Presbyterians or Anglicans who still banked on a strong ecclesiastical discipline; but in the 1660s attempts to enforce religious orthodoxy upon the general population (in the shape of a series of Parliamentary Bills against Atheism and Heresy) led him to a flurry of work defending his ideas. He produced a series of manuscript treatises (including the well-known

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38 See e.g. Michael Hudson’s The Divine Right of Government (London 1647), sig. xxiv ff for a discussion of toleration (though the book is very different from Leviathan in every other respect).


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40 Tricault’s French translation of Leviathan (Paris 1721) is the only full study of the relationship between the Latin and English texts; he includes footnotes drawing attention to the salient differences, and translates the Latin appendix into French.