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HOBBS ON EVIL

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Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) is best-known as one of the preeminent theorists of the modern state. In his political writings he defends obedience to undivided and absolute sovereignty as the only solution to human conflict and war, arguing that only if the civil sovereign has overwhelming power to bend the will of each citizen can a catastrophe be avoided. As radical as they are contentious, few of his readers have been willing to accept his views without reservation. Yet, they are difficult to ignore. He inventively incorporates commonly held views and aspects of the views of his opponents, and he makes a concerted effort, over several decades, to place his politics in a systematic philosophy that includes metaphysics, natural philosophy, and what we would today call psychology. The result is a tightly argued wide-ranging philosophical system. This is also the reason why a handbook on evil should include a chapter on Hobbes. At several moments, he contributes to the conceptual history of evil by showing how evil must be understood to fit with his unconventional political and philosophical commitments. In this chapter I provide an overview organized primarily around two of those moments.

First, Hobbes tries to undermine the traditional natural law position that identifies God's command as an independent standard to which the civil sovereign can be held to account. Hobbes maintains that individuals owe virtually unlimited obedience to their earthly sovereign in both temporal and spiritual matters, regardless of the content of the civil law. This means that citizens commit a sin or culpable evil then and only then when they violate the command of the civil sovereign. However, Hobbes builds this positivist edifice on a natural law foundation. Crucially, he remains committed to the principle that "Subjects owe to Sovereigns simple Obedience in all things wherein their obedience is not repugnant to the Lawes of God" (L 31.1: 554; also EL 2.6.1: 144–5). The arguments squaring these two positions provide a framework explaining what must be condemned as evil in civil and religious life.

Second, Hobbes develops a necessitarian and materialist metaphysics that rules out the existence of free will and commits him to maintaining that God is the cause of all evil in the world. In a long-running debate with the Anglican theologian Bishop John Bramhall, Hobbes spends considerable energy on showing the compatibility of these positions with Christian piety and the justifiability of ordinary practices of praise, blame, and punishment. I turn to these arguments, which provide further insight in Hobbes's thoughts on the nature of evil, in the last section of the paper. First, I start by outlining Hobbes's conception of natural law as means to avoid death as the chief natural evil, and his conception of sin in temporal and spiritual matters.

Evil in moral philosophy

In this section I show that Hobbes conceives of morality, or natural law, as principles dictating the means to avoid the greatest natural evil – death. From the outset, Hobbes is strongly opposed to teleological accounts of human flourishing. In his works dealing with natural philosophy and metaphysics, and most extensively in *De Corpore* (1655), Hobbes defends a materialist and necessitarian ontology. He equates being with matter, thus ruling out the existence of immaterial substances, and denies that bodies have properties besides extension and motion (DCo 8.24: 118; see Duncan 2005). All motion is caused necessarily by the local motion of other bodies, in a long chain of causes going back to a first cause, “the eternal cause of all things, God Almighty” (DCo 9.5: 122–3; LN: 20). On the basis of this ontology he maintains that scientific explanations must not venture beyond considering material and efficient causality. In particular he denies that we can find final causes or purposes in nature, and teleological explanations are therefore never genuinely explanatory (DCo 30.2: 509–10; L 2.1: 26).

This is also true for moral philosophy, the “Science of what is *Good*, and *Evill*” (L 15.40, p.242). Hobbes does not deny that humans have purposes. They evidently pursue things they find desirable and avoid things they consider harmful. However, he suggests, we can fully explain such behavior in terms of imperceptible motions of the inner organs of the human body (DCo 10.7: 131–2). In *The Elements of Law* (1640) he develops a materialistic psychology along these lines, which he also adopts with few changes in *Leviathan* (1651, Latin ed. 1668), generally considered the most mature exposition of his moral and political philosophy. When a person perceives something as good and desirable, he argues in these works, this is ultimately nothing but some corporeal motion in the heart, an “appetite,” that may cause the person to pursue it if no other motion prevents it. Similarly, he suggests that practical deliberation consists in the succession of such appetites and aversions, and that an act of the will is the last of the appetites that causes the person to act (L 6.5, p.80; L 6.49, p.90). This psychology reduces all intentionality and purpose exhibited in the thoughts and actions of individuals to mechanical motions in their bodies. This, Hobbes concludes, rules out the existence of a “*Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,)” or “*Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,)” for humans (L 11.1: 150). Humans have no purpose by virtue of their nature, except to pursue the things they happen to desire (L 6.58: 96).

Hobbes’s treatment of human flourishing, prompted by his mechanistic ontology, is exemplary of his commitment to the agent-relativity of value. Nothing is good or evil in itself; things are always only good or evil *for* someone. As Hobbes observes,

these words of Good, Evill . . . are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves.

(L 6.7: 80–82; also EL: 1.7.3: 29;
DH 11.4: 47; DCv 14.17: 162)

While the agent-relativity of value is a fundamental feature of Hobbes’s treatment of evil, he nevertheless aims to establish a number of certain and universal principles of morality. He does so by holding that death is, generally, the greatest evil that can befall humans. Even in the absence of any *summum bonum* this provides him with a foundation to establish moral principles, which he accordingly conceives as dictating the means to self-preservation (Strauss 1952: 16).

He maintains in *De Cive* (1642, 2nd ed. 1647), the most influential Latin statement of his political philosophy, that each person desires “that which is Good for him [*sibi bonum*]” and avoids “what is bad for him [*sibi malum*], and most of all the greatest of natural evils

[*malorum naturalium*], which is death” (DCv 1.7: 27; also DCv Epistle Dedicatory §10: 6; EL 1.14.6: 71). On this basis he attributes to each individual, in the absence of political institutions, the natural right to do anything necessary to preserve themselves. Conversely, reason dictates the necessary means to self-preservation. Morality, or the laws of nature, consists in those dictates of reason (DCv 1.8: 27; DCv 2.1: 33). Commentators have observed that Hobbes is in *Leviathan* less clearly committed to a self-interested psychology (e.g., McNeilly 1966). Where he had previously claimed that individuals necessarily pursue their *own* good, in *Leviathan* he claims more moderately that the object of their desire “is principally their owne conservation” (L 13.3: 190). Commentators also note that he admits that individuals do not always, in fact, shun death as the greatest evil: they may pursue honor and revenge in a way that lead them to willingly risk their lives, or they may suffer pains that lead them to “number death among the goods” (DH 6.6: 48). Nevertheless, he remains in *Leviathan* of the opinion that natural law is a set of dictates of reason “by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life” (L 14.3: 198). Since he takes natural law to be “Immutable and Eternal” (L 15: 240), he must have remained committed to the position that our own death is the chief evil, providing an agent-relative and self-interested foundation of morality (Murphy 2000: 45).

There are two complications to this account of Hobbes’s moral philosophy as means to avoid a premature death as greatest evil. First, Hobbes holds that eternal damnation is a worse fate than death in this life (Murphy 2000: 50; Olsthoorn 2014). The danger of ignoring one’s duties toward God, he recognizes, may lead to evils in the afterlife that form a “greater punishment than the *death of Nature*” (L38.1: 698; in DCv 1.7: 27 he speaks of death as the greatest of “natural evils”). He therefore must show that his account of the obligations of subjects in a Hobbesian commonwealth are consistent with their salvation. Second, Hobbes notes that the laws of nature, which are “but Conclusions” regarding our self-preservation, can be properly be called laws when we conceive them as “delivered in the word of God” (L 15: 242; also DCv 3.33: 56–7). Conceived as the word of God, the laws of nature must be obeyed in order to avoid damnation and secure entry into the kingdom of Heaven. So conceived, however, they only give a partial account of our obligations since they provide only our obligations in temporal matters. In spiritual matters (“things which have their foundation in the authority and office of CHRIST and could not be known if CHRIST had not taught them” [DCv 17.14: 216]), our obligations must be derived from revealed religion. For this reason, I first outline Hobbes’s conception of sin or moral evil in temporal matters, and afterwards I turn to his conception of sin in spiritual matters.

Sin and temporal obligations

In this section I outline Hobbes’s changing conception of sin or moral evil in *temporal* matters. In his political works his primary aim is to defend the view that individuals have, with some specific exceptions deriving from an inalienable right to resist threats to their life, an unlimited obligation of obedience (Hobbes calls it “simple obedience”) to their civil sovereign. He also aims to deny that natural law, outside the civil state, imposes meaningful restrictions on permissible action, so as to explain why life in that state is rife with conflict and should be avoided at all costs. Hobbes’s treatment of sin in temporal matters can be understood as an attempt to simultaneously satisfy both aims.

In the first edition of *De Cive* (1642) he distinguishes between two conceptions of sin, one of a wide and one of narrow signification. In the wide signification, any action against reason is considered a “sin [*peccatum*]” in the “broadest sense” regardless of whether the act would be considered immoral or merely imprudent. There is no distinction between actions “contrary to

the law, as to wreck someone else's house" and actions "not contrary to law, as to build one's own house upon sand" (DCv 14.16: 162). (Note that this includes irrational actions that do not frustrate the end of self-preservation.) All such foolishness is equally sinful. In the narrow signification, actions are sinful when they are against reason and additionally are *blameworthy* and form a "culpable evil [*malum culpae*]." Hobbes introduces the agent-relativity of our judgments of evil to defend the claim that we can only reach an agreement on what should be regarded as culpable by deferring to civil law. As he explains, individuals disagree about what contributes to their preservation and must be considered good or evil; they will tend to "regard as *evil* [*malos*], i.e. to *find fault with* [*culpam attribuere*], those who are a source of *evil* for themselves" (DCv 14.17: 162). Therefore we must leave it to the state to determine what actions are against reason and therefore culpable. The function of the civil law is to settle for everyone what should be considered "good and evil" (DCv Preface §8: 9–10; also DCv 6.9: 79; DCv 12.1: 131–2). Once the commonwealth is established we must no longer judge for ourselves what is good and evil but let the reason of the commonwealth stand for our own. Sin, in the strict signification, is "what anyone does, fails to do, says or wills contrary to *the reason of the commonwealth*, i.e. against the laws" (DCv 14.17:162–6. *The Elements* does not contain a treatment of sin, but it does include a similar point about the impossibility of having a standard of reason in the state of nature [EL 2.10.8: 188–9; EL 2.6.13: 158]). On this account of sin, we commit a culpable evil when we pursue what reason – that is the state – identifies as evil, that is, as contrary to our self-preservation.

It is impossible to sin in the strict signification by violating natural law in the state of nature. Violations of natural law must be classified as sinning in the "broadest sense" and as acts of mere imprudence. This is consistent with Hobbes's account of natural right. In the state of nature, he maintains, everyone has a right "to all things," (DCv 1.10: 28), which is to say that no action is prohibited. His argument for this radical position is the following. He attributes to individuals the right to do anything that reason indicates is necessary to preserve themselves. In the absence of political institutions they must decide for themselves what course of action best contributes to their preservation (DCv 1.9: 28). Since he has supposed that individuals always pursue what seems good for them (*sibi bonum*), he concludes that all actions necessary seem to the actor to contribute to their self-preservation (DCv 1.10: 28). That is why no action in the state of nature is prohibited.

A development noted by Tuck (1979: 125), Hobbes revises his view of the nature of sins against natural law in the second edition of *De Cive* (1647). In the second edition – which includes several notes that develop and occasionally amend the argument in main text – Hobbes admits that it is possible to sin in the strict sense by violating natural law. However, he does so in a way that does not meaningfully restrict individual's natural right in the state of nature. He still maintains that in absence of declared civil law the only standard of action is the "judgement of the person" acting (DCv 1.10n: 29; DCv 2.1n: 33). However, he now denies that individuals necessarily act in accordance with their best judgment of what contributes to their preservation. When they fail to do so they sin and commit a "wrong" against God (DCv 3.27n: 54; Hobbes had already proposed this position in EL 2.2.3: 120; EL 2.2.7: 121). It is impossible in the state of nature to commit a "wrong" against any "man," Hobbes admits, but this does not imply that "it is impossible in such a state to sin [*peccare*] against God or to violate the Natural laws." A person sins in this way, and commits a wrong against God, if "he claims that something contributes to his self-preservation, but does not believe that it does so" (DCv 1.10n: 28–9; also DCv 3.4n: 45; DCv 12.2: 132; DCv 3.28: 54; EL 2.6.12: 157). What matters, in one's relation to God, is that one *sincerely* believes that one acts in accordance with natural law. On the revised view, then, Hobbes allows that individuals commit culpable evils in the natural state when they act against their conscience. In that case they wrong God.

There are at least two reasons why Hobbes may have decided to introduce this amendment in the second edition of *De Cive*. First, it allows him to censure actions contrary to natural law by sovereigns, for instance acts of cruelty against their subjects. While such actions do not wrong citizens, and accordingly citizens have no standing to protest, they do wrong God. Although a sovereign “may do so rightly, i.e. without inflicting a wrong on himself, he will not do so justly [*juste*], that is, without violating natural laws and wronging God” (DCv 6.13n: 83; QLNC: 135). Second, it may help him to characterize treason as a culpable evil. Hobbes argues that treason or the “crime of lèse-majesté” (DCv 14.20–21: 165–6) is a violation of natural not civil law. It is the renunciation of the agreement to obey the sovereign and so a renunciation of all civil laws together. “This evil [*malum*],” Hobbes observes, “is more serious than any single sin [*peccato*] as constant sinning is more serious than a *single* sin” (DCv 14.20: 165). Both immoral acts by the sovereign and treason by citizens are actions that Hobbes wants to censure, not merely as imprudent but as culpable evil. This requires him to admit that it possible to sin in the strict sense by violating natural law.

There are, however, two difficulties with the resulting view that Hobbes can be understood to resolve in *Leviathan*. First, the amendment suggests that Hobbes now thinks that sins in the strict signification are always *relational* wrongs. Violations of natural law (characterized as acts contrary to one’s conscience) in the state of nature are wrongs against God. Violations of the civil law, analogously, are wrongs against the commonwealth (DCv 3.3: 44) and “against right” (DCv 12.2: 133). By violating the civil law we violate the original agreement by which we have transferred our rights to the sovereign, thereby wronging the commonwealth (DCv 3.4: 45; DCv 1.10n: 28). If this is what Hobbes has in mind, though, it is inconsistent with the original argument for the view that violations of the civil law are a culpable evil. On the original view sins are not relational wrongs: we sin when we violate the civil law because we do not, on the authoritative judgment of the commonwealth, pursue our self-preservation. On the amended view, however, violations of the civil law are a sin *because they are violations of the civil law*, since in so doing we wrong the commonwealth.

Second, Hobbes would presumably want to maintain that wrongs against the commonwealth are always also sins against God. This could be so because “natural law commands that all civil laws be observed in virtue of the natural law which forbids the violation of agreements” (DCv 14.10: 159). The difficulty, however, is that Hobbes holds that one only sins against God if one acts against one’s conscience. Accordingly, actions violating the civil law that one mistakenly *but sincerely* thinks are required by natural law, are not sinful. It is true that Hobbes argues that civil laws can safely be obeyed since the sovereign, not the citizen, sins if the civil law requires an action contrary to God’s laws (DCv 12.2: 132–3; for doubts about that argument see Murphy 1995). However, this does not establish the converse claim: that citizens cannot safely disobey the civil law, even if they conscientiously judge it to be necessary.

In *Leviathan* Hobbes addresses both problems. He removes all traces of the original argument from the first edition of *De Cive*, and introduces a distinction between “sins” and “crimes” to capture more clearly the distinct relational wrongs one may commit (against God and against the commonwealth). He defines a “crime” as “a sinne, consisting in the Committing . . . of that which the Law forbiddeth, or the Omission of what it hath commanded” (L 27.2: 452). This definition leaves undetermined whether a crime is a violation of natural or civil law. He clarifies that crimes are violations of civil law when he observes that crimes are sins “whereof man may accuse another” (L 27.2: 454) and notes that “the Civill Law ceasing, Crimes cease: for there being no other Law remaining, but that of Nature, there is no place for Accusation” (L 27.3: 454). On this definition of a crime, then, it is impossible that that one violates the civil law

without sin, even if one – wrongly but sincerely – holds the view that the crime is necessary for ones preservation and thus demanded by natural law.

Hobbes provides two related reasons why crimes, violations of civil law, are the appropriate object of accusation by fellow humans. First, as violations of the civil law, crimes are actions *without right*. That is why “there is an Injury done” and those injured have standing to hold the violator to account in a court of law (L 27.54: 480; also L 42.111: 900). Second, crimes are *actions*, not merely intentions, contrary to the civil law. For intentions that “never appear by any outward act, there is no place for accusation” (L 27.2: 454; also L 27.3: 454). We have no knowledge of the intentions of others, which accordingly “cannot be argued by a humane Judge.” However, forming the intention to transgress civil law is a “sinne, though it never appeare in Word, or Fact: for God that seeth the thoughts of man, can lay it to his charge” (L 27.2: 452–4).

In *Leviathan* Hobbes defines sin as “not onely a Transgression of a Law, but also any Contempt of the Legislator,” where contempt of the legislator includes having an “the *Intention*, or purpose to transgresse” (L 27.1: 452). Again, he leaves undetermined whether a sin, qua sin, is a violation of natural or civil law. Since intentions to violate a civil law are sins by virtue of God’s standing to accuse the person, sins must be (also) violations of natural law. As in *De Cive* he maintains that violations of natural law wrong God. He notes this when emphasizing that sovereigns who violate natural law do not wrong their citizens. He compares such actions against natural law – he now calls them “iniquitous” actions – with David’s murder of Uriah. Though David’s action was “against the law of Nature, as being contrary to Equitie . . . yet it was not an Injurie to *Uriah*; but to *God* . . . because *David* was *Gods* Subject; and prohibited all Iniquitie by the law of Nature” (L 21.7: 330). A sovereign never acts without right in relation to his subjects but he may act without right in relation to God.

In the second edition of *De Cive*, Hobbes had claimed that only acts against conscience are sinful. He may appear to be committed to the same position in *Leviathan* when he maintains that, in respect to the natural law, “every man being his own Judge, and accused onely by his own Conscience, and cleared by the Uprightnesse of his own Intention,” therefore, when “his Intention is Right, his fact is no Sinne: if otherwise, his fact is Sinne; but not Crime” (L 27.3: 454). He also maintains that in conscience – the “Court of Naturall justice” – “God raigneth” (L 30.30: 552; also L30.1: 520). This position, as noted above, exposes Hobbes to the objection that individuals who sincerely believe that they should violate natural law do not commit a sin in doing so. In *Leviathan* he responds by emphasizing that the law of nature is “eternal” and therefore that the “Violation of Covenants, Ingratitude, Arrogance, and all Facts contrary to any Morall virtue, can never cease to be Sinne” (L27.3: 454; also EL 1.17.14: 94). Anyone who has “attained to the use of Reason” is *supposed* to know what the law of nature requires (L 27.4: 454–6). Indeed, “only Children, and Madmen are Excused from offences against the Law Naturall” (L 27.23: 468). By emphasizing that ignorance of natural law is itself culpable, Hobbes can characterize as sinful, violations of natural law in accordance with conscience.

Sin and spiritual obligations

I now turn to Hobbes’s treatment of culpable evil in *spiritual* matters. Hobbes’s primary aim is, as noted, to defend the view that individuals owe simple obedience to their sovereign. This obligation is grounded in the fundamental natural law requiring the avoidance of a premature death. Hobbes, however, admits that damnation in the afterlife is a worse fate than death in this life. The damned, on his eccentric reading of Scripture, are subjected to a lifetime of “Torments of Hell” before being condemned to a “second Death” that lasts for eternity (L 38.13: 716; also

AB: 87–92). He therefore admits without reservation that “if the command [of a sovereign] be such, as cannot be obeyed, without being damned to Eternall Death, then it were madnesse to obey it” (L 43.2: 928–30; also DCv 18.1: 235; DCv 6.11: 80; EL 2.6.5: 147). A full defense of his political philosophy, then, requires showing what is necessary for salvation and entry into the “Kingdom of heaven” (DCv 18.2: 235) and why this is consistent with obedience to earthly sovereigns. In this section I outline this argument.

Hobbes’s basic strategy remains the same in all iterations of his political philosophy. He maintains that two things are necessary for salvation. The first is “*Faith in Christ*” (L 43.3: 930), a sincere belief that “Jesus is the Messiah, that is, the Christ” (EL 2.6.6: 148, also DCv 18.6: 239; L 43.11: 938). On the basis of a number of Scriptural arguments, many of which his contemporaries would have found unpersuasive,¹ he concludes that this is “[t]he (*Vnum Necessarium*) Onely Article of Faith” necessary to salvation and to entry into the kingdom of Heaven (L 43.11: 938). The second is obedience to God’s laws, “which are the laws of the kingdom of heaven, in which consisteth Christian obedience” (EL 2.6.10: 155; also DCv 18.3: 235; L 43.3: 930). God’s laws, as already noted, are the laws of nature and require that one always obey one’s civil sovereign (L 43.5: 932). By obedience, Hobbes notes, he means not actual obedience but the sincere attempt to obey. If God required unfailing obedience to the law no person would be saved, Hobbes argues, since “wee are all guilty of disobedience to Gods Law, not onely originally in Adam, but also actually by our own transgressions” (L 43.3: 930). This is precisely why we must have faith in Christ and why obedience to the law is no sufficient condition for salvation. Our faith in Christ is rewarded by remission of our sins (L 43.3: 930; DCv 18.3: 236; DCv 18.12: 244; EL 2.6.10: 155; although God only forgives the sins of those who repent and obey [DCv 18.3, p.236]).

Faith in Christ and obedience to the laws, then, are required for salvation. Is simple obedience to one’s earthly sovereign consistent with one’s salvation? The answer is straightforwardly affirmative if one is subject to a Christian sovereign. A Christian sovereign would never compel subjects to renounce the faith that is required for their salvation. “As long as sovereigns profess to be Christians,” Hobbes submits, “they cannot command their subjects to deny Christ or to treat him contemptuously” (DCv 18.13: 245; also EL 2.6.11: 157). In a Christian commonwealth, in other words, it is impossible that the demands of the civil law are inconsistent with the demands of God (L 43.22: 952).

Things are more complicated when one is subject to a non-Christian ruler. Hobbes’s answer in this case reveals a development in his thinking about the nature of spiritual obligations. In both *The Elements* and *De Cive*, Hobbes maintains that Christian faith, as condition for salvation, requires its public profession. Besides atheism Hobbes classifies idolatry and apostasy – the “renunciation of the article, that *Jesus is the Christ*” – as treason against God (DCv 18.11: 244). If an infidel sovereign compels subjects to “renounce” (EL 2.6.11: 157) their faith, they cannot do so without committing a sin that endangers their entry into the kingdom of Heaven. That is why Hobbes admits that Christians may rightfully and without sin *forbear* obedience to commands to commit apostasy or idolatry, even if it means they die as martyrs in apparent contravention of the moral law requiring self-preservation. It cannot be expected that “a man should perform that, for which he believeth in his heart he shall be damned eternally” (EL 2.6.14: 159). In *De Cive*, Hobbes clarifies that this exception to the requirement of simple obedience to one’s earthly sovereign does not justify violent resistance. “Are princes to be resisted when they are not to be obeyed?” asks Hobbes rhetorically. “Of course not! This is contrary to the civil agreement. What then must one do? Go to Christ through Martyrdom” (DCv 18.13: 245). One must accept the punishment the civil sovereign has in store for those unwilling to “deny Christ or to treat him contemptuously” (DCv 18.13: 245). Indeed, Hobbes points out, someone who really believes with “his whole heart that JESUS IS THE CHRIST” will “long to be dissolved

and to be with Christ” (DCv 18.13: 245; a reference to Philippians 1.23 where Paul says that he has a “desire to depart, and to be with Christ” See McClure 2016: 96).

In *Leviathan* Hobbes no longer maintains that the public profession of faith in Christ is a necessary condition for salvation. He now writes that “*Faith*, it is internal, and invisible; They have the licence that Naaman had, and need not put themselves into danger for it” (L 43.23: 954). He had from the outset argued that God is concerned with individuals’ righteousness in conscience when it comes to obedience to the law. He now increases the coherence of his theory by maintaining the same for the requirement of having faith. If one is required to publicly denounce one’s faith under an infidel sovereign it is not a sin as long as one sincerely believes that Jesus is the Christ. Public worship and professions of faith are “but an externall thing” (L 42.11: 784). The view that idolatry and apostasy are no obstacle to salvation requires an idiosyncratic reading of Scripture. Hobbes draws on the story of Naaman, who converted to the “God of Israel” while publicly worshipping the “Idol Rimmon,” as required by his Syrian sovereign. While “he denied the true God in effect, as much as if he had done with his lips,” Hobbes argues that the verse shows that the prophet Elisha granted him this liberty by saying that “*the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing*” (L 42.11: 784, also AB: 48).

Hobbes’s readers are very skeptical of this argument, which may explain why he was initially hesitant to defend it. Thomas Tenison objects that Hobbes misunderstands “the Faith of the Gospel, which is not complete, unless the outward profession answereth to the inward act of assent” (Tenison 1670: 199), a mistake that Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, calls a “monstrous Impiety” (Clarendon 1676: 250). John Whitehall objects that this one passage is too slender a textual basis for such a controversial doctrine, “for the Prophet’s bidding *Naaman* go in peace might be an Error in the Prophet” (Whitehall 1679: 63). In the Appendix of the Latin *Leviathan* Hobbes nevertheless refuses to change his position. He asks if the prophet, by declaring to Naaman, “Go in peace,” may mean to be “saying goodbye” rather than giving license to Naaman’s idolatry, and answers in the negative. In the passage “those words cannot be understood in any way other than as a permission” and he references the Nicene Council in support of his view (LLA 3: 1239–41).

His changing views on the nature of faith also impact his assessment of martyrdom. Where he had in *De Cive* explicitly endorsed martyrdom, in *Leviathan* his stance is more equivocal. He still permits disobedience, saying that if individuals decide to disobey the civil sovereign “they ought to expect their reward in heaven and not complain of their Lawfull Sovereign; much lesse make warre upon him” (L 43.23: 954; L 45.28: 1038). However, he now notes that a true martyr is a “Witnesse of the Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah” and therefore only those who were instructed directly by Christ to profess their belief openly and gave their lives for it could be properly called martyrs (L 42.12: 786). Those who disobey the civil sovereign merely because they are asked to renounce their faith are “not obliged to suffer death . . . because being not called thereto, tis not required at his hands; nor ought hee to complain, if he loseth the reward he expectedth from those that never set him on work” (L 42.14: 788). Hobbes’s assessment of martyrdom in *Leviathan*, as response to the rule of an infidel sovereign, then, is ambiguous; by disobeying their lawful sovereign they do not just risk dying a natural death but also forgoing eternal felicity (Chadwick 2018).

Free will, moral evil, and God’s omnipotence

I now turn to consider the implications of Hobbes’s ontology for his treatment of the nature of evil. While he is from the outset committed to denying the existence of “free will,” it is only when he becomes embroiled in a long-running intellectual dispute with Bishop John

Bramhall (1594–1663) that he considers in *Of Liberty and Necessity* (1645, published 1654) and *The Questions of Liberty Necessity and Chance* (1656) the philosophical and theological implications of his materialistic-necessitarianism. Hobbes does not deny that we can attribute freedom to individuals; they are free when they are unconstrained by external impediments to act as they want (LN § 29: 38, also QLNC: 273–4; L 21.2: 324). Neither does he deny that individuals can act voluntarily; they act voluntarily when their action follows, or is informed by, their will or choice (LN § 25: 37). What he denies is that their will or choice itself is voluntary, that they have the capacity to determine their own will or, in other words, have “*Free-will*” (L 21.2: 324, also QLNC: 143). Their will, which is ultimately but a physical motion in the body, is determined by necessary antecedent causes as any other motion in the universe (LN § 30: 38).

Bishop Bramhall raises several philosophical and theological objections to this form of compatibilism, based on the traditional view that individuals are the appropriate object of moral approbation and blame only by virtue of having free will. He thinks that Hobbes can defend his account of human freedom only by destroying the very foundation of morality and Christian faith. I discuss the philosophical and the theological issues in turn, starting with the former.

Bramhall is persuaded that by denying freedom of the will Hobbes is no longer justified in attributing to individuals culpable evils. Hobbes in the first instance invokes the agent-relativity of value to defend the appropriateness of such judgments. Why do we blame a person who was necessitated to steal? “I answer,” responds Hobbes, “because th’y please us not” (QLNC: 39). There is in this sense, he admits, no distinction between blaming a person for having sinned and blaming fire for laying waste to a house, although in the former but not the latter case would we “seek to be revenged” (QLNC: 40). Bramhall retorts that when we blame a person we are concerned with a specific kind of evil, namely the “moral evil of an action,” which consists in “the bad use of liberty” (QLNC: 130), when individuals freely act against right reason or the moral law. That is why we admonish those with the use of reason, “men of understanding,” but not “fools, children, or madmen,” because the former but not the latter “have the use of reason, and true liberty, with a dominion over their own actions” (QLNC: 144). Hobbes in turn replies by invoking his formal definition of a sin as violation of the law and a consequentialist argument about the appropriateness of blaming those who have the capacity to reason. We admonish “men of understanding,” he observes, because their rationality allows them to change their behavior. They, unlike fools and madmen, can come to see the error of their ways (QLNC: 145). Additionally, moral blame is not, as Bramhall suggests, “*from the bad use of liberty*, but from disobedience to the laws,” since to say “a thing is good, is to say it is as I, or another would wish, or as the State would have it, or according to the Law of the Land” (QLNC: 146–7). In this answer, Hobbes returns to his position from the first edition of *De Cive*, where he had maintained that sins are actions aimed at what is evil (i.e., that displease us) according to right reason, with right reason being the judgment of the state (i.e., the civil law). One may wonder if Hobbes would have been able to provide a similarly persuasive reply for his mature, relational, account of sin from *Leviathan*.

Hobbes’s defense of the appropriateness of punishment for sins follows a very similar structure. Bramhall objects that Hobbes is committed to a view that renders civil laws “unjust and tyrannical” since the laws “prescribe things absolutely impossible in themselves to be done, and punish men for not doing them” (QLNC: 118). Hobbes responds, first, by reiterating his account of justice. Laws are just, simply by virtue of the fact that they are the commands of the civil sovereign in whom all citizens have “consenteth to the placing of the Legislative Power” (QLNC: 133; also QLNC: 115, 138). Second, Hobbes reminds Bramhall of his consequentialist, forward-looking justification of penalties. In his political works Hobbes had as one of the laws of nature derived the principle that in punishment (“retribution of Evil for Evil”)

(L 15.19: 232) one ought only to “consider future good, not past evil” (DCv 3.11: 49; also L 15.19: 232; L 28.6: 484). Penalties are justified because and insofar as they have a corrective and preventative function (QLNC: 115–16). Revenge for the sake of revenge is without purpose and only apt to increase the likelihood of renewed war contrary to the fundamental law of nature (DCv 3.11: 49). Bramhall, Hobbes objects, has a retributivist account of punishment; he:

taketh punishment for a kind of revenge, and can never therefore agree with me that [I] take it for nothing else but for a correction, or for an example, which hath for end the *framing* and *necessitating* of the Will to *virtue*.

(QLNC: 134)

The enforcement of laws prevents individuals from committing sins, and is so a “cause of Justice” (QLNC: 116).

Finally, Hobbes notes that the sovereign is not subject to any civil law and acts with an undiminished right of nature. The sovereign may inflict harm on a subject in a way that is contrary to natural law, and therefore without right and unjust in relation to God, but it cannot be unjust in relation to the subject (QLNC: 116; also L 28.2: 482). Again, Bramhall is wrong to complain that the law that sanctions punishment could be unjust because it allows for punishments of crimes or sins that were necessitated, since the sovereign punishes by natural right. While Hobbes accordingly shows that his moral and political philosophy provide him with resources to counter Bramhall’s objections – by foregrounding his idiosyncratic definitions of terms like justice and sin – it is difficult to see how Hobbes can defend the contractualist basis of the commonwealth, and the practice of rights transfers, in the face of his materialistic–determinism, except by definitional fiat (Riley 1973).

I now turn to the second set of objections, related to the theological implications of Hobbes’s views. In the theological context the most serious issue confronting him, as a scandalized Bramhall observes, is that he “makes the first cause, that is, God Almighty, to be the introducer of all evil, and sin into the world” (QLNC: 84; also QLNC: 174–5). Hobbes is intent on defending this claim while denying the heretical implications that Bramhall thinks follow from it, namely, first, that God’s introduction of evil in the world should be reprimanded as itself sinful, and, second, that individuals, whose actions are necessitated by God, are innocent and may not justly be subject to God’s punishment (QLNC: 85). In doing so he emphasizes the similarities between his view and those of Reformation theologians such as Luther and Calvin.²

Hobbes argues, first, that God can never sin. Bramhall thinks that if an evil action is necessitated we should blame God, not the person, as ultimate cause of the sin (QLNC: 223). Hobbes responds by denying the equivalence of causing a sin and sinning itself (QLNC: 235). The argument is based on his conception of culpable evil as actions against the law. He admits that God has ordered the world in such a way that a person may be necessarily caused to commit an act against the law. However, since God “is not subject to some higher Power,” and thus not subject to any law, he himself cannot sin (QLNC: 234–45; also QLNC: 105; LN § 12: 23). Additionally, Hobbes denies that God lacks the right to anything. In *De Cive*, he had introduced the view that God’s right to rule derives from his omnipotence seemingly to explain the non-contractual basis of God’s sovereignty (DCv 15.5: 173). In response to Bramhall’s objections, he employs it to deny that God’s actions can ever be censured as sinful or unjust. “Power irresistible justifies all actions,” and accordingly God “must needs be just in all his actions” (LN § 12: 22–3; also QLNC: 87–9). That is why the mere fact that God does something “makes it just and consequently no sin” (LN § 12: 23; QLNC: 79, 105; LL 46: 1091–3).

Second, Hobbes defends the claim that, even if God causes all actions, a person can be accused of culpable evil. Bramhall objects that Hobbes makes God “the Author of all the defects and evils which are in the world” (QLNC: 174–5). Hobbes responds by noting that, if God really is the author of the sins of individuals, he must have authorized or given warrant to those sins. This response is prompted by his account of authorization and personification in chapter 16 of *Leviathan*. There he argues that a person is the “AUTHOR” of an action when the person is represented in the action, either because the person represents himself, or because he authorizes and is represented by another who accordingly “is said to beare his Person, or act in his name” (L16.3: 244). He denies that we have reason to think that God has authorized us to act in his name. Nowhere in Scripture, “which is all the warrant we have from God,” do we find an authorization to commit sins. Therefore, Hobbes concludes, “God is the cause (not the Author) of all Actions” (QLNC: 175; also QLNC: 105–6; LL 46: 1091–3). Furthermore, he notes, if it were the case that God did authorize an action against the law, it would no longer be sinful (QLNC: 106). He has two reasons for saying this. First, natural law is the command of God, and if God authorizes an action contrary to his own command it cannot be understood that the law was his command in the first place. Second, even if it were, in authorizing the action God (not the individual) is now the author of the action, and God, as we have seen, is not subject to any law and therefore cannot sin.

The resulting view gives rise to the objection that God nevertheless causes evil action that he subsequently punishes with eternal damnation. Bramhall dismisses this conception of God as dishonorable, since it makes God a “Tyrant” who imposes laws on his subjects that they are unable to obey (QLNC: 85; also QLNC: 13, 87, 91). Hobbes has what should now be a familiar response: God’s omnipotence is a sufficient justification for the punishment. God’s right to punish sinners is not formally dependent on the sinfulness of the action. Even if God punishes a person “because he sinned, one must not say that he could not justly have afflicted or killed him even if he had not sinned” (DCv 15.5: 173; DCv 15.6: 174; but see DCv 4.9: 61–2, where Hobbes suggests that the “only purpose” God had in introducing “eternal punishment” was “that men should fear to sin in the future”). This means that God may indeed “command a thing openly, and yet hinder the doing of it, without injustice” (QLNC: 79); he may demand that individuals act in accordance with natural law while simultaneously cause them to violate it. He does all this with right and it is “no dishonour to believe that God is a greater Tyrant than ever was in the world; for he is the King of all Kings” (QLNC: 175).

Conclusion

Hobbes’s engagement with the nature of evil is wide-ranging. His political preoccupations lead him to consider the nature of evil both in temporal and spiritual matters, arguing that if citizens obey their civil sovereign, they do not sin nor risk eternal damnation. He emphasizes death as the chief evil that can befall individuals in this life, and maintains that sinning consists in actions that frustrate the end of self-preservation, either because they are in contravention of the civil law or because the person acting does not believe that they contribute to their self-preservation. This position, he argues, is consistent with revealed religion, since the Bible teaches that salvation requires only a sincere belief that Jesus is the Christ and obedience to the laws of the civil sovereign. In the debate with Bishop John Bramhall, Hobbes confronts the question whether his treatment of evil is consistent with a denial of free will, as entailed by the metaphysical commitments that had formed the bedrock of his moral philosophy from the outset. It is in this context that the inflammatory implications – both philosophical and theological – of his treatment of evil and sin are most clearly in view. It is also the location where he is perhaps most

audacious, attributing the capacity to commit culpable evil to individuals who lack free will, and describing God as a “Tyrant” who, by virtue of his omnipotence, can do no wrong. In doing so, Hobbes shows himself to be a formidable thinker whose views, however disagreeable, demand the close attention of the reader that chances upon them.

Abbreviations of cited works of Hobbes

- AB Hobbes, T. (1682) *An Answer to a Book Published by Dr Bramhall. . . Called The Catching of the Leviathan*, London: W. Crooke at the Green Dragon.
- DCo Hobbes, T. (1839) *De Corpore*, trans. as *Elements of Philosophy. The First Section, Concerning Body*, in W. Molesworth (ed.) *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, vol. I, London: John Bohn.
- DCv Hobbes, T. (1998) *De Cive*, trans. as *On the Citizen*, ed. R. Tuck and M. Silverthorne, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DH Hobbes, T. (1991) *De Homine*, trans. in *Man and Citizen*, ed. B. Gert, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- EL Hobbes, T. (1969) *The Elements of Law*, ed. F. Tönnies, London: Frank Cass.
- L Hobbes, T. (2012), *Leviathan*, in N. Malcolm (ed.) *Leviathan: The English and Latin Texts*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- LL Hobbes, T. (2012), Latin *Leviathan*, in N. Malcolm (ed.) *Leviathan: The English and Latin Texts*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- LLA Hobbes, T. (2012), “Appendix to *Leviathan*,” in N. Malcolm (ed.) *Leviathan: The English and Latin Texts*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- LN Hobbes, T. (1999), “Of Liberty and Necessity,” in V. Chappell (ed.) *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- QLNC Hobbes, T. (1656), *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, London: Andrew Crook.

References to DCo, DCv, DH, and L are given by chapter, section and page number. References to the notes added to the second edition of DCv include “n” after the section number. References to LN are given by paragraph and page number. References to LL and LLA are given by chapter and page number.

Notes

- 1 Somos 2014: 110 concludes that “most of its hundreds of biblical interpretations are . . . conspicuously untenable and where recognised as such by Hobbes’ contemporaries.” See e.g., Tenison 1670: 207.
- 2 Some recent commentators see Hobbes as being engaged in a sincere reconstruction of a reformation theology (Overhoff 1997). Others are more skeptical, dismissing his references to reformation theologians as opportunistic and polemical (Pacchi 1989) or more moderately, as having no constitutive role to play in his philosophical development (Collins 2005: 265). As Cromartie (2018) points out, it seems indeed clear that his use of protestant positions, even if held sincerely, was aimed to support and justify to a religious audience metaphysical and political views that he was committed to for independent reasons.

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