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The Desire for Immortality as a Political Problem

Hobbes wanted to live a long life. He went out of his way, in his *Verse Autobiography* and elsewhere, to portray himself as a fearful man. He joked that he was born prematurely when his mother took fright at the approaching Spanish Armada in 1588 and boasted about being “the first of all that fled” to Paris at the outbreak of the English Civil War.¹ This image stuck. In a 1670 attack on *Leviathan*, Thomas Tenison presents Hobbes taking the waters at Buxton Well, “for the old Man being a well-wisher to long life, and knowing that those Waters were comfortable to the Nerves, and very useful towards the prolongation of health.”²

The caricature that Hobbes promoted of himself as a timorous man was not simply an act. During his lifetime, he assiduously avoided any place rumored to be infected with plague; later in life, he ate no meat other than fish; and played tennis in order to keep fit well into old age.³ All of this paid off: He lived to be ninety-one years old in an age when the average life expectancy was only about thirty-five, and despite being low born.

Both in life and in popular imagination, Hobbes stood in contrast to most of his contemporaries. All around him were those who courted death for any number of what Hobbes thought were bad reasons. As recounted in *Behemoth*, his history of the English Civil War, ordinary citizens joined

¹ Hobbes (1840a, 414). Martinich (1999, 162) also notes in this context that Hobbes was “criticized for leaving, even being called a ‘poltroon,’ on the grounds that he could have served the royalist forces in some noncombative role, as William Harvey and other soldiers over the age of fifty had.”

² Tenison (1670, 3).

³ Martinich (1999).

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either the Roundhead or Cavalier armies for the sake of pay and plunder. Far more dangerous, though, were those who fought because of the threat of hellfire and aristocrats, who hoped to make names for themselves. The latter were corrupted, as Hobbes saw it, by the democratic writings of Greek and Roman philosophers. Those who took up arms in pursuit of some form of immortality were the most serious threat to peace and stability.

Hobbes recognized that the desire for immortality, in its various forms, was the greatest obstacle to his proposed political system. The most obvious reason for this was the problem citizens faced when forced to choose between obeying a secular government that threatened them with imprisonment, torture and death, and religious authorities that promised an eternity of agony in hell. Avoiding the latter was clearly the more sensible route. It was also difficult, if not impossible, to convince someone who believed that God had chosen an everlasting life of bliss for him to do anything he thought might jeopardize that destiny. Glory seekers, too, were a perennial threat to peace since they thrived on war and were prepared to kill and often to die for the sake of renown. Hobbes, though, realized that these desires could not be entirely removed, recognizing them as a part of a permanent human nature that would be in constant tension with his system, insofar as the latter rests on a powerful if not absolute fear of death. A major goal, therefore, of Hobbes's political works was weakening or otherwise undermining the two most significant hopes for an afterlife, Christian hope for heaven, as well as the fear of hell, and a desire for immortal honor, and replacing these with a politically salutary desire for longevity. Hobbes wanted to tame, but not eradicate, hopes for eternity. Where there was once certainty about life after death, he sought to leave a deep uncertainty.⁴

What this means is that Hobbes's system, so often noted for its geometric precision, is not a perfect fit with his view of human nature.⁵ Just as

⁴ McGrath (2005, 359) notes that "the doctrine of justification – traditionally regarded as addressing the question of how humanity may establish a transcendent dimension to existence through relating to the divine – is...subverted by the Enlightenment's emphasis upon self-actualisation as the goal of human existence. This has led, both directly and indirectly, to a growing perception that the traditional Christian soteriological agenda is implausible for modernity."

⁵ As Johnston puts it, Hobbes "formulated a portrait of man characterized by a systematic opposition between two models. One of these was the model of man as an egoistic, rational being that had underlain his political philosophy from the beginning. The other was a descriptive model of man as an ignorant, superstitious, irrational being" Johnston (1989, 121). I agree with Johnston that Hobbes was engaged in a struggle for

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irrational numbers such as pi and the golden ratio reveal the limits of mathematics, but also some of its most fascinating facets, so by examining this dimension of Hobbes's political theory, the desire for immortality which is at the heart of so much human striving, but which can never be entirely rational in the modern sense of the term, we will be able to witness Hobbes's genius at its most subtle.

By approaching Hobbes from this perspective, we will gain not only a deeper understanding of what Hobbes thought he could and could not achieve but also some clarity both about the contemporary approach to mortality in the West and current debates about the nature of liberalism and modernity in general. It is in fact remarkable how closely the tension in Hobbes's system is mirrored in contemporary Western society. About 58 percent of Americans, for example, said that religion was very important in their lives in a 2012 Gallup poll, and 55 percent of respondents claimed that religion could answer all, or most of today's problems. Yet few, if any, wish to die as martyrs for their faiths, and those who do are likely to be branded extremists or fanatics. Similarly, the kind of violence that those in the seventeenth century would have thought necessary for the defense of one's honor, or that of one's family, is today the preserve of street gangs and those on the fringes of society. Even in the armed forces, where the ethos of honor has always been strongest, contemporary observers have noted an increasing aversion to casualties and a decline in the warrior spirit.

The widespread interest in Hobbes over the past few decades stems from the sense that Hobbes stands somehow at the dawn of modernity. Whether because of his impact on liberalism, capitalism, the secular Enlightenment, the scientific view of man and politics, his insistence on the need for powerful government, or all of these, Hobbes is widely recognized as a key figure in the development of the modern world.

Scholars of nearly every stripe, too, have recognized that Hobbes was, in one way or another, a highly rhetorical author. Sometimes this is meant in a straightforward way to mean that Hobbes made use of common rhetorical strategies he would have known of from his early reading of Cicero, Quintilian and others. This is the famous argument of Quentin Skinner, and it would be difficult to deny the presence of such devices in

enlightenment, but, as will become clear, we disagree about the method Hobbes chose. Oakeshott (1991, 245) also speaks about Hobbes's philosophy as the establishment of "true fictions" and claims that "the system of Hobbes's philosophy lies in his conception of the nature of philosophical knowledge, and not in any doctrine about the world."

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Leviathan.⁶ There are also those, including Leo Strauss, especially in his later writings on the subject, who see Hobbes as an esoteric author, who wished to conceal his true views from most readers. Still others, beginning with David Johnston, see Hobbes's use of science and theology as part of a single polemical project of cultural transformation. There is some degree of overlap in these views. All of these scholars agree that Hobbes was not simply setting out a scientific view of man, while acknowledging the importance of science to his overall project. I am sympathetic to differing degrees with all of these positions, as well as the thought that Hobbes was instrumental in the development of modernity.

The assumption, explicit or implicit, in these interpretations is that whatever Hobbes's rhetorical strategy, he failed at it. Hobbes's political writings, as is well known, provoked an extraordinarily hostile reaction. Any account of Hobbes's rhetoric must account for this major and unavoidable fact. Hobbes, after all, is famous in large part for his insights into the passions and human nature. If his aim was to win over his audience through the clever use of rhetorical devices, would his total failure in this regard not detract from his reputation as a great political philosopher? Would we not be justified in claiming that Hobbes badly misjudged the passions and concerns of those among whom he lived?

My central claim about Hobbes's rhetorical strategy is that he intentionally provoked his readers into attacking him in order to subtly induce them to draw conclusions that Hobbes could not state openly and to increase the influence of his work through notoriety generated by controversy. This rhetorical strategy is closely intertwined with the specific aims of Hobbes's political works. The particular aim that I am concerned with in this book is that of instilling grave doubts about the possibility of achieving any kind of immortality. This was a goal Hobbes could not state openly. Nor could he have been successful in this aim through anything other than an indirect method.

So, while I am in agreement that Hobbes had a great impact on modernity, I also want to stress another dimension of this impact that is not often mentioned: Hobbes's contribution to the sense of malaise that many critics of modernity have identified. Fred Dallmayr, a rare exception, has argued that there is a deep affinity between Hobbes's view of life and that of existentialist thinkers such as Camus, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.⁷ For Hobbes, according

⁶ Skinner (1996).

⁷ Dallmayr (1969, 615–40). Other scholars who do not explicitly draw attention to these affinities nevertheless speak of Hobbes as depicting man alone in a disordered universe,

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to Dallmayr, life is endlessly restless and the world disenchanted; Hobbes is quite close to Camus, who writes, “[i]n a universe suddenly divested of illusion and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land.”⁸ Hobbes’s view, Dallmayr goes on, “must appear dry and uninspiring: his terse sentences never soar to the heights of eternal vistas or awesome revelations. His starting point – life and its continuous affirmation – is almost offensively mundane.”⁹ Part of my argument is that this anxiety about the fact of mortality is not an unintended consequence but a necessary, political one that Hobbes, at least, has built into his system. One of the requirements of peaceful politics, for Hobbes, is that citizens have more or less disquiet minds.

THE DISQUIET MIND OF THE HOBBSIAN CITIZEN

The Cambridge Platonist Robert Cudworth, in one of many polemics attacking the religious thought of *Leviathan* in the decades after its publication, accuses Hobbes of being the latest inheritor of the atomistic and Epicurean brand of ancient atheism embodied in the poem *De Rerum Natura* by Lucretius.¹⁰ Like Hobbes, Lucretius taught that men’s beliefs about the gods originated in their fear of nature’s unexplained flux and its inscrutable effect on their lives. This supposedly elementary fear, Cudworth claimed, tended, “to the great *Disquiet* of mens own Lives, and the *Terrour of their Minds*” and “cannot be accounted other than a kind of *Crazedness* or *Distraction*.”¹¹ For atheists such as Hobbes and Lucretius, he goes on, “it is all one as if they should affirm the Generality of mankind, to be Frighted out of their Wits, or Crazed and Distemper’d in their Brains: none but a few Atheists, who being undaunted and undismayed have escaped this *Panick Terrour*, remaining *Sober* and in their *Right Senses*.”¹² This, in fact, is not

unable to understand or really relate to others. Thus, Flathman: “By denying the humanly knowable divine, natural or rational order posited by his main theological and philosophical opponents, by claiming to liberate human beings to devise an order of their own making and liking, Hobbes cast humankind into an abyss of self- and mutual unintelligibility” Flathman (1993, 5).

⁸ Dallmayr (1969, 620).

⁹ Dallmayr (1969, 625).

¹⁰ Cudworth (1678). For the charge of Hobbes’s Epicureanism, see also Dowell (1683, 11).

¹¹ Cudworth (1678, 658).

¹² Cudworth (1678, 658). In an early letter to Hobbes, Sorbrière also implied that Hobbes was dispelling religious superstition as Lucretius had. Hobbes (2007, 122) and Malcolm’s note (2002, 123).

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a bad characterization of *De Rerum Natura*, where Lucretius maintains that men “are often held in suspense with affrighted wits – happenings which abase their spirits through fear of the gods, keeping them crushed to the earth, because their ignorance of causes compels them to refer events to the dominion of the gods, and to yield to them the place of kings.”¹³ Once men understand the principles and laws of nature, however, Lucretius promises “tranquil peace of spirit.”¹⁴

Unlike Lucretius, though, for Hobbes even those who understand the origins of religion and the laws of physics are driven by a “perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power.”¹⁵ No one can remain satisfied with his current condition, and everyone is thus forced to “assure for ever, the way of his future desire.”¹⁶ There is no trace in Hobbes’s political philosophy of the “*animi tranquilla pace*” Lucretius speaks of.¹⁷ What accounts for this different view of the possibility of human happiness between Lucretius and Hobbes? We find a clue if we follow Cudworth further in his attack on Hobbes’s atheism. Against the “*Sottish Stupidity*” of Hobbes and other atheists, Cudworth claims, there is indeed a “*Religious Fear of God*,” but this has nothing to do with fear for one’s worldly fate, since no true believer is concerned with what happens to him here on earth.¹⁸ In fact, it is atheists like Hobbes who are subjected to the vicissitudes of fortune and acknowledge “no other Good, but what belongs to the *Animal Life only*,” who are “*Timourous and Fearful*.”¹⁹ In Hobbes’s case, this is obvious from the central place of fear in his political philosophy. The fundamental error atheists make, according to Cudworth, is that they believe they are freeing themselves from a wrathful, spiteful and ultimately malicious god, or gods, when in fact, all, “*agree in this, that God is to be praised, as one who is Good and Benign*.”²⁰ Cudworth acknowledges that this may be a difficult claim to prove, and indeed, it fails as an indictment of Lucretius, for whom the real gods are so benign that they do not concern themselves in the slightest with man’s fate. This was an improvement over pagan gods, “rolling great billows of wrath,” and meting out everlasting punishment after death.²¹

¹³ Lucretius (1992, 497 (sections 6.51–5)). See also (1992, 15 (section 1.146)).

¹⁴ Lucretius (1992, 499).

¹⁵ Hobbes (2012, 150).

¹⁶ Hobbes (2012, 150).

¹⁷ Lucretius (1992, 498).

¹⁸ Cudworth (1678, 658–9).

¹⁹ Cudworth (1678, 659).

²⁰ Cudworth (1678, 659).

²¹ Lucretius (1992, 499, 13).

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One who doubted the truth about Christianity in Hobbes's time would not only be free of the fear of eternal hellfire but would also have lost the possibility of immortality in heaven and a savior who cared for him as a father. This, as Cudworth suspected, could be deeply unsettling. What is odd about Hobbes's work is that, despite never admitting to being an atheist, he seems to embrace almost with enthusiasm the great disquiet of mind that Cudworth claims is the result of atheism. In *Leviathan*, his darkest work, Hobbes goes to great lengths to emphasize the absence, or at least great distance of God from man, the precarious nature of human life, and the fragility of civilization. Hell seems less real, but so does heaven.

Hobbes, though, in an apparent paradox, wants above all to release man from fear. What is "worst of all" in the state of nature is not only the danger of violent death, but the perpetual fear that pervades it.²² But the constant fear of physical harm and insecurity of property are not the same as the restless anxiety that will underlie the lives of at least some in the Hobbesian state. Hobbes does not expect the citizens of his state to be atheists, but he does expect many to experience the disquiet Cudworth claims is the consequence of atheism. It is as if the anxiety of the Christian for the next world that Cudworth describes had been transferred to this world. Hobbes, though, was not reverting to a pagan worldview: The essentially negative Christian view of life on earth is retained, at least in the background, in the *Leviathan*.

As mentioned, this sentiment is stronger in *Leviathan* than in his earlier works. In both the *Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*, Hobbes claims that man's appetites can never be satisfied and that there is no greatest good. In the *Elements*, though, we find a discussion of the pleasures and joys of both body and mind, which has dropped out in *Leviathan* in favor of a startling assertion of the futility of the pursuit of happiness: The desire for power after power "ceaseth only in Death."²³ In de-emphasizing the importance of pleasures available to mortal creatures and sharpening his focus on the grasping nature of life and the finality of death, Hobbes moves further from anything recognizably Epicurean.²⁴ All human endeavor can be reduced to a desire for power, of which we can never have enough. Mankind is engaged in a race from which individuals drop out once they die, but which never ends while they are alive, and which can

²² Hobbes (2012, 192).

²³ Hobbes (2012, 150). Cf. Hobbes (1999, 46–7).

²⁴ Pace Strauss (2011, 65–7).

never be won. The prospect of escaping this race through some form of transcendence or immortality has also dimmed in *Leviathan*. The Christian vision of the afterlife seems less believable. The traditional idea that one could win immortality through great deeds in war and politics has been undermined as well. Even the idea that one could win everlasting honor through wisdom, which we find in the *Elements*, has been left out in *Leviathan*.

This is not an accidental development in Hobbes's works. Hobbes intentionally subdues all forms of the hope for immortality and promotes instead a vague sense of anxiety at the loss of this hope. This is an essential part of his project. Clarendon, perhaps the greatest contemporary reader and critic of *Leviathan*, descried something of this strategy when, in discussing Hobbes's very strange thoughts on hell, he speaks of the "comfort that is in the uncertainty" of hell's whereabouts or even its existence.²⁵ Hell is not as frightening, but, Clarendon notes, Hobbes also makes "the joies of Heaven more indifferent."²⁶

The uncertainty about what happens after death makes one uneasy, but there is a certain comfort in being relieved from constant terror at the prospect of eternal damnation. Hobbes repeatedly stresses that damnation is a worse fate than death. If one was certain to be damned for some action, then, by the same logic through which Hobbes allows for resistance against those who seek to kill the body, he would also have to acknowledge a right to resist those who can imperil the soul. Widespread atheism was not a realistic option for Hobbes, for whom the seeds of religion "can never be so abolished out of humane nature, but that new Religions may againe be made to spring out of them."²⁷ If it was impossible, as I will argue it was, to make men believe that breaking the law would result in damnation, a fundamental uncertainty about the afterlife was essential to a stable regime. One's mortal life becomes more important in light of this uncertainty, and because of this, men become more politically pliant. What critics such as Cudworth and Clarendon failed to see was that Hobbes's real goal was changing how men thought about death. Nor did they see the extent to which they were playing into Hobbes's plan with their attacks.

It is sometimes said that Hobbes was a rhetorical failure because of the black reputation he gained among his contemporaries, earning nicknames

²⁵ Hyde, Earl of Clarendon (1676, 223).

²⁶ Hyde, Earl of Clarendon (1676, 219).

²⁷ Hobbes (2012, 180).

such as the Monster of Malmesbury and the Agent of Hell. The theology and the depiction of human nature in *Leviathan* could not easily be dismissed and were deeply unsettling. In fact, though, Hobbes realized that notoriety acquired through controversy was the surest means of achieving widespread influence. An early scholar of Hobbes's reception, Sterling Lamprecht, argued that at the hands of his critics, Hobbes became a caricature in large part because of his "remarkable gift for trenchant utterance and a glee in exploiting this gift to the irritation of his opponents."²⁸ Lamprecht and others have interpreted the creation of the Hobbist caricature as something Hobbes did not want and had no control over. One of the main arguments of this book, however, is that Hobbes was fully aware of how his works would be read and that he therefore knew he would become a caricature and welcomed this outcome. He was, in fact, a rhetorical genius. Hobbes, who claimed that the universities of his day were like Trojan horses importing destabilizing Greek philosophy into society, understood the insidious course language and thought could take. He wanted his own works taught in the universities, and despite his apparent hubris, his wish has been fulfilled – a wish that not incidentally conferred on Hobbes his own immortality.²⁹

As noted, Hobbes wanted to alter how men thought about their lives here on earth, and this went hand in hand with undermining traditional hopes for immortality. The entire philosophical system Hobbes lays out in his political works, as we shall see in greater detail in the following chapters, is part of this rhetorical strategy.

PRESCRIPTION, NOT DESCRIPTION

The political system Hobbes built was meant to be impervious to destruction except from external threat and was therefore, he claimed, a mortal god. He claims, moreover, that previous regimes failed not because of man as the matter but as the maker of them. In other words, he seems to imply that he will take man as he is and place him in a new system that will account for his deficiencies; the *Leviathan*, then, appears to have the virtue of neither requiring the inculcation of virtue nor a degree of piety or

²⁸ Lamprecht (1940, 34). Quoted in Parkin (2007, 3).

²⁹ Martinich (1999, 338) notes that when John Fell, dean of Christ Church, tried to besmirch Hobbes's reputation by altering the celebratory biography of him being prepared for a history of Oxford, Hobbes retorted that his reputation "took wing a long time ago and has soared so far that it cannot be called back."

patriotism that is not ordinarily seen in man. While it is true that Hobbes's Leviathan does not rely on the kind or degree of civic virtue that would have satisfied Cato the Elder, neither does Hobbes simply take man as he finds him. He takes man as the matter in the sense that man is always driven by appetites and aversions, but he does not in any way want to leave the targets of those appetites and aversions as he found them.

For what must Hobbes have thought of those appetites and aversions when he walked through cities whose most impressive buildings were cathedrals, when the most intense political controversies of his time were about the right path to heaven, when he saw so many men fight and die in battle as a matter of course? He spent much of his life attached to one of the most important aristocratic families in England, the male line of which, all named William Cavendish, has persisted from the sixteenth century until today. Hobbes's earliest memories, according to his Verse Autobiography, were of the Malmesbury monastery, and the monuments to Athelstan, first king of all England, which stood in his hometown.³⁰ For a large number of Hobbes's contemporaries, the aversion to death was weaker than the appetite for immortality.

Hobbes, though, would claim in his political works, and especially in *De Cive*, that the fear of death is impossible to overcome. In *Leviathan* he says that it is the most reliable passion on which to found the civil state. This, though, was Hobbes's goal, not his starting point. When he speaks about the great power of the fear of death, and its usefulness in creating a stable regime, he is prescribing how men should think about death, not how they did think about it in his time.

In the natural state, Hobbes makes it clear that many, in fact, the majority, of men are willing to kill at the slightest provocation. And yet, from this situation, according to Hobbes's prescriptive system, the commonwealth arises. One scholar, explaining the transition from the natural to the political state, describes the mechanism thus, "[i]n the absence of a binding arbiter, disputes surrounding reputation escalate into mortal combat. However, in these battles, combatants experience one passion, fear of violent death, which pierces inflated egos, prompts rational deliberation, and inclines men to contract."³¹ This description, which seems to accord with the explicit system Hobbes sets out, puts into sharp relief the fact that Hobbes seems to have skipped a step. If men care more about their reputations than their lives, at which point during the mortal combat

³⁰ Hobbes (1994c, liv).

³¹ Cooper (2007, §20).