

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

Hobbes over the past few decades. His engagements with various literatures show him learning from the best of the more historical scholars, such as Noel Malcolm, Quentin Skinner, and Richard Tuck, even while pressing against the theoretical confines of historicism. For readers who already know Hobbes and the Hobbes literature well, this book offers a real pleasure—a rereading of passages from throughout Hobbes’s works (not just *Leviathan*) which have been much discussed, and a balanced set of judgments about how to incorporate some of the recent smaller controversies into an overall interpretation. Stauffer integrates elements of revisionist readings without allowing them to warp too much our sense of Hobbes’s broad project. A “more tolerant” Hobbes (Alan Ryan) friendly to “Independency” (Jeffrey Collins)? Yes, to some extent, but only as furthers a project of ultimate secularization. A “democratic” Hobbes (Richard Tuck)? Yes, at one key point in the theory, but mainly to depower the clergy and enable the creation of what Stauffer reminds us Nietzsche called “the coldest of all cold monsters,” the modern state. An Erastian “civil religion” (Collins, Tuck, Ronald Beiner)? Perhaps as a temporary measure, but Stauffer emphasizes that reason and the sword ultimately were meant to play a greater role in the developing Hobbesian state than the crozier was.

The three central chapters of the book examine what Stauffer refers to as Hobbes’s “critique of religion.” The book thus claims a place alongside Leo Strauss’s early work *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*.¹ The purpose of Strauss’s work was to examine the arguments against revelation. Strauss’s conclusion was that those arguments are not philosophically decisive. Stauffer’s Hobbes encounters some of the same sorts of limitations that arise when trying to call religion before the tribunal of reason. Hobbes emphasizes the difficulties in knowing whether creation of the world by divine fiat could have happened, and whether prophecies and miracles can be believed, but he cannot entirely close off the possibility that natural theology, scripture, and individual religious experience might point to truths. Even Hobbes’s materialism, we learn in chapter 2, cannot be more than hypothetical or “methodological”; it is a proposal about the best way to build a science from our sense perceptions rather than a certain description of the world that produces those perceptions. In chapters 3–5, Stauffer shows both that Hobbes’s intentions were in the direction of enlightenment, “the kingdom of light,” and that his arguments—the arguments justifying modern secular civilization—have holes in them.

The significance of these holes is not explored at length in this book, but at various moments the author does allow himself to point to questions. For example, he wonders at one point about the lack of empathy with religious experience that we have learned from Hobbes, our Hobbesian tendency to dismiss such elements of experience as products of fear and ignorance: “Of course, one could ask ... whether what Hobbes would regard as progressive

¹Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965)

enlightenment could not be interpreted instead as estrangement from God" (183). He also argues that Hobbes's moral philosophy is not as self-sustaining as Hobbes wanted to believe it was. There is, at the root of Hobbes's thought, a moral distinction between aggressive actions motivated by self-preservation (which are said to be defensible and reasonable) and aggressive actions motivated by pride and honor-seeking (which are not). Stauffer suggests that we find here an unacknowledged natural law at the heart of Hobbes's thought, a natural law that Hobbes seems to assume must be binding in the state of nature, contrary to his official theory (218–19). Presumably Stauffer draws attention to this point to open the door for an argument against this moral judgment, for a claim that certain forms of honor-seeking might be morally worthwhile, that the human being might be justified in aiming at something beyond self-preservation. Coming to the fundamental issue in the last paragraph of the book, Stauffer writes in his own voice, "the modern Hobbesian state, in telling us that we can and should be satisfied with the security, freedom, and prosperity attainable in this world, tells us something about ourselves that is not true" (277).

This untruth is meant to help explain why the modern world has generated the sort of dissatisfactions that can be found in the writings of Rousseau, Nietzsche, Solzhenitsyn, and other critics of modernity. Stauffer does not indicate what strategy we should adopt once we see the holes in Hobbes's critique and the possibilities they leave open.

When Strauss republished his work on Spinoza in the United States (it had originally been published in German in the 1930s), he included a preface that ended with a summary of a philosophical project that he had not yet developed in the Spinoza book. In that book, the insufficiency of philosophic reason had led him only to see a standoff between reason and revelation. Later, however, Strauss wondered whether the insufficiencies he had found in Spinoza's reason were particular to *modern* philosophy, and therefore whether the case for philosophy could be strengthened through a recovery of premodern rationalism. This led him to propose a study of Plato and Aristotle in search of a form of reason less susceptible to the dissatisfactions that have fueled modern fanaticism and nihilism.

Stauffer's book inherits this project, but it also points to some deep questions that confront it. Most interesting, perhaps, is the possibility that he says Hobbes raised—that the roots of the Kingdom of Darkness can be found in classical philosophy itself. Against commentators who argue that Hobbes was only targeting the combination of Aristotle with Christianity found in Scholasticism, the "schoolmen," Stauffer shows Hobbes to have suggested that Aristotle himself was responsible for opening the door to religiosity and its vices. In putting forward a metaphysics so easily interpreted to support the existence of "abstract essences," and in not resisting more openly the assimilation of that metaphysics to pagan religions ("fearing the fate of Socrates:" *Leviathan*, chap. 46), did Aristotle himself not create trouble for philosophy? Stauffer's approach is refreshing in that it allows for the possibility that Hobbes was concerned not only with escaping civil war, but also with saving

the philosophical enterprise from being corrupted by accommodations with religious authorities (22–29). If even the Philosopher himself can be convicted of incipient religiosity, however, does the path that Strauss indicated at the end of his preface to the Spinoza book remain open? Is a recovery of premodern rationalism available? If even Aristotle could not avoid at least a rhetorical concession to superstition, a concession that has had dire consequences for philosophy, could any version of Aristotle's project that we generate hope to do better?

The final sentence of this book remarks that the "costs" of Hobbes's tremendous influence include "the discontent of modern men, whose political communities ask of them too little" and "the disappointment with reason, of which Hobbes taught the modern world to ask too much" (276). To simultaneously wish for more political engagement and caution against asking too much from reason is a provocative note on which to end—especially at a moment in our politics featuring engaged irrationalism. If it is dangerous to ask too much of reason, it also remains, as Strauss put it, "unwise to say farewell to reason." The crucial question of precisely what is appropriate to ask of reason demands to be treated more directly.

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Response

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Thank you to Paul Wilford for conceiving of and organizing this symposium. And thank you to Geoff Vaughan, Paul Franco, Ioannis Evrigenis, and Bryan Garsten for their reviews of my book. I am delighted to have the chance to grapple with such serious reviews from such thoughtful readers. In my remarks below, I will not take up every point they raise, but I will address their most important questions and objections. Because that inevitably means my response will focus on the critical aspects of their reviews, let me take this chance to say that I appreciate their praise of my work as well. I imagine, though, that readers have little interest in my thoughts on that. So let me cut to the chase and take up the questions and points of dispute.

Geoff Vaughan

Geoff Vaughan raises two main objections to my book, which prove to be objections as much to Hobbes as to me, since he thinks I give Hobbes more