

The Unsuccessful Atheist

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In 1666 the English House of Commons introduced a bill stating their plan to take action against “Books as tend to Atheism, Blasphemy, or Profaneness, or against the Essence or Attributes of God...in particular the Book of Mr. Hobbs, called *The Leviathan*.”¹ The charge of heretic and atheist hung over Hobbes’s head for the rest of his life, preventing him from printing his further works in England and influencing him to spend much of the remainder of his life writing on heresy laws. That such an act of censorship would appear as obscene to modern thinkers is understandable; that such charges of atheism and blasphemy should have been considered in the 17th century is less obvious – but equally true. Despite Hobbes’s best attempt to provide an a-moral and exclusively rational justification for an all-powerful sovereign in *Leviathan*, his argument requires acknowledgment and fear of God if it is to be coherent and convincing. This claim goes further than stating that Hobbes needs a hypothetical god in place to act as the first cause; a necessity that Hobbes himself acknowledges in the text.² I will argue that Hobbes requires a much more involved, active God when he addresses the *Laws of Nature* and the transition from the State of Nature to the social contract. As *Leviathan* stands, it appears that Hobbes is arguing for an impossible sequence of events. With an active God in place to fill in the apparent gaps of Hobbes’s logic, *Leviathan* will be able to put forth a more coherent argument, even if it is no more convincing.

As I mentioned above, Hobbes acknowledges the need for at least a minimalist conception of God if his metaphysics is to appear viable. The God Hobbes provides us with in the first thirteen chapters of *Leviathan* fulfills this role and little else. It is possible to liken Hobbes’s metaphysics to a game of billiards – in which the chaos of the billiard balls represent the forces and pressures causing our sensory perception, and God is the player who initially breaks the rack:

1 ‘House of Commons Journal Volume 8: 17 October 1666’

2 Hobbes *Leviathan* p. 77

“or he that from any effect hee seeth come to passe, should reason to the next and immediate cause thereof, and from thence to the cause of that cause, and plunge himselfe profoundly into the pursuit of causes; shall at least come to this, that there must be...one First Mover; that is, a First, and an Eternall cause of all things; which is that which men mean by the name of God.”³

Hobbes similarly attributes God with the creation of speech, ‘the most noble and profitable invention of all others,’ but supports his claim only with scripture.⁴ Beyond this, Hobbes appears to allow no active role for a deity within his system. In the first passage of *Leviathan*, to specifically address God⁵, Hobbes explicitly notes that God’s nature is ‘incomprehensible,’ and that her attributes are ‘unconceivable.’ When Hobbes uses the next sentence to remind the reader that everything she can conceive of ‘has been first perceived by sense,’ it is hardly controversial to understand this as a comment about God’s lack of demonstrable presence in our lives.

If this was the extent of Hobbes’s need for God, the charges of atheism levied against him might not have been inappropriate. Hobbes, had he lived with the knowledge of modern astrophysics, could have placed the ‘first cause’ entirely within the confines of big bang theory without denying his metaphysical and political arguments. By espousing an evolutionary linguistic theory, Hobbes might also have replaced the need for God in the creation of speech and languages, though admittedly this transition would force him to rethink the sequence of his political theory. Hobbes would have to work out the difficulties of language formation in a state of nature as individualistic and anti-progressive as the one he suggests. The alternative, that language did not develop until after individuals had left the state of nature, is not a viable possibility for Hobbes’s theory, as the formation of a social contract appears to be impossible without the communicative aid of language. Conceivably, Hobbes may have found a way around this problem by making the state of nature an entirely hypothetical device like modern contract theorists⁶, and the loss of God entirely would not have discredited Hobbes’s overall argument prior to Chapter 14 of *Leviathan*. However, the discussion of the Right and Laws of Nature that takes place in Chapter 14 will move Hobbes’s argument from one based in pure rationality

3 Ibid p.77

4 Ibid p.24

5 Ibid p.23

6 For example, see John Rawls’s *Original Position in A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971)

to one that is divinely dependent.

Any investigation into the Right of Nature and the Laws of Nature must first address the supposition on which they are built: before and above all else, man pursues corporal preservation. Unfortunately, Hobbes gives us no indication as to where this ultimate end comes from; he simply treats this as understood and assumes our intuitive agreement. As a conscientious reader of Hobbes, we are forced to ask the question: What kind of a statement is this? Is Hobbes intending to be entirely descriptive here? Is this a prescriptive statement, that we should desire self-preservation? Or maybe it is a moral statement, that we have a duty to preserve our physical existence? Of course, the text gives us very little in answering this question, but I think we can do well in eliminating some of Hobbes's possible intentions. Classifying this as a descriptive claim is problematic. While Hobbes could point to the multitude and say that they do, in fact, routinely aim towards self-preservation in their daily activities, it is common knowledge that people choose to end their lives every day. Anyone wishing to make a descriptive claim like this one would have to be entirely ignorant of suicide and martyrdom, which Hobbes certainly was not (Hobbes actually praises martyrdom in Book IV of *Leviathan*⁷). The possibility of it being a normative claim also loses credibility once looked at closely. Surely, if one were to make a prescriptive claim such as this and use it as the foundation of their political system, this same person would go to great lengths to convince their reader of the claim's validity. Without corresponding supportive arguments, prescriptive statements contain very little persuasive weight. *Leviathan* contains no such argument in favor of self-preservation as our natural end; it simply asks us to accept its truth on Hobbes's authority. If this is in fact a prescriptive statement, it's an unconvincing one.

There is only one author known to Hobbes that holds the authority to make a prescriptive claim without need for persuasive justification. If self-preservation becomes a duty we hold towards God, we may begin to better understand why Hobbes felt no need to include supporting arguments for the claim's validity. What better supporting argument than that God commands it? Only a divine moral assertion can possess the universality that Hobbes claims. It is possible that this duty to God was simply taken as understood, given the ubiquitous hold the church had on society and education. John Locke, writing just a quarter century after Hobbes, was certainly not shy about assuming the validity and universal acknowledgement of our duty to preserve God's creation.⁸ He similarly builds his entire political system upon the idea. Making self-preservation an obligation towards God actually clears up one

7 Ibid p.414

8 Locke *Second Treatise of Government* p. 9.

of the largest ambiguities in *Leviathan*. If we have a fundamental duty towards God to preserve our physical selves, it is understandable that Hobbes allows for the defiance of the sovereign when this preservation is in danger. Similarly, it would explain why we can never grant the right to take our life, for our obligation to God must be prior to any new covenant we might make, and “a former covenant makes voyd a later.”⁹ It is conceivable that the reason we hesitate to accept this idea of self-preservation as a moral claim may be our preconception of Hobbes as an atheist and amoralist. Hopefully, as we now proceed to Hobbes’s discussion of the Laws of Nature, this hesitation to recognize the implicit moral claims in *Leviathan* will dissipate.

Hobbes makes no mention of God as he lays forth the first two Laws of Nature, even explicitly stating that they are to be ‘found out by Reason,’¹⁰ but this has not stopped some Hobbes scholars from arguing that they may have divine origin. I argue that they need these origins if they are to be of any help in building a commonwealth. Howard Warrender has put forth the most famous argument of this vein, and he begins very sensibly by looking at what exactly makes a law. Warrender claims that if a “law is to be valid, the following conditions must be fulfilled: (i) the law must be known or knowable to the person to be obliged ... (ii) The author of the law must be known or knowable.”¹¹ For the Laws of Nature, reason can fulfill only the first of Warrender’s conditions; the author remains unknown. The author cannot be any other human being, for these Laws of Nature are intended to be pre-political, and adherence to man-made laws can take place only once a sovereign has been put in place and a commonwealth has been formed. Hobbes cannot successfully make the claim that reason is the author of the Laws – as well as the way in which we discover them – for reason provides no mechanism of enforcing the Laws. Hobbes is quite clear in pointing out to his readers that we do not follow ‘law’ because of any virtue inherent in our selves, but rather from fear of punishment for breaking the law. Pride in upholding the law, Hobbes says, “is a Generosity too rarely found to be presumed on, especially in the pursuers of Wealth, Command, or sensuall Pleasure; which are the greatest part of Mankind. The Passion to be reckoned upon, is Fear.”¹² If this is in fact true, the Laws of Nature need an author who is active enough in punishing transgressions for fear of retribution to be created if the Laws of Nature are to have any influence at all. The author and enforcer of the Laws of Nature must take no other form than God.

9 Hobbes *Leviathan* p. 98

10 Ibid p.91

11 Warrender *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* p. 80-1

12 Hobbes *Leviathan* p. 99

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This coincides quite well with the conclusion we speculated about earlier concerning self-preservation being a mandate of God. If preservation of the corporal self is an end that God holds to be important for humans on this Earth, it follows accordingly that She might also invoke a set of laws aimed at forcing us to achieve this end. Hobbes tells us directly that the Laws of Nature aim at nothing other than our self-preservation:

“A LAW OF NATURE, (*Lex Naturalis*), is a Precept, . . . by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit, that, by which he thinketh it may be best preserved.”¹³

I do not think it is an implausible step from here to say that Hobbes must consider our obligation of self-preservation and our obligation to obey the Laws of Nature to originate in the same place. This point of origin must be God, as no other actor possesses the power to punish someone for the failure to preserve his or her life. A break in one's obligation towards self-preservation implies death, and Hobbes was never so blasphemous as to imply that man's soul is under any other dominion than God's post mortem. The Laws of Nature, and indeed the obligation of self-preservation from which the laws are built, lose all their power to instruct men's actions if they stem from any other source than God.

A further, critical blow for the amoralist argument arises when we recognize that Hobbes's system cannot survive the loss of a dynamic author of the Laws of Nature if it hopes to escape the pre-political stage. Hobbes so meticulously crafts his State of Nature as a situation of unending, rational conflict that he makes it impossible for its inhabitants to escape by rational means.¹⁴ We must take a moment to explore this predicament before we look at God's prospective role in providing the solution. Jean Hampton best portrays this static State of Nature by importing a game theoretic model to predict the strategies of its actors.¹⁵ The State of Nature fits nicely into the classic Prisoners Dilemma game; each player finding that his or her dominant strategy is to be uncooperative and hostile regardless of the other player's actions. This protects the player from becoming 'prey' to their opponent if they are violent and provides the possibility for great gain if the other player is naïve enough to cooperate. Viewing the State of Nature through the lens of game theory

13 Ibid p.91

14 Kelly Liberalism p. 21

15 Hampton Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition p. 62

succinctly demonstrates that no rational actor would ever choose to cooperate if they took their obligation for self-preservation seriously. Seemingly, the inhabitants of Hobbes's State of Nature will never make it to the Social Contract.

Hampton will try to escape this situation of eternal un-cooperation by changing the State of Nature from a one-time Prisoner Dilemma game to an iterated, or repeating, Prisoners Dilemma.¹⁶ With this alteration, players are able to 'educate' their partners as to the benefits of being cooperative by being cooperative themselves in the first few games that are played. Through gradual cooperation, Hampton believes she has discovered the way out of the State of Nature for its inhabitants. While this works well as a hypothetical game theory model, Hampton has entirely missed the intent of Hobbes by expanding the game to an iterated PD model. As Richard Tuck states:

"Hobbes, as we have seen, took the only generally accepted basis for rational conduct to be the securing of one's own preservation, and not any increase in personal utility, however slight (this is a vital difference between Hobbes and modern rational choice theorists, and renders any attempt to recast Hobbes's arguments into choice-theoretic terms highly misleading)."¹⁷

A participant in the State of Nature would never try to 'educate' another player by cooperating initially because this could very well mean their own death or enslavement. Hampton acknowledges that the iterated PD model breaks down when risk becomes sufficiently high, but she fails to understand that every game played in the State of Nature is played at the possible expense of one's life!¹⁸ In outlining the State of Nature, Hobbes states that:

"Where an Invader hath no more to feare, than an other mans single power; if one plant, sow, build, or possesse a convenient Seat, others may ... be expected to come...to dispossesse, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also his life, or liberty."¹⁹

If we wish to view the State of Nature through the Prisoner's Dilemma model, we

16 Ibid p.75

17 Hobbes Leviathan p. xxxiii

18 Hampton Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition p. 76

19 Hobbes Leviathan p. 87

must be sure to understand that the cost of cooperating might always be death. No rational actor concerned with self-preservation would ever open himself to this possibility. Hampton's argument for an iterated PD model of the State of Nature must be dismissed as it misunderstands the fundamental logic of those individuals in the State of Nature. In Hobbes's State of Nature, it is never rational to cooperate.

We will not find our way out of the State of Nature through the further manipulation of game theory concepts, but rather through a return to divinely revealed Laws of Nature. Some sort of agreement must be made and upheld if we are to reach a situation in which the Social Contract could be discussed and constructed. Once again, it is to God that Hobbes must turn if this is to take place. Hobbes admits a tacit understanding of this when he discusses the impossibility of making covenants based on fear of anything secular in the pre-political stage:

“In the condition of meer Nature, the inequality of Power is not discerned, but by the event of Battell. So that before the time of Civill Society, or in the interruption thereof by Warre, there is nothing can strengthen a Covenant of Peace agreed on, against the temptations of Avarice, Ambition, Lust, or other strong desire, but the feare of that Invisible Power, which they every one Worship as God. All therefore that can be done between two men not subject to Civill Power, is to put one another to swear by the God he feareth.”²⁰

It is only through an appeal to our mutual fear of God that we can seek to uphold covenants made in the State of Nature. This is to say that only our mutual awareness of divine retribution will convince us to obey the Laws of Nature and raise ourselves from the self-destructive State of War. We must accept a common pre-political authority if we hope to ever escape eternal non-cooperation. Further, an intervention must occur to make man aware of this divine will. If the Laws of Nature were natural products of human rationality, man would obey these laws from the outset and the State of Nature would not have existed prior to human society. An intervention is necessary either to improve man's rational capacities or to reveal the Laws of Nature to him if there is to be a move from the State of Nature to the Social Contract. Hobbes was clear in telling us that the State of Nature could not produce any advancement by man on his own. Thus, an account of the Laws of Nature based entirely on man's rational abilities asks us to accept an impossible series of events.

In the light of these conclusions, Hobbes's seemingly contradictory com-

20 Ibid. p. 99

ments towards ‘the Fool’ in Chapter 15 make perfect sense. The Fool, who ‘hath said in his heart there is no God,’ does not fear the retribution of God upon his death and thus sees no problem in the blatant violation of the Laws of Nature. The Fool is accredited with the view that it is reasonable to renege on a covenant in the State of Nature if the other individual is naïve enough to perform their duty first. In breaking a covenant, the Fool does not care that he is violating the Law of Nature, God’s law, because he neither believes in nor fears God. Hobbes responds to the Fool’s opinion harshly, stating that the Fool is not only professing wrong beliefs, but that they are also unjust. His use of the word unjust here is important, as Hobbes states earlier in Leviathan that “where there is no common Power, there is no Law: where there is no Law, no Injustice.” Where there is no God to hold you to your covenants, there are no credible Laws of Nature, and without the Laws of Nature there is no way out of the State of Nature.

The conclusion that Hobbes needs a strong and active God for his political system does not change the absence of such a God from the Leviathan. While I have attempted to show that Hobbes’s system lacks persuasiveness and possibility without the weight of God, this does not guarantee that such a God was within Hobbes’s intentions. Complete understanding of what was meant by the text died in 1679 with its author. I have not attempted in this essay to attribute ideas to Hobbes that may not have been his, but simply to give his argument coherency. Hobbes’s status as a giant in the history of ideas is secured regardless of the role God plays in Leviathan, but I believe that the interpretation laid out above must be considered seriously if Hobbes is to be saved from a number of embarrassing philosophical blunders.

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