

with. Put differently, could it be that Hobbes is both less and more interesting than Stauffer's interpretation suggests?

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Hobbes: Prophet of the Enlightenment or Justice of the Peace?

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Hobbes's Kingdom of Light is a well-written and thought-provoking book that has much to offer to Hobbes scholars, whether they agree or disagree with its conclusions. I cannot do it justice here, nor address all the ways in which it made me think. In it, Devin Stauffer sees Hobbes as a "thoroughgoing critic of traditional Christianity," who sought to replace the "Kingdom of Darkness" with a "Kingdom of Light" (7). Stauffer identifies four main themes in his argument: "Hobbes's critique of the classical tradition, his natural philosophy, his critique of religion, and his political philosophy" (9), and argues that it is necessary to step back and see Hobbes's system in its totality, in order to assess its parts. Indeed, this approach conforms to Hobbes's own standard as articulated in *Leviathan*:

For it is not the bare Words, but the Scope of the writer that giveth the true light, by which any writing is to bee interpreted; and they that insist upon single Texts, without considering the main Designe, can derive no thing from them cleerly; but rather by casting atomes of Scripture, as dust before mens eyes, make every thing more obscure than it is; an ordinary artifice of those that seek not the truth, but their own advantage. (*L*, 43: 331)¹

Where Stauffer's own scope is concerned, I think that he is both right and persuasive when he argues that Hobbes sought to remove the hold that theologians and clerics had placed on humanity, and that he did so through a multifaceted, complex, and well-thought-out system, in which each part has a role to play towards the attainment of peace. I disagree with Stauffer's interpretation of some of the steps along the way to this conclusion,

¹All references to *Leviathan* are to the 1651 edition, by chapter and page numbers.

however, and think that that ultimately leads us to somewhat different assessments of Hobbes's project.

For instance, what Stauffer bills as "Hobbes's critique of the classical tradition" in practice turns out to be a critique not so much of ancient thinkers but of their mindless (mainly Christian) imitators. In this case, it is Stauffer's argument, rather than its label, that is correct, and this is important for a number of reasons. One is that it points to what Hobbes sees as an epistemological problem that transcends epochs: citing authorities rather than thinking about the validity of a claim. Hobbes distinguishes between the great ancient philosophers (Aristotle included) who could think for themselves and those who can only cite them uncritically. A second reason is that there is a lot that Hobbes's engagement with ancient authors can teach us about his own thought. I was thus surprised to see no mention of Lucretius and hardly any engagement with Cicero. *Pace* Stauffer (208), both of these are very much present in Hobbes's account of the state of nature (Creech recommended his translation of *De rerum natura* to Hobbes's readers for the poem's resemblance to Hobbes's state of nature). More importantly, given Stauffer's goal, Lucretius was widely seen as an atheist and Cicero was a favorite of the Christian theologians.

Where the state of nature is concerned, Stauffer and I disagree more broadly and since I have developed my reasons elsewhere and in detail, I will not rehearse them here.² Given the present constraints, let me say that there is plenty of evidence against Stauffer's claim that the Bible is absent from Hobbes's account of the state of nature. I also disagree with Stauffer's reading of it as an account of what preceded commonwealths; while Hobbes wanted it to resemble that, its main purpose was to show what was to be avoided. Most important, however, is my disagreement with Stauffer's account of the roles of natural right and natural law therein. Stauffer repeatedly writes of Hobbes's inability to see the inconsistency between natural law and natural right (e.g., 220–21). In fact, Hobbes calls the two inconsistent explicitly, in *Leviathan*, chapter 14 (64). I see that inconsistency as necessary to the state of nature and to the emergence of the commonwealth. Stauffer cannot because, as I will argue below, he thinks that for Hobbes natural law is there in name only.

Stauffer's treatment of Hobbes's natural philosophy, on the other hand, struck me as excellent, in that it took a thorny and complex issue fraught with difficulties and assessed it in a sober and persuasive manner. As Stauffer points out, at the edges of his materialistic universe, Hobbes is bound to run into difficulties and these difficulties will have consequences not just for his physics and conception of human nature, but also for his politics and religion. At his best, Stauffer is sensitive to something that many commentators on Hobbes and religion pass by, namely, the fact that to people with serious religious belief (and those who address them thoughtfully) there is no boundary between religion and such domains as politics, science, and nature.

²Ioannis D. Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy: The Rhetoric and Science in Hobbes's State of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

This brings me to Stauffer's main interest, which is in Hobbes's theology. Stauffer argues that Hobbes has presented a multilayered argument, especially when it comes to the Bible. Those who think that there is anything Straussian about this method would do well to read the early Hobbes's praise for Thucydides's ability to "secretly" instruct the reader, as well as his explanation to his patron that he wrote as he did in his exchange with Bramhall because he expected that it would be kept in confidence, or his praise in *De Cive* for the ancients who clothed their teachings in fables. For these and many other reasons, Stauffer is on solid ground when he argues that Hobbes hid some of his meaning from plain sight and he describes the manner in which Hobbes did so brilliantly (256). Moreover, on occasion Stauffer's explanation of some of Hobbes's manipulation of the Bible is illuminating. Yet, there are also many specific instances in which there are alternative interpretations that are more straightforward, raising the question of Hobbes's scope, over his "atomes".

All too often, debates about religion in Hobbes center on this or that specific denomination or doctrine. Those arguments strike me as dust fights, because they miss the scope, which for Hobbes was the right relationship between theology and sovereignty. The problem for Hobbes was not Anglican or Episcopalian, Catholic, or even Christian. Would it be any different, for example, in a world in which divergent denominations of Islam fought over the right interpretation of the Quran and challenged secular authorities? Certainly not, as Hobbes's ancient Ethiopian example—which Stauffer invokes—indicates. Whether one calls it Erastian or not (Stauffer entertains the possibility but ultimately decides that Hobbes's doctrine does not fit), Hobbes was quite clear that his goal was to subordinate spiritual authority to the sovereign so as to put an end to religious violence.

I therefore think that Stauffer is partly right when he claims that Hobbes sought to combat religion, but wrong when he has Hobbes envision an enlightened world in which reason has pushed religion out altogether (e.g., 113–14; 257–77).³ Stauffer devotes a lot of careful attention to Hobbes's treatment of religion as a human phenomenon, but the closest he comes to explaining what, other than religion, might satisfy man's need for religion is to assert that it would be reason. In this sense, Stauffer joins a number of other commentators who have begun to see Hobbes as a prophet of the Enlightenment, for whom reason would radically transform human affairs, if not human nature. I do not see any compelling evidence that Hobbes envisioned such a "civilizational transformation" (182), nor that he thought it possible to rid human beings of religious belief completely and convert them, in toto, to reason.

³Stauffer's interpretation of a commonwealth "of any religion at all" (268) takes Hobbes's words out of context. In that passage (*L*, 31: 192), Hobbes is only arguing that a commonwealth of several religions is like a commonwealth with no religion at all. He is not envisioning a commonwealth without religion.

Unlike Stauffer, I see Hobbes's obvious manipulation of the Bible as evidence of a strategy intended to signal something to sovereigns everywhere: that it is possible to take the holy book one's religion is centered on and interpret it in such a way as to place peace on the highest pedestal and make any subordinate doctrine conform to the needs of civil order. If orthodoxy means complete agreement with every single particular of doctrine, then there have been very few orthodox people and Hobbes was certainly not one of them. Commentators who focus too much on questions of orthodoxy tend to lose sight of the intensity and extent of theological disputes even among people whom we might classify in the same camp. There was hardly any major passage of scripture that was not the subject of intense controversy in the seventeenth century. Alongside his openly unorthodox views, Hobbes stated time and again that he told the truth as he saw it about religion, and that he focused on doctrines that "manifestly tend to Peace and Loyalty" (*L*, R&C: 394).

If Stauffer is correct when he points to the fact that at its edges Hobbes's materialism is subject to question, then he is also right when he observes that the same is true of Hobbes's view of God as the prime mover. Yet, while Hobbes, too, was aware of the impossibility of saying anything about God's nature, let alone proving that He is the prime mover, he also thought it reasonable to deduce from the infinite connections he saw around him (visible and invisible) that everything leads back to one such omnipotent being. Stauffer claims, "Far from basing his account of the laws of nature on the premise of divine legislation, Hobbes barely mentions God in the course of his extensive discussion of the laws of nature" (225). This is simply wrong and has major consequences for both Hobbes's and Stauffer's arguments. As Hobbes states explicitly, the laws of nature are God's laws and natural punishments follow breaches of the laws of nature as their "naturall, not arbitrary effects" (*L*, 31: 193; cf. *DC*, 13.1), even though "no humane Providence ... is high enough" to see that long chain of events. Setting aside questions of specific doctrines, denominations, orthodoxy, and atheism (which, incidentally, in the seventeenth century is merely the first insult hurled at one with whom one disagrees), I see no reason to doubt Hobbes's considered conclusion that the world is governed by natural laws and that these dictate and constrain what is possible and good for human beings.

Having dismissed any serious role for natural law, Stauffer can thus claim that "Hobbes does not seem to have looked very deeply into the *moral dimension* of the claims and outlook of serious religious believers" (181). I think that this claim is astonishing if only because Hobbes spent so much time and effort to meet those believers on their own terms. Stauffer thinks that an account of religion as having originated in man's fear is incompatible with faith. I do not see why that is the case. As Hobbes put it in *De Cive*, among other places, God "produces natural effects through the order of secondary causes" (13.1). The observation that objects fall to the ground because of gravitational waves or corn turns into popcorn because of microwaves says nothing against the possibility that

God uses waves to make things happen, and this seems to me to have been one of Hobbes's major theological objections to the doctrines of his day.

Stauffer wonders whether peace can be a *summum bonum*. I think that Hobbes's answer is no, but not for the reasons Stauffer posits (e.g., 229). Rather, it is the thing that allows the pursuit of such individual *bona* as are consistent with order and other people's ability to do the same. Equally importantly, it is consistent with Christianity and other religions. One of Hobbes's great theological insights was to formulate his doctrines as "not-inconsistent" (rather than consistent) with civil doctrine. Another was that whatever else they disagreed on, reasonable believers and nonbelievers could come to agree on the desirability of peace.

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Hobbes and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns

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The subtitle of Devin Stauffer's wonderful new book understates its ambition, which is to study the foundations not merely of modern political philosophy but of modern civilization and culture, of the whole way of being in the world that we who live in modern societies cannot help but recognize in ourselves. The book's provocative and welcome conceit is that when we study the endlessly fascinating intricacies of Hobbes's seventeenth-century arguments, we are doing more than diving into a particular historical moment or following the back and forth of a particular language game; we are evaluating the justifications for our way of life.

On Stauffer's telling, Hobbes's ambitious goal was to help "the modern world to move beyond the politics of peoples, fatherlands, and faiths" by initiating cultural developments that would ultimately free people from the superstitions known as religion (276). The campaign against "the kingdom of darkness" is central to Stauffer's Hobbes because religious belief stood in the way of the materialist philosophy and the interest-based politics that together offered the best chance to bring more peaceful and comfortable lives to more people.

While Stauffer is certainly not the first scholar to view Hobbes in this way—he cites his debts generously—his book offers an especially thoughtful reading from this perspective and takes advantage of the proliferation of good scholarship on