

Thomas Hobbes's Materialism, Language, and the Possibility of Politics

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Abstract: Thomas Hobbes sought a reconstruction of philosophy, ethics, and politics that would end, once and for all, the bitter disputes that led to the English Civil War. This reconstruction begins with the first principles of matter and motion and extends to a unique account of consent and political obligation. Hobbes intended to produce a unified philosophical system linking his materialist account of human nature to his moral and political theory. However, his materialism gives rise to a set of perceptions, imagination, and desires that contribute to the chaos of the state of nature. The sort of person that emerges from Hobbes's materialist anthropology is unlikely to be able to make the necessary agreements about common meaning and language that constitute the ground of the social contract. Therefore, Hobbes's materialism frustrates the very purpose for which it is conceived.

Introduction

Writing during a time of extreme religious and political conflict, Hobbes claims

whatsoever assistance doth accrue to the life of man, whether from the observation of the heavens or from the description of the earth . . . [or] from the notations of time . . . we must acknowledge to be a debt which we owe . . . merely to geometry. If the moral philosophers had as happily discharged their duty, I know not what could have been added by human industry to the completion of human happiness. For were the nature of human actions as distinctly known as the nature of *quantity* in geometrical figures . . . mankind should enjoy such an immortal peace . . . that there should hardly be . . . left any pretence for war. (*De Cive*, Dedicatory Letter)¹

Hobbes took upon himself the duty of fulfilling the task the old moral philosophers had failed to accomplish. He produced a comprehensive philosophical system that would end, he believed, the bitter disputes which led to the

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¹Thomas Hobbes, "*De Cive*," in *Man and Citizen*, ed. Bernard Gert (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1978), 91.

English Civil War. Hobbes's comprehensive philosophical system begins with the first principles of motion and body and extends to a unique account of moral consent and political obligation.

I argue that Hobbes intends to produce a unified philosophical system linking his materialist account of our senses, imagination, and passions to his moral and political theory. Hobbes's purpose for turning to materialism is to provide a new foundation for the generation of meaning, language, and political stability. However, I see that his materialist account of human nature gives rise to a set of perceptions, imaginings, and desires that contribute to the chaos of the state of nature. Characterized by the absence of a highest good, the equal vulnerability of each to a violent death, radical diversity of perception and meaning, and the absolute freedom to pursue one's desires, Hobbes's state of nature is not just a theoretical model, but rather a product of his materialist account of sensation, imagination, and desire. Hobbes's materialist anthropology makes a disjointed set of images, words, and meanings a much more likely result than consensus, consent, and contract. I argue that the type of person that emerges from Hobbes's materialist anthropology is unlikely to be able to establish, or agree to, the common definitions that are necessary to enact the social contract.²

²In addition to the creation of commonwealth by institution, Hobbes also states that commonwealths can be formed by acquisition. Hobbes calls sovereign power created by acquisition Dominion. Dominion is acquired either through generation, as when a father holds power over his children, or by conquest. "The right of dominion by generation is that which the parent hath over his children" (*Lev.*, xx, 4). Dominion by conquest Hobbes calls despotical power and is acquired when "the vanquished, to avoid the present stroke of death, covententh either in express words, or by other sufficient signs of the will, that so long as his life and the liberty of his body is allowed him, the victor shall have the use thereof" (*Lev.*, xx, 10). The difference between commonwealth by institution, where individuals enter into covenant because of mutual fear of each other, and Dominion, lies in the fact that the covenant in both forms of Dominion is made directly between the individuals consenting and the "man or assembly that hath their lives and liberty in his power." What is unique about Hobbes's account of commonwealth by acquisition is his claim that the sovereign power is legitimate because it is based on some form of consent. Paternal dominion derives "from the child's consent, either express or by other sufficient arguments declared" (*Lev.*, xx, 4). The same claim also holds for despotical power. "It is not . . . the victory that giveth the right of dominion over the vanquished, but his own covenant. Nor is he obliged because he is conquered . . . but because he cometh in, and submitteth to the victor" (*Lev.*, xx, 11).

There are at least three issues tied up in Hobbes's account of commonwealth by acquisition. First, there is the empirical observation that throughout time parents have exercised power over their children and that nations have conquered and subjected others. Second, there is the historical question of whether children or subjected people thought of themselves as consenting to their subjection. And third, there is the question of whether or not Hobbes's account of materialism and language is coherent enough to provide the sort of common language necessary for his understanding of covenant to succeed. The first two issues are not the focus of this essay. My concern here is with the

I contend, therefore, that Hobbes's materialism frustrates the very purpose for which it is conceived.

When *Leviathan* first appeared in 1651 it was received as a "comprehensive vision of the world, which united metaphysical, theological, and political arguments into a single distinctive outlook. At the center of this outlook lay mechanical materialism."³ However, since the publication of G.C. Robertson's *Hobbes*,⁴ the connection between Hobbes's materialism and his

role and possibility of consent in Hobbes's materialistic account of human nature. If Hobbes had simply claimed that commonwealth by acquisition was legitimate by virtue of the force of the parents or conqueror, this claim would constitute an objection to my thesis that Hobbes's materialism frustrates his account of consent. But Hobbes clearly asserts that it is the consent of the child or the vanquished that makes commonwealth by acquisition legitimate. In addition, what makes it difficult to untangle these issues is the way Hobbes purposefully blends empirical and historical observations with his new philosophical claims. For example, it is uncontested that, empirically speaking, parents exercise power over their children and that sovereignty has been gained by force. It is less certain, historically speaking, that those who have been subjected thought about their subjection as a form of consent. Hobbes's claim that they understood their consent to create a covenant of subjection is purely theoretical. For my purposes here, the important issue is not the empirical observation, nor is it the historical question (even though from a purely historical perspective it would be interesting to know whether or not a conquered people really thought of their subjection as a form of consent). Rather, the question of Hobbes's account of materialism, language, and their ability to generate the conditions necessary for covenant as Hobbes understands it. If it is the case that his materialism and theory of language most likely undermine the ability to establish a stable and common language upon which to enact a covenant, then this also contaminates his account of commonwealth by acquisition.

It is curious that Hobbes concludes the chapter on "commonwealth by acquisition" with the following remarks: "The skill of making and maintaining commonwealths consisteth in certain rules, as doth arithmetic and geometry, not (as tennis-play) on practice only; which rules, neither poor men have the leisure, or men that have had the leisure have hitherto had the curiosity or the method to find out" (*Lev.*, xx, 19). Hobbes ends the chapter on "commonwealth by acquisition" with a return to a consideration of the scientific rules and methods necessary for the making and maintaining of commonwealths. Surely Hobbes does not intend the reader to believe that he expects children and the conquered to know these rules and methods, thereby gaining a better understanding of their subjection. At the very least, Hobbes's decision to end this chapter with these remarks demonstrates that his principal concern is his desire to articulate a comprehensive philosophical system in which his materialist account of perception, thought, and language will lead to and illuminate the rules for making and maintaining commonwealths. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). (Hereafter cited as *Lev.*).

³David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), xv.

⁴G. C. Robertson, *Hobbes* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1886).

moral and political theory has become a contested issue. For the last century Hobbes scholars have rejected the claim that his materialism and his moral and political theory are connected. For example, A.E. Taylor⁵ and Howard Warrender⁶ argue that Hobbes's philosophy is a form of traditional natural law theory and that his materialism and his moral and political theory are separate. Others such as J.W.N. Watkins⁷ and Thomas Spragens⁸ take Hobbes's commitment to materialism seriously and argue that it influences his moral and political theory, but they, too, stop short of arguing that there is a direct connection between the two. Recently A.P. Martinich has brought Hobbes scholarship full circle by providing an interpretation of *Leviathan* that once again considers the work a comprehensive worldview that unites natural science, theology, and political concerns into a single argument.⁹ In *The Two Gods of Leviathan*, Martinich argues that Hobbes was a genuine materialist, a natural law philosopher, and a sincere Christian. In what follows I will discuss Hobbes's materialism, how his version of materialism undermines his search for stable perceptions, language, and politics, and turning to Martinich, consider whether an alternative metaphysics, or turn to God, can save Hobbes's system.

What Kind of Materialism: Metaphysical or Methodical?

Is Hobbes a metaphysical or methodical materialist? Hobbes believes that a few basic principles are fundamental to all accounts of reality and that a basic understanding of these principles is essential to the proper building of any moral and civil philosophy. Identifying these fundamental principles constitutes, for Hobbes, "first philosophy." In this sense, Hobbes is a metaphysician in search of the underlying, self-sufficient cause of all things. As a materialist, Hobbes believes that these principles are found in the physical substance and mechanical dynamics of nature. For Hobbes, these physical and mechanical concepts are body, extension, and motion, all of which are self-evident and not reducible to, or explained by, any other concepts. Writing in *De Corpore* about these concepts, Hobbes states that they "are well enough defined, when by speech. . .we raise in the mind of the hearer perfect and clear ideas or conceptions of the things named" (*De Corp.*,

⁵A. E. Taylor, "The Ethical Doctrine of Hobbes," in *Hobbes Studies*, ed. Keith Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

⁶Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

⁷John Watkins, *Hobbes's System of Ideas* (Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 1989).

⁸Thomas A. Spragens, *The Politics of Motion* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973).

⁹A. P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

vi, 13).¹⁰ “Hobbes,” Richard Peters claims, “is to be regarded as the metaphysician of the new scientific movement.”¹¹ As a metaphysical materialist, Hobbes has a realist, or self-evident, conception of truth that he believes grounds his account of human nature and activity.

However, Hobbes cannot be considered a metaphysical materialist in the strict sense. While Hobbes shares the metaphysical materialist’s belief in physical principles that explain the nature of reality, he is skeptical of the traditional claim that reason provides access to that reality, and he is further skeptical of our ability to equip ourselves with a language that truly expresses that reality. While Hobbes believes that things exist “out there,” independent of our thoughts and language, he does not believe that we can acquire absolute knowledge about them. The names and definitions we assign to objects do not express their objective qualities; they are created to help us remember the encounter, and to convey the concept to others. Universal ideas or concepts are products of the human mind, and there is no inherent connection between the universal idea produced by the mind and the object it signifies. Hobbes’s nominalism, therefore, leads to a conventional theory of truth. Propositions are true because we coin the names, assign the meaning, and establish the rules with which the words will be used. As Samuel Mintz puts it, “the truth which reason yields is the truth about words, not things.”¹² Hobbes’s nominalism and conventional account of truth forces him to back away from the strong claims of metaphysical materialism and to settle for the softer position of methodical materialism. What distinguishes metaphysical materialism from methodical materialism is Hobbes’s suspicion of our ability to equip ourselves with a language sufficiently transparent to reveal the objective quality of the external world.

Some of the difficulty of reading Hobbes derives from the fact that he is, at different times, both a metaphysical and methodical materialist. In *De Corpore*, Hobbes claims that all things possess the primary qualities of extension and magnitude. While in both *The Elements of Law*¹³ and *Leviathan*, Hobbes makes a strong case for what is often called the “subjectivity of sensible qualities.” Hobbes never fully comes to grips with the tension between his soft realism (extension and magnitude are real qualities of objects) and his nominalism. The issue is important because this tension leads many Hobbes scholars to discount the influence Hobbes’s materialism has on his moral and political theory. Their argument is that Hobbes is either confused about his account of materialism, or that he makes an ontological mistake by thinking that moral claims can be derived from purely material sources. Despite

¹⁰Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, vol. 1, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1839). (Hereafter cited as *De Corp.*).

¹¹Richard Peters, *Hobbes* (London: Pelican Books, 1956), 76.

¹²Samuel Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 23.

¹³Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1889). (Hereafter cited as *EL*).

Hobbes's shuffling between metaphysical and methodical materialism, as well as between a realist and conventional account of truth, Hobbes most likely believes that he is developing a comprehensive philosophical system that combines his account of geometry with the "way things really are." For Hobbes there is sufficient connection between geometry and the natural world to establish the system. While it is true that Hobbes does not resolve the tension between his metaphysical materialism and nominalism, this should not preclude an analysis of what Hobbes thought he was doing and whether his account of materialism can do what he wants it to.¹⁴

Materialism, Language, and Commonwealth

Hobbes was seduced by the promise of the emerging natural sciences, and he used this knowledge to build a comprehensive theory of human nature, morality, and politics. He asserts that matter is the only substance of reality, that matter produces mind, and that changes in matter are the result of different rates of motion. In *De Corpore*, he writes, "[a]fter *physics* we must come to

¹⁴J. G. A. Pocock offers one possible solution to this tension. Pocock argues that Hobbes distinguishes between two types of knowledge—philosophical and historical. Philosophical knowledge consists of assertions that are amenable to rational and scientific demonstration (158). Historical knowledge, especially the religious doctrine that makes up books 3 and 4 of *Leviathan*, is conveyed through divine prophecy and revelation (159). Pocock argues that Hobbes intends both forms of knowledge to play a role in the commonwealth. Hobbes "states quite plainly," Pocock argues, "that human existence, knowledge, morality and politics must be thought of as going on in two distinct but simultaneous contexts: the one of nature, known to us through philosophic reasoning on the consequences of our affirmations, the other of divine activity, known to us through prophecy, the revealed and transmitted words of God" (159). On Pocock's reading of Hobbes, the tension I identify between Hobbes's material metaphysics and his nominalism is not a tension at all, but rather a result of failing to recognize the role divine prophecy and revelation play in Hobbes's thought. According to Pocock, a historical philosophy describes our natural condition and identifies the mechanism by which we institute a commonwealth, and the sovereign, in turn, recognizes the existence of God. "The inhabitants of the a-historical world of reason must enter the historical world of faith" (166). Pocock's reading rests on the belief that religious doctrine serves a real and important role in Hobbes's thought. However, if Hobbes is ironic about his use of religious doctrine, especially in *Leviathan*, this limits Pocock's reading as a solution to the tensions that emerge in Hobbes's thought. In addition, Pocock's suggestion that both forms of knowledge exist simultaneously with each other does not mitigate my claim that the difficulties associated with Hobbes's materialism, hence his philosophic knowledge, are so great that they render the establishment of common perspectives, language, and the institution of a commonwealth very unlikely. I will take up both of these issues in greater detail in section 6 of this essay. J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York: Atheneum, 1971).

moral philosophy. . . . And the reason why these are to be considered after *physics* is, that they have their causes in sense and imagination, which are the subject of *physical* contemplation. . . . [T]he principles of politics consist in the knowledge of the motions of the mind, and the knowledge of these motions from the knowledge of sense and imagination" (*De Corp.*, vi, 6). All aspects of human experience—perception, feeling, motivation, and politics—consist of, and are explained by, a complex arrangement of matter in motion.

The Senses

Hobbes's interest in matter and motion is driven by his desire to understand the cause of perception and motivation. The meeting ground between Hobbes's materialism and his theory of human nature is his account of sensation.¹⁵ Sensation is Hobbes's term for the manifold motions in the body and mind that give rise to perception, thought, and feeling. "The cause of sense is the external body, or object, which presseth the organ proper to each sense," and this pressure (motion) is carried along the nerves through the body and mind (*Lev.*, i, 4). External matter strikes our senses, setting off a chain reaction within the body and mind that registers our contact with the outside world. And reciprocally, sensation also entails an outward movement of the body and mind toward, or away from, the object that stimulated it. The most important aspect of Hobbes's account of sensation is the role it plays in perception. "The first beginnings . . . of knowledge are the phantasms of sense and imagination," for it is through our senses and the images they produce that we encounter the external world (*De Corp.*, vi, 1). "There is no conception in a man's mind," Hobbes asserts, "which hath not at first, totally or by parts, been gotten upon by the organs of sense" (*Lev.*, i, 2).

Imagination

Deriving from sensation, Hobbes identifies two types of imagination: simple and compound. Simple imagination consists of the phantasm we form in our mind as a result of our encounter with an object. As we encounter more and more objects new phantasms are made in our mind, and as they pile up, some phantasms are pushed out of immediate awareness. "For after the object is removed," Hobbes writes, "or the eye shut, we still retain an image of the thing seen" (*Lev.*, ii, 2). Our ability to hang on to the original image, and the way that it fades as time goes on, is what Hobbes means when he calls simple imagination "decaying sense." Simple imagination denotes first the image we form of an object, and then its continued presence in our minds constitutes our memory. Our thoughts and perceptions are also constituted by what Hobbes calls compound imagination. Since human experience is

¹⁵Peters, *Hobbes*, 103.

“much memory, or memory of many things,” compound imagination is the combination in our mind of many images. “So when a man compoundeth the image of his own person with the image of the actions of another man, as when a man imagines himself a *Hercules* or an *Alexander*, it is compound imagination” (*Lev.*, ii, 4). Compound imagination is the process of mixing and combining several images in order to arrive at new possibilities.

Train of Thoughts

From simple and compound imagination, the argument moves to Hobbes's account of our “train of thoughts.” Thinking (mental discourse) is nothing but the activity by which human beings organize the images or phantasms in their minds. Our “train of thoughts,” he writes, is “regulated by some desire and design. For the impression made by such things as we desire or fear is strong and permanent” (*Lev.*, iii, 4). In the absence of an objective rational or moral order to regulate our thinking, Hobbes must rely on imagination and the passions to do the work of bringing order to our thoughts.

Endeavor

Having articulated a material account of sensation, imagination, and nascent thought, Hobbes proceeds to his theory of motivation. Hobbes connects his materialist account of sensation and imagination to the motion of human desire and aversion. Two types of motion—vital and voluntary—drive human action. Vital motion is Hobbes's name for the body's essential functions such as breathing, the circulation of blood, and the beating of the heart. Voluntary motion is “to go, to speak, to move any of our limbs, in such manner as is first fancied in our minds” (*Lev.*, vi, 1). Animated by the things we desire and fear, Hobbes equates voluntary motions with the passions. Endeavor, Hobbes's term for passion as material motion, conveys both physiological and psychological experiences, and is the phenomenon connecting vital and voluntary motion to each other. There “is a reciprocation of movement from the brain to the vital parts, and back from the vital parts to the brain; whereby not only imagination begetteth motion in those parts, but also motion in those parts begetteth imagination” (*EL*, iii, 3). Desire and fear, and their extension to claims of good and bad, are not mental phenomena that are qualitatively distinct from physical or material experiences. Desire and fear are the products of quantitatively more intense motions within the mind and body.

Language

Hobbes calls speech the “most noble and profitable invention of all” because it enables us to bring stability and coherence to our imagination and thoughts.

Language is invented to signify the images that exist in our minds and is the process by which human beings name and define things, establish truth, and institute a commonwealth. Hobbes places a great deal of confidence in language, and our ability to utilize it properly—even as he cannot refrain from cataloguing our misuses of it. According to Hobbes, marks are personal notations we create so that our “thoughts may be recalled to our mind as are like those thoughts for which we took them” (*De Corp.*, i, 1). Marks then evolve into names that begin the process of ordering and stabilizing our perception. “A name is a word taken at pleasure to serve for a mark, which may raise in our mind a thought we had before” (*De Corp.*, i, 4). He further claims that “marks” and “names” are created “at pleasure” by human beings, and are “arbitrary” in their designation (*De Corp.*, ii, 2). The words we invent bear no relation to the objects they represent. There is no natural origin for speech except the “will of man” (*De Homine*, x, 2).¹⁶ Solitary individuals give meaning to the world by naming and defining things. Hobbes’s famous preoccupation with power is, first and foremost, the very power to coin names and assert definitions.

Hobbes’s claim that language is conventional leads to his assertion that our notions of truth and falsehood are functions of definition and sentences. “For *true* and *false* are attributes of speech, not things. And where speech is not, there is neither *truth* nor *falsehood*” (*Lev.*, iv, 11). Applying the correct definition of a word in the proper context and grammatical structure produces truth. “Seeing then that *truth* consisteth in the right ordering of names in our affirmations, a man that seeketh precise *truth* had need to remember what every name stands for, and to place it accordingly, or else he will find himself entangled in words” (*Lev.*, iv, 12). For truth to exist individuals must use the right name, remember the definition, and apply the rules of grammar properly. Public notions of truth are then based on collective agreement about words, definitions, and rules of use. It is only through the adoption of common definitions and rules that the human environment becomes mutually intelligible and truth appears. From the names we coin and the grammar we cobble together, Hobbes hopes there will emerge signs which “*being pronounced to others, may be to them a sign of what thought the speaker had, or had not before his mind*” (*De Corp.*, ii, 4). Signs are names for things held in common, and they constitute the system through which individual names become public language and establish the foundation for common knowledge.

Instituting a Commonwealth

While Hobbes does not believe human beings are political by nature, he does hope that a stable political order can be built upon the scientific principles that

¹⁶Thomas Hobbes, “*De Homine*,” in *Man and Citizen*, ed. Bernard Gert (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1978).

derive from his materialist account of human nature. He systematically characterizes the material mechanics of sensation, imagination, and desire in order to reduce these phenomena, and the individuals animated by them, to commonly accepted principles of nature. From these basic principles of matter and motion—bodies with passions—Hobbes deduces a few premises that will constitute the foundation of his political theory. Despite the diversity of opinions about what is good and bad, individuals will, Hobbes believes, ultimately accept the brute fact that no one can pursue his or her desires in the absence of a political order. The twin drives of satisfying our desires and avoiding a violent death ought to direct even obstinate, vainglorious individuals to accept the necessity of instituting a commonwealth.

Hobbes seizes on the *Summum Malum* of death, and our intense fear of it, to act as a sobering and stabilizing force. “The passion to be reckoned upon,” Hobbes writes, “is fear” (*Lev.*, xiv, 31). While Hobbes acknowledges that people fear different things, he believes that the material uniformity of fear is enough to allow an individual to know what another is experiencing without knowing what he is thinking. “[W]hosoever looketh into himself and considereth what he doth, when he does *think, opine, reason, hope, fear*, [and so forth] and upon what grounds, he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon the like conditions” (*Lev.*, intro., 3). As the sort of creatures who are driven by the same material passion of fear, we will naturally be led to accept the necessity of the social contract.

The solution to the problem of perpetual fear is the institution of a commonwealth. “The final cause, end, or design of men . . . in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves in which we see them in commonwealths is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life” (*Lev.*, xvii, 1). In order to escape the state of nature, individuals must do two things. First, they must give up their exclusive right to *name* and *define* things. A common vocabulary must be hammered out of the diffusion of private words and definitions. The very idea of a social contract implies that there is sufficient consensus grounded in a common language to establish a commonwealth. Second, individuals must give up their natural right to all things. A commonwealth is created when the inhabitants of the state of nature mutually agree to lay down their right to all things and transfer it to a sovereign. By transferring our right to name and define what is good and bad to the sovereign, we end the debate about the meaning of these issues. What is good and bad is what the sovereign declares. Truth is simply a matter of calculating correctly about words and definitions. Justice becomes a matter of keeping one’s promise to obey the sovereign.

Materialism, Language, and the Fragmentation of Meaning

In *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes writes, “[k]nowledge . . . which we call science, I define to be some evidence of truth, from some beginning or principle of sense” (*EL*, vi, 4). The question is, can Hobbes go from sense to knowledge,

and from knowledge to politics? I contend that the generative process of Hobbes's materialism creates a situation in which the senses, imagination, and passions lead to a diffusion of meanings and perceptions that frustrate the development of common accounts of things. Hobbes's materialism leads toward greater anarchy, and away from political agreement, because at each stage of the argument the potential for diversity of images, perceptions, and ideas multiply exponentially, resulting in deeply subjective interpretations of the physical and shared environment.

The Senses

The images created by the different senses may lead to a fragmentation of perception and meaning both within and between individuals. The origin of perception is subjective because Hobbes denies that the physical qualities of external objects determine the images we create of them. Hobbes writes "the subject wherein colour and image are inherent, is not the object or thing seen. [There] is nothing without us really which we call an image or colour. [T]he said image or colour is but an apparition unto us of that motion... which the object worketh in the brain. [I]n conception by vision, so also in the conceptions that arise from other senses, the subject of their inherence is not the object, but the sentient" (*EL*, ii, 4). What exists "out there" is matter arranged in particular ways, and when this matter strikes our senses, the motion in the body and mind creates certain images. Hobbes argues that qualities such as color and smell do not exist in the objects we encounter. "For if those colours and sounds were in the bodies, or objects, that cause them, they could not be severed from them... [W]e know the thing we see is in one place, the appearance in another. [T]he object is one thing, the image or fancy is another. So that sense in all cases, is nothing but original fancy" (*Lev.*, i, 4). Hobbes further claims, "when anything is *seen* by us, we reckon not the thing itself, but the *sight*, the *colour*, the *idea* of it in the fancy" (*Lev.*, iv, 17). The images we create are not realistic representations of the objects they signify, only particular combinations of matter moving in the body and mind. "[W]hatsoever accidents or qualities our senses make us think there be in the world, they are not there, but are seemings and apparitions only" (*EL*, ii, 10). Not only are images subjective apparitions, but it is also unclear why, or how, an individual would produce the same image of an object across time, and under different circumstances. It is likely that basic perception is idiosyncratic and unstable across time.

In addition, Hobbes's treatment of the senses leads to fragmentation of meaning *between* individuals because it is unlikely that external objects will produce the same phantasm in different people. "People," Tom Sorell writes, "have different constitutions, are affected sensually in different ways by different objects, and can encounter different objects as they follow

their different spatio-temporal paths."¹⁷ There is no common reception of data among individuals, and Hobbes insists that each person will experience an object differently. Since a radical diversity of images constitutes our original perception, and images are the primary data of all understanding, a diverse mosaic of images characterizes our original condition.

Imagination

Simple and compound imagination furthers the diversity of perception begun with Hobbes's account of sensation. Simple imagination consists of an image I create in response to an external object, and the image enjoys my attention only until another object stimulates me. "[O]ur phantasms or ideas are not always the same," Hobbes writes, and "new ones appear to us, and old ones vanish, according as we apply our organs of sense, now to one object, now to another" (*De Corp.*, xxv, 1). As the old image is pushed out of my attention, it decays. Defining simple imagination as decaying sense means that as new images command one's attention the old ones fade or recede into obscurity. As they fade, so, too, does the perceiver's command of their original content. Moreover, as they fade, they are no doubt transformed and changed, having less and less connection to the original image as time goes on. Hobbes's account of the relationship between simple imagination and time suggests that an individual's grasp of an image is hard to hold.

Compound imagination *compounds* the potential problems associated with Hobbes's account of simple imagination. Compound imagination is the creation of a single image from the combination of separate images floating around in one's mind. Sometimes the new image is common, as when we "fancy" ourselves a "*Hercules or Alexander*." Other times it is wholly fictional, as when we combine the image of a man and horse to create a centaur. Moreover, compound imagination is connected to the things we desire and fear. No longer just decaying sense, or combined images, imagination now signifies creative visions designed to sustain the rush of vital and voluntary motion. "Joy arising from imagination of a man's own power and abilities is that exultation of the mind which is called Glorifying" (*Lev.*, vi, 39). Since each person's mind creates unique images, recreates them, and then invents new images to fit his or her desires, perception and meaning are not only quite idiosyncratic, but in constant flux. Compound imagination leads to as much "confusion and disorder . . . [as it does] understanding."¹⁸ This is potentially problematic as imagination is the raw material from which agreement and consensus about meaning, and ultimately the social contract,

¹⁷Tom Sorell, *Hobbes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 91.

¹⁸Richard Flathman, *Thomas Hobbes: Skepticism, Individuality, and Chastened Politics* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993), 18.

must be struck. Rather than providing a mechanism by which individuals will move closer together in their regard of perceptions of reality, compound imagination creates yet another degree of distance between them.

Hobbes's account of the relationship between imagination/thought and memory creates further difficulties. For Hobbes, memory is simply our ability to recall images of objects after the encounter is over. This means, however, that there is no real difference between imagination/thought and memory. Sorell writes, "it is not made clear how exactly we are to remember things, and memory is never clearly distinguished from other psychological capacities."¹⁹ Here are two related problems. First, if there is no independent faculty of memory, how do we, in fact, remember things? This problem is important for Hobbes because our thoughts and ideas are produced by sensations, and we are exposed to millions of sensations a day. While some sensations will be more pronounced than others, the question of how they get coded and remembered is a serious problem. If there are real questions regarding how we remember things, then the link between thought, language, and memory becomes very problematic.

Second, if there is no distinction between imagination/thought and memory, the temporal relationship between past and present nearly collapses. Being in perpetual motion, I *am* a stream of sensations that gives rise to a mosaic of images, which then becomes memory. But, as suggested above, if this chain of sensations, thoughts, and memories is radically fluid, then the idea of a self-present, stable individual becomes highly suspect. Rather than possessing relatively stable blocks of time and experience, life becomes a rush of sensations, thoughts, and motions only haphazardly organized into fractured units of time. Life is literally a *blur*. To stress that this is not an abstract issue for Hobbes is important. The compression of time and self that derives from his account of the collapse between sensation/thought/memory is found in Hobbes's constant description of life in the state of nature as short, intense, hassled. We live that sort of time in the state of nature because that is how we are experiencing the motions in our body (sensations) and mind (phantasms, images, thoughts).

Not only are the spatio-temporal boundaries of the subject in jeopardy, when we add Hobbes's account of compound imagination to the analysis, reality becomes highly quixotic. Recall that compound imagination is the creative fusion of single images to create new images. Hobbes acknowledges that these compound images are often total "fantasy." By fantasy, Hobbes means that the images have no relationship to external objects or phenomena. If consciousness is comprised of a stream of images that derive from "creative fantasy," and this stream blurs the distinction between images based on encounters with objective, external objects and those that are invented, then reality itself must become highly fluid and unstable. Under these conditions,

¹⁹Sorell, *Hobbes*, 84.

it would be very difficult to distinguish between what is originally an image or memory of an external object or experience, and what is simply fantasy occupying our thoughts. This, too, is not an abstract issue for Hobbes. He is well aware of the influence that fantasy and “things invisible” have on the minds and actions of men. Indeed, Hobbes never tires of reminding us that it is our fear of invisible powers and the fantasies (fictional compound imagination) that animate them that lead many to act so irrationally. People who believe in invisible powers do so, Hobbes thinks, because they cannot distinguish what is material and properly sensible, from what is not. While Hobbes believes his materialism to be the proper cure for foolish thoughts and actions, it seems likely that his materialism may actually produce them. It is revealing, therefore, that we find Hobbes admitting “that it is a hard matter, and by many thought impossible, to distinguish exactly between sense and dreaming” (*Lev.*, ii, 5).

Train of Thoughts

It is questionable whether Hobbes's account of how our “train of thoughts” are yoked together is strong enough to stabilize our buzzing sensations and multiplying images. He argues that the bustling content of our imagination is organized into a “train of thoughts” because our desires and aversions direct our activity. As we consistently desire some things and fear others, the images and ideas associated with these sensations jell into stable perspectives. However, Hobbes himself acknowledges that the mind is a continually moving and changing stream of desires and fears. “[B]ecause the constitution of a man's body is in continual mutation, it is impossible that all the same things should always cause in him the same appetites and aversions” (*Lev.*, vi, 6). Being in constant motion, it is unlikely that we will always desire and fear the same things. Therefore, what counts as good or bad will be constantly fluctuating. While Hobbes argues that it is the uniformity of desire and fear and not its objects that will lead men to consent, it is difficult to see how this uniformity will find enough ground *within us* to begin the process of establishing a stable train of thoughts.

In addition to the perpetually changing objects of desire and aversion *within* individuals, Hobbes acknowledges the significant diversity of desires and aversions *between* individuals. Hobbes writes, “whatsoever 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 or aversion, *evil*” (*Lev.*, vi, 7). What we consider good is simply what our sensations and imagination drive us toward. When individuals develop preferences about what is good and bad, they are not doing so on the basis of qualitatively objective properties or standards. Hobbes's materialism gives rise to a highly idiosyncratic account of what counts as good and bad. Because imagination and the objects of our passions are so thoroughly personal, the range of what may count as good and bad is

completely open-ended. This is important because our passions and imagination are the raw material upon which more developed thoughts and ideas are built. If the diversity of passions among human beings is too great, there is little hope that the distance, and difference, opened up between individuals could be reigned in without the pressure of a sovereign.

Not only does the presence of “innumerable” passions and opinions drive men apart, they are also the source of much dispute and violence. “[W]hen every man follows his own opinion, it is necessary that the controversies which arise among them, will become innumerable and indeterminable; whence there will breed among men, who by their own natural inclinations do account all dissension an affront, first hatred then brawls and wars” (*De Cive*, xvii, 27). The objects of the passions themselves, which are created by the different motions of sensation and imagination within men, are the source of a radical incommensurability between men. Not only do changing passions disrupt the personal sense of good and bad, but they also widen the gap between individuals and shared meaning. If what constitutes an individual’s desire and fear is constantly fluctuating, and this is also true for those around that person, it is unlikely that all will settle on what is desirable and what is loathsome.

Most important, little in Hobbes’s notion of fear suggests that the universal experience of fear can provide the mechanism by which people transcend their subjective accounts of reality and learn to communicate. My argument is that Hobbes’s materialism describes a condition of mental life that cannot provide the shared perspectives and meaning necessary to escape the state of nature. Even if Hobbes is correct in asserting that everyone is afraid, it does not follow that fear operates as an *edifying* force. Simply being afraid does not increase one’s cognitive ability to understand another if there is a fundamental incommensurability between them. In the absence of a sufficiently shared perspective, extreme fear militates against the very state of mind and clarity necessary to build a common language and meaning. It is likely that during times of intense fear and anxiety, the passions will “discharge themselves in an uncontrollable manner, compounding the fluctuations of the senses and inflaming the imagination.”²⁰ At the very moment individuals need clarity and composure the most, the diversity of perspectives and the extreme anxiety created by fear will lead individuals toward greater incommensurability and away from collective thought and action. Indeed, Hobbes’s account of generalized fear seems to exacerbate the fragmentation of meaning. Under conditions of extreme fear, combined with a profound incommensurability between individuals, the instinct is to flee, not stay. While Hobbes believes that fear is the passion “that must be reckoned upon,” he also acknowledges that “where there is no power of coercion, there is no fear; the wills of most men will follow their passions of

²⁰Flathman, *Thomas Hobbes*, 20.

covetousness, lust, anger, and the like" (*EL*, pt. II, i, 6). Without the power of coercion, it seems that the sensations, imaginings, and passions of men will not be restrained; and yet, it is precisely the stampede of sensations, apparitions, and desires that works against the creation of the legitimate coercion of the sovereign.

Language and the Fragmentation of Meaning

Hobbes hoped his account of language would stabilize and bring order to the diversity of images and thoughts existing in the minds of human beings. He is also, however, quite critical about the way human beings use words. He acknowledges that the inappropriate use of words leads to philosophical confusion; and more important, the pernicious use of words leads to a great deal of political instability. Much depends on Hobbes's account of language to "stand for" the natural and human phenomena he describes and to do so in such a way that a common vocabulary and language might emerge. For in this common vocabulary and language the commonwealth is instituted.

While Hobbes acknowledges that much goes astray in our use of language, I contend that the challenges confronting the proper use of language appear much "earlier" in Hobbes's materialist anthropology. Before we ever come to the difficulties of common definitions and rules, the motions of the body and mind are operating in such a way as to disrupt and destabilize the desire for a fixed vocabulary. I will cite three reasons why Hobbes's materialism and its influence on language formation contribute to the fragmentation of meaning begun with his account of sensation, imagination, and the passions, thereby frustrating the very purpose of language itself and rendering unlikely the hope of consensus, consent, and commonwealth. First, there is the volatile relationship between imagination, memory, and language; second, the sheer relativism of marks and names; and third, the plural conceptions of good and bad produced by the passions and the personal names assigned to them.

The first difficulty concerns the volatile relationship between imagination (thought), memory, and language. Since sensation gives rise to imagination and memory is nothing more than decaying images, keeping track of our thoughts is difficult. Hobbes writes, "[h]ow unconstant and fading men's thoughts are, and how much the recovery of them depends upon chance, there is none but know by infallible experience of himself" (*De Corp.*, ii, 1). The solution to this condition is the invention of language. However, there are two concerns that can be raised about Hobbes's account of imagination, memory, and language. Nothing in his materialism indicates that individuals will consistently assign the same mark or name to a particular phantasm across time, or in different conditions. As it stands, new sensations constantly impact our organs, phantasms are created, and we are forced to invent new

marks and words. In addition, given Hobbes's notion of imagination as decaying sense, as new marks and words demand our attention, the old marks and words are pushed aside and fade. This creates a situation, Hobbes acknowledges, in which "new names are daily made, and old ones laid aside" (*De Corp.*, ii, 4). More important, as we saw above, memory is simply decaying sensation. Because there is no separate mental faculty for remembering, there is no account of how we will remember the words we invent and assign to phantasms.

Second, Hobbes gives us no reason to believe that human beings will assign the same marks or names to objects. Words express only the will of the person who coins them. Hobbes writes, "[f]or seeing all names are imposed to signify our conceptions, and all our affections are but conceptions, when we conceive the same things differently, we can hardly avoid different naming of them. [T]he diversity of our reception of it, in respect of different constitutions of body and prejudices of opinion, gives everything a tincture of our different passions" (*Lev.*, iv, 24). Given the subjective rendering of our materialist encounter with things, it is likely that the world will be characterized by a nearly infinite variety of marks and names. It is improbable, Hobbes acknowledges, that any two individuals, let alone a group, will by chance hit upon the same name for an object, or set of definitions to explain some phenomenon. Unable to rely on the "nature of things" to lead us to a common definition, and lacking the power of a sovereign to determine the public discourse, it is difficult to see how people will come to the necessary agreements about words on their own. The subjective character of our perception, marks, and names militate against the necessary conditions for shared meaning. A condition characterized by a radical diversity of words and a diffusion of meaning seems to be the more likely result.

Third, the relativity that characterizes imagination and naming expresses itself in those special classes of words we use to designate good and evil. "For these words of good [and] evil . . . are used with relation to the person that useth them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of objects themselves" (*Lev.*, vi, 7). About the very passions and ends for which human beings are willing to fight, there is no agreement and many names. Disputes will emerge over the most important differences among men, and the great diversity of words used to express these differences will only contribute to the anarchical differences between them. If signs (commonly accepted names) do not develop, or if individuals cannot agree on what things are to be called, then there is no possibility for the social contract and, therefore, no commonwealth.

Hobbes's Response

Despite the materialistic and linguistic obstacles to the creation of stable perspectives and meaning, and despite Hobbes's own detailed catalogue of the misuses

of language, Hobbes writes as if language somehow gets off the ground, is remembered, and taught from one generation to another. How does Hobbes explain the apparent tension between the deleterious effects of his materialism and theory of language and the demonstrated ability of humans to give names, formulate languages, and produce science? Anticipating such concerns, Hobbes rhetorically poses to himself the following observation:

Because . . . I would say that names have arisen from human invention, someone might possibly ask how a human invention could avail so much as to confer on mankind the benefit speech appears to us to have. For it is incredible that men once came together to take counsel to constitute by decree what all words and all connexions of words would signify. (*De Homine*, x, 2)

Hobbes tacitly agrees that it is doubtful that language could develop in the way stated, and offers the following response. "It is more credible," he writes, "that at first there were few names and only of those things that were the most familiar. Thus the first man by his own will imposed names on just a few animals . . . then on other things, as one or another species of things offered itself to his senses; these names, having been accepted, were handed down from fathers to their sons, who also devised others" (*De Homine*, x, 2). At first there were just a few names, these names were remembered, and they were passed down from father to son. This process was repeated exponentially as human beings evolved and developed more names and abstract forms of reasoning.

In *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes buttresses this position by suggesting that habit and custom reinforce the formation of stable perspectives and language.

It is the nature almost of every corporeal thing, being often moved in one and the same manner, to receive continually a greater and greater easiness and aptitude to the same motion; insomuch as in time the same becometh so habitual that to beget it, there needs no more than to begin it. The passions of man, as they are the beginnings of all his voluntary motions, so are they the beginnings of speech, which is the motion of his tongue. (*EL*, vi, 14)

These passages contain the spirit of Hobbes's explanation for the development and stability of individual perspective, language formation, and shared meaning. The repetition of certain passions and the names associated with them is strong enough, Hobbes suggests, that these desires and names become habitual. Once habitual, these passions and names form a sort of custom of desire and meaning that "hath so great a power, that the mind suggesteth only the first word [and] the rest follow habitually" (*EL*, vi, 14).²¹

²¹In several passages in *Leviathan*, Hobbes makes glancing reference to the role teaching, habit, and convention play in the establishment of language, shared

Two points can be made regarding Hobbes's explanation for the demonstrated ability of human beings to give names, formulate languages, and produce shared meaning. First, his account, even if plausible, says nothing about whether or not the right—rationally conceived and scientifically useful—language has been invented, remembered, and deployed for the benefit of human happiness. Hobbes's account of how our demonstrated ability for speech develops does him little good if what is learned, remembered, and passed along from teacher to student is nothing more than the errors of the “deceiving schoolmen.” It is important to note that even while Hobbes relies on phenomena such as learning, habit, and custom to do the work of stabilizing our perspectives, names, and shared language, he is very critical of their influence in the wrong circumstances. For example, “[a]s it is with beggars,” Hobbes writes, “when they say their *paternoster*, putting together such words, and in such manner, as in their education they have learned from their nurses, from their companions, or from their teachers, having no images or conceptions in their minds answering to the words they speak. And as they have learned themselves, so they teach posterity” (*EL*, vi, 14). Hobbes's criticism of the way beggars recite their prayers without understanding what they say—because they have no image or conception in their minds corresponding to the words they use—applies equally to all people who by rote memory recite what they have learned about the rules of civil life.

Second, given the fluidity and diversity of sensation, perception, and imagination associated with Hobbes's materialism and theory of language, his explanation for the demonstrated fact of human language formation and use is not very convincing. It is important to stress that, for Hobbes, there are no supernatural or natural foundations that account for the presence of human language, shared meaning, and reason. Human beings are complex bodies in motion—nothing else. If they speak, establish language, communicate, and build sciences, they must do so from the materialist assumptions Hobbes provides. As it stands, there is a significant disconnect between Hobbes's rich and detailed account of human sensation, perception, imagination, and language and his rather prosaic account of how it all gets off the ground. For Hobbes's explanation to be plausible there must be a more internally consistent connection between his theoretical assumptions about materialism and language and his expected, and assumed, outcomes. The power and utility of Hobbes's theoretical apparatus of materialism rests on its ability to provide a causal explanation of the chain running from sensation to knowledge, and from knowledge to politics. If a close analysis of Hobbes's theoretical assumptions about materialism and language reveal

meaning, and the transfer of meaning from one generation to another (see *Lev.*, iii, 11; iv, 13; v, 18; viii, 13; xliii, 6–9).

that they struggle to plausibly generate their own conclusions, then perhaps there is something wrong with Hobbes's account of the connection between sensation, perception, language, and reason. If we are confronted with the paradox that Hobbes's theoretical assumptions struggle to generate their own conclusions, and yet every where we witness human beings giving names, formulating language, and reasoning abstractly, then perhaps an alternative philosophical or theoretical interpretation of human perception, language formation, and reason will more adequately explain the mystery.

The State of Nature

It is commonplace to interpret Hobbes's state of nature as a theoretical device used to describe the behavior of human beings in the absence of government. However, seen from the perspective of his materialist anthropology, the state of nature is less a rhetorical device and more the result of his claims about the senses, imagination, passions, and language. Hobbes's state of nature is truly anarchic—that is, without governing principle or order. It is characterized by the absence of a highest good, the equal vulnerability of each to a violent death, radical diversity of perception and meaning, and the absolute freedom to pursue one's desires. Hobbes's claim that there is “no such *Finis Ultimus* (utmost aim) nor *Summum Bonum* (greatest good)” is a result of his materialist perspective. Our sensations, imaginings, and passions tell us what is good, and Hobbes acknowledges that the desires of men are “in themselves no sin . . . till they know a law that forbids them” (*Lev.*, xiii, 10). We are equally vulnerable to a violent death because human life is nothing more than matter in motion, and the vital motion of life is fragile. Hobbes never tires of reminding us how easily the “weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest” (*Lev.*, xiii, 1). Moreover, the state of nature is anarchic because meaning is subjective and highly fluid. We assign meaning to the world, and in the absence of a sovereign power, it is hard to conceive how our disparate imaginings, words, and definitions could be yoked together. More than just the “wayward figment of philosophical imagination,”²² the state of nature is a condition in which wayward imagination and speech are incapable of creating a public language and commonwealth. Dramatically describing the state of nature, Hobbes writes, “[i]n such a condition there is no place for industry . . . and consequently, no culture of the earth . . . no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society” (*Lev.*, xiii, 9). This description of life in the state of nature is more than Hobbes's warning to us to keep our promises; it is the result of his materialist claims about sensation, imagination, and language. The quotation above expresses the sort of individuated and fractured account of things that characterizes the condition of human beings

²²Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan*, 39.

without the existence of a common framework of meaning, grammar, and language.

If it is true “that the principles of the politics consist in the knowledge of the motions of the mind, and the knowledge of these motions from the knowledge of sense and imagination,” then the materialist foundation upon which Hobbes builds his politics is sketchy at best. Hobbes writes,

If we consider the power of those deceptions of sense . . . and also how unconstantly names have been settled, and how subject they are to equivocation . . . and how subject men are to . . . fallacy in reasoning, I may in a manner conclude, that it is impossible to rectify so many errors. (*EL*, v, 14)

Hobbes concludes this astonishing statement by suggesting that the only way to rectify these errors is to begin “anew from the very first grounds of all our knowledge, [and] sense” (*EL*, v, 14). But, as I have tried to show, there is strong evidence supporting the claim that rather than rectifying the errors of sense, imagination, and passion, Hobbes’s materialist account of human nature produces them. What we get from Hobbes’s materialism and theory of language is an unstable realm of solitary individuals, driven by their passions, frantically trying to stabilize their experiences. It is indeed a form of existence that is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Can Hobbes’s System be Saved?

I have argued that Hobbes’s version of materialism leads to a diffusion of perceptions, meanings, unstable linguistic environments, and the unlikelihood of social contract. I now want to consider whether an alternative metaphysics, or turn to God, can save Hobbes’s comprehensive philosophical and political system from the problems I have identified. In *The Two Gods of Leviathan*, Martinich argues that Hobbes turns to a form of Calvinist theology in order to stabilize his philosophical and political project. According to Martinich, God serves this stabilizing role by underwriting Hobbes’s philosophical position and by authoring the laws of nature. Martinich’s thesis consists of two parts. His primary thesis is “that theological concepts, especially those of English Calvinism, are an inextricable part of [Hobbes’s] philosophy, especially his moral and political views.”²³ Martinich claims that Hobbes is a deeply religious person and his religious views are revealed in *Leviathan*, a book Martinich calls a “Bible for modern man.”²⁴ Following the claim that *Leviathan* is a thoroughly religious text, Martinich argues that Hobbes’s laws of nature are divine commandments. “I maintain that it is Hobbes’s view that God is the controlling authority for the laws of nature . . . the root

²³Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan*, 1.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 45.

of all obligation is God's omnipotence, because irresistible power directed to an object literally binds, ties or constrains that object to a certain course of action. [And therefore] the laws of nature are literally laws. . . . in the same way in which they are divine laws."²⁵

His secondary thesis claims that, contrary to the standard reasons given for Hobbes's interest in natural science, "Hobbes was trying to answer the challenge that the new science . . . posed for religion."²⁶ Hobbes turns to science, Martinich claims, not to undermine religion but to demonstrate that "the distinctively religious content of the Bible could be reconciled with the new science and to prove that religion could not legitimately be used to destabilize a government."²⁷ It is important to stress, however, that while Martinich believes that religion can provide the stabilizing force in Hobbes's thought, he acknowledges that Hobbes's turn to materialism to buttress religion from the emerging sciences fails. "Rather than supplying an adequate conceptual foundation for religion, on the whole his views fit into a long tradition that intended to undermine it, often contrary to the intentions of the authors."²⁸ Martinich acknowledges that Hobbes's materialism undermines his theologico-political project. Here Martinich and I agree: Hobbes's materialism undermines his political project. The question then becomes one of clarifying the status of religion in Hobbes's thought and the meaning of the laws of nature.

Martinich's text is a comprehensive account of seventeenth-century religious views as well as a provocative interpretation of Hobbes's thought. I contend, however, that Martinich misinterprets the role religious themes serve in Hobbes's thought and that Hobbes does not turn to natural science to buttress his religious convictions but to eliminate the sort of debates about God and scripture that led to so much controversy and political instability. Hobbes, I argue, sought to replace classical political philosophy in which some form of moral virtue or theology is the defining guide to political action with what he considered to be the first political science. In order to achieve this monumental task, Hobbes had to write carefully²⁹ while at the

²⁵Ibid., 88 and 100.

²⁶Ibid., 5.

²⁷Ibid., 5. As it turns out, Martinich is more concerned to support his primary thesis than he is to support his secondary thesis. Early in the book Martinich claims that "Hobbes's determinism, which is often thought to indicate, or even entail, atheism, is not merely a part of his mechanistic materialism; it is logically tied to Calvin's doctrines of predestination and belief in the omnipotence of God" (3). After this very bold claim, Martinich says virtually nothing about Hobbes's materialistic account of sensation, perception, thought, and action or about how Hobbes used these themes to buttress religion against the challenge of the "new science."

²⁸Ibid., 8.

²⁹Johnston argues that *Leviathan* is an "intensely political book" not just because it concerns politics but also because it is organized by a series of rhetorical strategies

same time articulating an alternative account of human nature and politics. I follow Leo Strauss and Edwin Curley in the view that Hobbes's pronouncements on religion are ironic,³⁰ and I argue further that he intended to articulate a materialistic philosophy upon which his moral and political project would rest. I will restrict my remarks to a brief consideration of Martinich's account of the role of religion in Hobbes's thought, and his account of the laws of nature as divine commandments. My goal is to provide sufficient evidence that Martinich's reading of Hobbes does not stand in the way of my claim that the difficulties raised by Hobbes's account of materialism and language constitute a significant obstacle to the institution of a commonwealth.

The Role of Religion in Hobbes's Thought

I first turn to a brief discussion of Martinich's view of religion in Part I of *Leviathan*. Toward the end of Chapter 11 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes:

Curiosity, or love of the knowledge of causes, draws a man from consideration of the effect to seek the cause, and again the cause of that cause, till of necessity he must come to this thought at last: that there is some cause, whereof there is no former cause, but is eternal, which is it men call God. So that it is impossible to make any profound inquiry into natural causes without being inclined thereby to believe there is one God eternal. (*Lev.*, xi, 25)

Martinich takes this statement as evidence that Hobbes is a fairly orthodox Christian. Hobbes's belief in God and God's presence in *Leviathan*, Martinich suggests, are a "straightforward inference from observable effects

designed to seduce and persuade its readers (Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan*, xvii, and 66–76). "Hobbes," Johnston claims, "was a political writer (not just a writer about politics)" and the "*Leviathan* was a work of political speech." David Johnston, Review of *The Two Gods of Leviathan*, by A.P. Martinich. *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 772.

³⁰Strauss writes, "many present-day scholars who write on subjects of this kind do not seem to have a sufficient notion of the degree of circumspection or of accommodation to the accepted views that was required, in former ages, of 'deviationists' who desired to survive or die in peace" (Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1953], 199). Curley echoes this sentiment. "On my account *Leviathan* is intended to be an ambiguous work, to be read by different people in different ways, as all displays of irony are apt to be" (Edwin Curley, "I Durst Not Write So Boldly" or, How to Read Hobbes' Theological-Political Treatise," www.sitemaker.umich.edu/emcurley/hobbes: 67. See also Edwin Curley, "Calvin and Hobbes, or, Hobbes as an Orthodox Christian," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34; 2 (1996): 263.

to an invisible cause."³¹ He further claims that in this passage Hobbes provides "a completely conventional cosmological proof for the existence of the God who is the proper object of religion."³² Martinich makes these claims because he reads the passage as an unambiguous statement of Hobbes's theologico-philosophical position.

There are at least two reasons to be suspicious of Martinich's reading of this passage. First, the passage is sufficiently ambiguous to allow a different interpretation. Rather than a transparent statement of Hobbes's theologico-philosophical view, the passage can be read as a descriptive account of what most of his contemporaries thought and did when they reflected on the phenomenon of causation. Considering that some form of Christian theology was the dominant paradigm of thought during Hobbes's time, his claim that "it would be impossible to make any profound inquiry into natural causes" without being inclined to believe in God can be read as an empirical observation. That Hobbes is being ironical about the claim is also likely. Many of Hobbes's readers would find the claim that curiosity naturally leads to a belief in God persuasive evidence that Hobbes is a good Christian and move on.³³ The fusion of a purely descriptive account of the conventional view with what appears to be a declarative statement of belief by Hobbes operates as a powerful rhetorical device and one that would shield Hobbes from persecution.

Support for the view that Hobbes might be ironical about the claim is found in the passage immediately following the one under consideration. Hobbes writes, "they that make little or no inquiry into the natural causes of things, yet from the fear that proceeds from the ignorance itself of what it is that hath the power to do them much good or harm are inclined to suppose and feign unto themselves several kinds of powers invisible. . . . And this fear of things invisible is the natural seed of that which everyone in himself calleth religion" (*Lev.*, XI, 26). Complicating Martinich's reading that curiosity leads all men to a belief in an eternal cause, Curley observes that Hobbes's use of the term "they" suggests that not all human beings "are led to a belief in God

³¹Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan*, 62.

³²Ibid.

³³Hobbes's decision to place the observation that curiosity leads to a belief in God in the context and passage that he does might also be a good example of a crafty rhetorical device that Clarendon attributes to Hobbes. Clarendon writes, "it is some part of his Art, to introduce, upon the sudden, instances and remarques, which are the more grateful [i.e., agreeable], and make the more impression on his Reader, by the unexpectedness of meeting them where somewhat else is talk'd of" (Quoted in Curley, "I Durst Not Write So Boldly," 19). In ten of the thirteen chapters that precede this passage, Hobbes has articulated a brief, complete material account of human sense, perception, imagination and action. Perhaps Hobbes places the observation where he does to shelter himself from persecution by giving the appearance that he is a good Christian.

by curiosity."³⁴ Hobbes seems to suggest that only "they" that do not inquire into the natural causes of things are led by curiosity to a belief in God, while those who do inquire into the natural causes of things will be led to different conclusions. Inspired by the scientific discoveries of Galileo and Harvey, Hobbes does "inquire into the natural causes" of the phenomena human beings perceive in themselves and the natural world. It is important to stress that Hobbes does not claim to provide human beings with a way of thinking that will extinguish the "fear of things invisible." Given his account of what we can and cannot know, our understanding of natural things and their causation will always remain hypothetical, mysterious, and hence invisible. What Hobbes is trying to do, I suggest, is replace the idea of God as the ultimate cause with a description of the material dynamics of man and nature that are amenable to rational articulation and manipulation. We will never have absolute knowledge of the invisible causes of motion and the natural world, but we can equip ourselves with the tools necessary to contain their most terrifying potential—violent death. Moreover, Hobbes's claim that the "fear of things invisible" is the origin of religion in human beings weakens Martinich's claim that Hobbes believes that God is the cause of all things. For it is one thing to say, as most Christians do, that human beings must fear God, and quite another to say, as Hobbes does, that the "fear of things invisible" is the cause of belief in God(s).

Second, I suggest that Hobbes's materialism and his turn to science signal a desire to provide an alternative explanation of causation. In the ten chapters that precede this passage in *Leviathan*, Hobbes elaborates a systematic (albeit truncated) account of the material mechanics of sensation, imagination, thought, and speech. While Hobbes rhetorically gestures to the common view that God is the ultimate cause, giving the appearance that he, too, believes it, he is actually articulating a materialistic account of cause and effect as the true object of rational curiosity. For example, in *De Corpore*, Hobbes writes:

The *subject* of Philosophy, or the matter it treats of, is every body of which we can conceive any generation, and which we may by any consideration thereof, compare with other bodies . . . that is to say, every body of whose generation or properties we can have any knowledge. . . . Therefore, it excludes *Theology*, I mean the doctrine of God, eternal, ingenerable, incomprehensible, and in whom there is nothing to divide or compound. . . . It excludes the doctrine of *angels*. . . [and] It excludes all such knowledge as is acquired by Divine inspiration, or revelation, as not derived to us by reason. (*De Corp.*, i, 8)

Hobbes makes a clear distinction between philosophy and religion. Philosophy is the product of rationally directed curiosity about the generation and properties of matter (bodies) in motion. Due to the different forms of

³⁴Curley, "I Durst Not Write So Boldly," 21.

matter, Hobbes claims that there are two general types of philosophy—natural and civil. Natural philosophy seeks knowledge about the generation and properties of objects existing in the world that are not the result of human creation. Civil philosophy seeks knowledge about the generation and properties of bodies that are a result of human artifice—especially commonwealths. Dividing once again, Hobbes then argues that civil philosophy is broken down into ethics, which deals with the dispositions and affections of men (human passion and thought as complex matter in motion) and politics. While Hobbes's taxonomy becomes labored, because the natural body called man is the object of both natural and civil philosophy, the essential claim is that in order to understand the creation of commonwealths, you must know something about the human body, and to know something about the human body, you must understand the material mechanics of sensation, imagination, and thought.

Hobbes's emphasis on philosophy as the proper paradigm for understanding natural and civil bodies reflects his belief that the most important object of knowledge is *motion*.³⁵ Countering Martinich's claim that Hobbes believes that God is the ultimate cause of all things are passages where Hobbes claims that motion is the underlying principle of reality. In *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes writes, "[t]he things that really are in the world without us, are those motions by which these seemings are caused" (*EL*, ii, 10). In *De Corpore* Hobbes extends this claim by writing, "the causes of universal things (of those, at least, that have any cause) are manifest of themselves ... for they have all but one universal cause, which is motion ... and motion cannot be understood to have any other cause besides motion" (*De Corp.*, vi, 5). Here Hobbes suggests that motion is the cause of all things

³⁵Hobbes's interest in matter and motion develops as early as 1630. Hobbes's first sketch of his material philosophy comes in his "Short Tract on First Principles." This piece was first published by Ferdinand Tönnies as an appendix to his translation of Hobbes's *The Elements of Law: Natural and Politic*. While there is some controversy over the authorship of the "Tract," most Hobbes scholars (for example A.P. Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 102; Perez Zagorin, "Hobbes's Early Philosophical Development," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54, no. 3 [1993]: 505–7; and Watkins, *Hobbes's System of Ideas*, 14–22 attribute it to Hobbes and suggest it was written between 1630 and 1636. One notable exception to this view comes from Richard Tuck, "Hobbes and Descartes," in *Perspectives on Hobbes*, ed. G.A.J. Rogers and Alan Ryan [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988], 16–18). The "Tract" is important because it provides a "first sketch of Hobbes's theory ... of the natural world, [and] of man's situation in it ... [suggesting that Hobbes was] mechanical philosopher long before his political doctrine[s] were fixed" (Watkins, *Hobbes's System of Ideas*, 22). The central thrust of the "Tract" is Hobbes's combination of a materialist philosophy with Galileo's theory of inertia. The main ideas of the "Tract" are (1) motion is "the universal cause of phenomena;" (2) "all change is due to direct or indirect contact between bodies;" and (3) the subjectivity of sensible qualities" (Zagorin, "Hobbes's Early Philosophical Development," 511).

and that motion has no other cause than motion.³⁶ Hobbes goes on to connect an understanding of motion to knowledge of human beings and commonwealths. It is through attaining “knowledge of the passions and perturbations of the mind” that we “come to the causes and necessity of constituting commonwealths, and to get the knowledge of what is natural right, and what are civil duties” (*De Corp.*, vi, 7). Hobbes believes that human beings are complex bodies of motion, and commonwealths are artificial aggregates of these, often tumultuous, individuals. His goal is to understand, and instruct, the *motion* that animates human and civil bodies.

The Laws of Nature as Divine Commandments

I now turn to Martinich’s claim that Hobbes’s laws of nature are divine commandments. Martinich writes, “the laws of nature consist of two elements: the command of God and propositions about self-preservation. . . . [I]f God did not exist, then no being would have the power necessary to serve as the source for the obligation required for moral laws.”³⁷ There are four points I want to make in response to Martinich’s interpretation of the laws of nature. First, Martinich makes a very important distinction between what he calls a “primary” and “secondary” state of nature in Hobbes’s theory. I am skeptical of Martinich’s distinction between a “primary” and “secondary” state of nature. Second, I disagree with Martinich’s claim that human beings are under an “original” obligation in the state of nature. Third, I contend that laws become laws only after the commonwealth has been instituted. And, fourth, I contend that Hobbes’s materialism and account of language effectively derail Martinich’s account of how we come to know and learn what the laws of nature contain.

Describing the state of nature Hobbes writes, “[t]he notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice” (*Lev.*, xiii, 13). This appears to contradict Martinich’s claim that God is a common power over all people and that it is his irresistible power that constitutes the moral force of the laws of nature. Much of the strength of Martinich’s argument rests on his ability to explain the contradiction or provide an alternative interpretation. To get around this passage, Martinich deploys a clever interpretive maneuver: he draws a distinction between what he calls the “primary” and “secondary” state of nature.³⁸ The “primary” state of nature, Martinich argues, ought to be “considered in

³⁶I do not want to give the impression that Hobbes’s claims about motion are free of difficulty. As I discussed in Section 2 of this essay, Hobbes is not always consistent in his account of what we can, and cannot, know about motion.

³⁷Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan*, 136.

³⁸Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan*, 76. After claiming that “much more of Hobbes’s text can be interpreted literally than most scholars recognize” (43), it is

isolation (or abstracted) from all laws, including the laws of nature."³⁹ He goes on to say that in the "primary" state of nature, "not even the existence of God is considered."⁴⁰ After discussing the "primary" state of nature, Martinich argues that Hobbes makes an important textual and conceptual transition by introducing the laws of nature in chapter 14. "The way out" of the "primary" state of nature, Martinich argues, is through the laws of nature.⁴¹ The "secondary" state of nature is a condition in which the only common power is God and the laws of nature are laws in the strong sense.⁴²

Nowhere in *Leviathan*, or any other of Hobbes's text, do we find the distinction between a "primary" and "secondary" state of nature. Hobbes neither uses these words nor provides other textual evidence that he intended his readers to make this distinction. Moreover, Martinich's distinction has the effect of neutralizing the important philosophical transition that Hobbes effects between traditional natural law doctrine and his state of nature.⁴³ Martinich's distinction between a "primary" and "secondary" state of nature weakens the coherence and power of the state of nature as a theoretical device. More important, it is unclear if the distinction is plausible. Martinich writes, "it is precisely because the common power of God is absent from the primary state of nature that there is 'no law' at all and 'where no law, no justice.'" On Martinich's reading it is unclear how God can be both absent from the state of nature and the author of its laws. One of Hobbes's more (in)famous suggestions is that God is some form of material substance. Early in *Leviathan* Hobbes claims that the concept incorporeal substance is a contradiction of terms (*Lev.*, iv, 21). Later he adds, "The world (I mean not the earth only . . . but the *universe*, that is, the whole mass of all things that are) is corporeal (that is to say, body). . . . And consequently, every part of the universe is body, and that which is not body is no part of the universe. And because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing (and consequently, nowhere)" (*Lev.*, xlvi, 15, see also xii, 7, and xliv, 15).⁴⁴ On Martinich's account, God must be part of the "whole mass of all things that are," and if so, it is impossible for God, or his power, to be "absent from the primary state of nature" in the same way that it would be impossible for God to be outside the universe. In the last instance, Martinich fails to justify the distinction he draws between a "primary" and "secondary" state of nature, the conceptual implications of the distinction subvert the state of

ironic that Martinich turns to an interpretation of Hobbes that imports terms and theoretical constructions that are foreign to the text.

³⁹Ibid., 76.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 184.

⁴⁴See also Curley, "I Durst Not Write So Boldly," 61–66.

nature as a theoretical device, and it runs counter to Hobbes's implicit materialistic account of God.

I now turn to my second concern. Martinich claims, "the laws of nature are moral laws in the same way in which they are divine laws" and that the "root of all obligation is God's omnipotence."⁴⁵ For Martinich's argument to work, there must be an original command and this command must create a form of obligation. However, in the state of nature, Hobbes asserts that there is no common power capable of issuing such a command (*Lev.*, xiii, 13). In the absence of an original command or common morality, Hobbes argues that human beings possess the Right of Nature. "The Right of Nature . . . is the liberty each man hath to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature, that is to say, of his own life, and consequently of doing anything which, in his own judgment and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto" (*Lev.*, xiv, 1). In the state of nature, individuals exercise their natural right to use their power to preserve their lives. According to Hobbes, there is no prior command, and hence no moral law, prohibiting any action that compromises an individual's right to self-preservation.⁴⁶ Moreover, Hobbes argues that obligation derives from voluntary consent, not God's irresistible power. Hobbes writes, "in the act of our *submission* consisteth both our *obligation* and our *liberty* . . . there being no obligation on any man which ariseth not from some act of his own; for all equally are by nature free" (*Lev.*, xxi, 10). As Strauss puts it, "obligation comes only on the basis of a covenant between formerly free and unbound men."⁴⁷ There is no obligation that does not derive from a voluntary act.

My third point concerns Martinich's claim that the laws of nature are moral laws in the traditional sense. This position is countered by at least two passages in *Leviathan*. Hobbes concludes his discussion of the laws of nature by saying, "[t]hese dictates of reason men use to call by the name of laws, but improperly; for they are but conclusions or theorems concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defense of themselves, whereas law, properly, is the word of him that by right hath command over others" (*Lev.*, xv, 41). The laws of nature are *necessary* not because they derive from God, but rather because they dictate to human beings what they must do to preserve themselves. Later Hobbes writes, "the laws of nature . . . in the mere state of nature . . . are not properly laws, but qualities that dispose men to peace and to obedience. When a commonwealth is once settled, then are they actually laws, and not before . . . for it is the sovereign power that obliges men to obey them" (*Lev.*, xxvi, 8). In the state of nature, the laws of nature are

⁴⁵Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan*, 100.

⁴⁶Strauss writes, "the fundamental moral fact is not a duty but a right; all duties are derivative from the fundamental and inalienable right to self-preservation" (Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 181).

⁴⁷Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1952), 24.

prudential guides to self-preservation. Ideally the laws of nature lead individuals voluntarily to consent to and authorize the power of the sovereign. Authorization gives the sovereign the power to command, and it is the power of the sovereign's command that creates the law and constitutes the moral order.

My fourth observation concerns Martinich's account of how we come to know the laws of nature. Martinich claims "humans are informed of God's law by reasoning about what it would contain."⁴⁸ Because God no longer speaks directly to people, and because there is no supernatural apprehension of the laws of nature, we only learn what God intends for us by reasoning together about the best ways to achieve peace. To reason together in this manner requires that human beings invent words, establish common definitions, create rules of use, and then communicate with each other about which words, definitions, and rules will lead to peace. Martinich simply assumes that human beings will be able to do all of this. He takes it for granted that Hobbes's account of materialism, language, and reason will do what Hobbes hopes it will. However, as I have argued, it is precisely Hobbes's account of materialism and language that frustrates his moral and political project. Following Hobbes's materialism and theory of language step-by-step, the possibility that individuals will reason together about the best way out of the state of nature appears unlikely.

Conclusion

The cause of civil war, Hobbes claims, is "that men know not the causes neither of war nor peace" because they have not learned the rules of civil life. Desiring to teach men the causes of war and peace, Hobbes set out to articulate a comprehensive philosophical system linking his physics to his politics. The potential strength of Hobbes's system rests on his belief that human beings are made of the same matter, animated by similar motions, and that knowledge of these phenomena would provide the rational foundation upon which the rules of civil life could be established. However, as I have tried to show, Hobbes's materialism creates a diffusion of perspectives, words, and definitions that undermine the foundation upon which the rules of civil life must be built. Following Hobbes's materialist anthropology step by step, a kaleidoscope of images, words, and definitions seems more likely than agreement about images and words, consent about procedures, and contract concerning public meaning and peace. If human beings are unable to establish a shared foundation of perspectives, words, and definitions, then no commonwealth is possible. In addition, Hobbes's belief that the material uniformity of fear would drive individuals to accept the necessity of instituting a commonwealth may not be sufficient to overcome the

⁴⁸Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan*, 136.

incommensurability in perspectives that emerges between individuals. Under conditions of intense fear and anxiety, it is likely that the diffusion of perspectives, words, and definitions will only contribute to the anarchy of the state of nature.

One possible solution to the problems I have raised is to turn to an alternative metaphysics. Martinich provides such a solution by arguing that *Leviathan* is a thoroughly theological work and that, according to Hobbes, God is the creator of the material universe and author of the laws of nature. But Martinich's reading of *Leviathan* is hampered by two obstacles. First, it is unclear that religion plays the central role in *Leviathan* that Martinich claims. Not only are Hobbes's religious claims in *Leviathan* open to alternative interpretations, the role of religion in Hobbes's overall philosophy is circumscribed by what Hobbes says about the relation between philosophy and religion, and the role he assigns to philosophy as the proper paradigm for understanding natural and civil bodies. Second, as I have tried to demonstrate, Hobbes's material account of the formation of perspectives, words, and language militate against our ability to learn what the laws of nature mean. As Martinich acknowledges, in order to know what God intends for us, we must reason together about what the laws of nature imply and, therefore, how best to go about pursuing peace. But this is precisely what I contend human beings, on Hobbes's account, have a profound difficulty doing. If Hobbes's materialism complicates our ability to establish the shared perspectives upon which the commonwealth is built, and Martinich's account of Hobbes's turn to God is unable to save or stabilize the system, where do we turn? Two possibilities present themselves. Perhaps a different materialist metaphysics could achieve what Hobbes desired. An alternative account of the relationship between sensation, perception, and language formation might provide enough glue to account for the formation of shared perspectives and language. Or perhaps we could return to some form of classical rationalism whereby reason reveals those elements of human nature that constitute our social and political possibilities.