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## Hobbes' Leviathan. The Irresistible Power of a Mortal God

No one on earth is his equal a creature without  
fear. He looks down on the highest. He is king  
over all proud beasts.

Job. 41, 24

### 0. Introduction

In different and complex ways, the philosophy and science of the XVII century moved away from the recognition of a divine authority in the interpretation of human events to an exclusively naturalistic account of this world. Hobbes has been widely regarded as the most representative figure of this process. At a time where religious beliefs were considered to be the prime motive of human behavior, Hobbes' mature work, the *Leviathan*, depicted men as egoistic calculators whose overriding concern was the pursuit of private advantage. Following this premise, Hobbes rejected the idea that politics is subordinated to the attainment of the ultimate good in spiritual life and proposed that the supreme authority in this world is a secular state whose sole end is the protection of physical life. In this vein, traditional interpreters have maintained that although half of the *Leviathan* is devoted to theological arguments, theology is either irrelevant or plays a secondary role for its central naturalistic arguments.

I will argue, against the traditional interpretation, that theological arguments are crucial to understand Hobbes' views on the foundations of political obligation and state authority. While rejecting the idea that Hobbes was essentially a moralist or a thinker deeply influenced by religion, I wish to propose that he used the scriptures and religion as part of a strategy of persuasion aimed at creating a stable political authority in a world where religious beliefs were still important components of human action. From this perspective, I contend that the cultural transformation initiated by Hobbes was not simply aiming at the rationalization of religion but, essentially, at the transformation of politics into a secularized theology.

This paper is divided into three sections. I will start by showing the limits and contradictions that Hobbes himself perceived in the construction of a political

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order merely based on self-interest and the centrality of the theological problem of pride to explain the roots of human rebellion. I then proceed to analyze the problems of a secular political order under the perspective of the sacred history and biblical interpretation that Hobbes traces in Part II and III of his work. I finally conclude by proposing a reformulation of the process of secularization of political thought in Hobbes' work.

### 1. *Pride and the theological origins of human rebellion*

At the beginning of Part III of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes states that the rights of the sovereign power and the duty of subjects of which he talked in the first half of the work, were derived "from the nature of Men, known to us by experience"<sup>1</sup>. This statement has been interpreted by authors like Gauthier as a definite proof of the independence and secondary role that biblical interpretation plays in Hobbes' political theory<sup>2</sup>. It also supports the conventional view that the *Leviathan* is a work exclusively written for the enlightenment of rational and secular men<sup>3</sup>. I think, however, that these views neglect the form and the content of the theological argument that is used in the first half of the work to explain the emergence and maintenance of political order.

Hobbes depicted men as mechanical, egoistic beings moved by "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death"<sup>4</sup>. Driven by their passions and lust for power, men find in the condition of mere nature nothing but a perpetual war of all against all. There is, however, a disposition of human nature, which, along with the desire of gain, is the most important source of conflict and anarchy: pride. Pride, also called vanity, or vainglory, is that "excessive opinion of man's own self" that makes men ambitious and perpetually inclined to compete with each other for honors, power and reputation. From pride, then, stems the most perpetual danger of civil order: disobedience and rebellion. So great an obstacle for human association is pride that, as Hobbes points out,

<sup>1</sup> *Leviathan*, edited and with an introduction by C. B. Macpherson (London: Penguin, 1985), Ch. 32, p. 409.

<sup>2</sup> See Gauthier, David, *The Logic of Leviathan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Leo Strauss is perhaps the classical representative of this perspective, for whom "the whole scheme suggested by Hobbes [is made possible] by the disenchantment of the world, by the diffusion of scientific knowledge, or by popular enlightenment." See Strauss, Leo, in *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) p. 198. A similar point is made in his *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. 9, p. 76.

“no society can be great and lasting, which begins from vain glory”<sup>5</sup>.

The problem of pride, as presented by Hobbes, has an indubitable theological origin that goes back to Saint Augustine. Pride was in Augustine the source of rebellion and evil that stood at the origins of the ‘City of Man’. For pride, says Augustine, “hates a fellowship of equality under God and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellows men, in place of God’s rule”<sup>6</sup>. Just like pride or *superbia* led to the fall of man in his vain attempt to imitate God, so is this disposition the cause of perpetual war and conflict in every human community<sup>7</sup>. What is more interesting about the analogy, however, is the lesson that Hobbes obtains from the Augustinian solution to the problem of pride. For Augustine, only the unconditional subjection to the omnipotent God is capable of arresting the pridefulness of human beings who think that their own efforts are the source of their comfort and safety. For Hobbes, instead, the solution of the problem of pride lies not in the direct subjection to God but to a secular figure of mythical proportions: “the generation of that great Leviathan, or rather to speak more reverently, of that *Mortall god*, to which we owe under the *Immortal God*, our peace and defence”<sup>8</sup>.

Given the pre-eminent role of pride as the source of war and rebellion, it is not an accident that Hobbes took from the Bible the image of the state as a Leviathan, the daunting sea monster that the Book of Job calls the “king over all proud beasts”<sup>9</sup>. As Stephen Holmes points out, Hobbes realizes that “there is no mythology more effective in attacking pride than the mythology of sin and redemption”<sup>10</sup>. Just as the repentance of the sinner in Christian theology is a necessary step toward forgiveness and salvation, so in this world is peace unattainable unless men purge themselves of the vice of pride<sup>11</sup>. For Hobbes, no repentance would take place without an omnipotent authority capable of speaking to man through the language of fear. This is the lesson, I believe, he obtained from the Book of Job. Just like

<sup>5</sup> *The Citizen*, edited and with an introduction by Bernard Gert (Cambridge: Hackett, 1991), p. 113.

<sup>6</sup> *City of God* (New York: Penguin, 1984), Book XIX, Ch. 12, p. 868.

<sup>7</sup> On the relation between Augustine’s theology and the political realism of his conception of conflict, see Niebuhr, Reinhold, “Augustine’s Political Realism”, in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (Fairfield: Kelley Publishers, 1977), pp. 119-46.

<sup>8</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 17, p. 227.

<sup>9</sup> Job, 41, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Holmes, Stephen, Introduction to *Behemoth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Also F.C. Hood (although favoring an even more direct influence of the scriptures in Hobbes’ political arguments) stresses the parallel between the Christian interpretation of the sin of pride and Hobbes’ analysis of civil obedience. See Hood, F.C., *The Divine Politics of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 175-6.

<sup>11</sup> As A. P. Martinich points out, one of the analogies between the Leviathan and God is that the civil state saves people from the imminent death lurking in the state of nature, just as God supposedly saves people from the death of sin. See *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 33.

Job obeyed the arbitrary will of God in spite of his innocence, so men should obey the sovereign without putting into question the right or justice of his commands<sup>12</sup>. The commonwealth described by Hobbes in part II of the *Leviathan* traces a perfect analogy between the sovereign and the image of an all-powerful God. Both God and the sovereign have absolute power, remain outside the law and therefore cannot act unjustly<sup>13</sup>. Fear of the omnipotent God is therefore similar to the terror by which the sovereign-the “Mortall God”-reigns.

The identification of the state with a mythical figure that resembles the power of God on earth is not a mere stylistic metaphor. The fact that Hobbes believes that theological persuasion is necessary for the existence of political order is reinforced by his theory of the social contract. According to Hobbes, in a state of nature in which there is no civil power, contracts are not reliable: “covenants without the Sword are but Words, and no strength to secure man at all”<sup>14</sup>. If that is the case, then, how can the social contract come about? How is the power that guarantees all subsequent contracts and covenants created? Hobbes seems to see in the fear of God the only means to back up contracts in the state of nature:

So that *before* the time of civil society, or in the interruption thereof by war, there is nothing can strengthen a covenant of peace agreed on against the temptations of avarice, ambition, lust or any other strong desire, but the *fear of that invisible power* which every one worships as God, and fear as a revenger of their perfidy. All therefore that can be done between two men *not subject* to civil power is to put one another to swear by the God he feareth: which swearing or oath, is a form of speech added to a promise, by which he that promiseth signifieth that unless he perform he renounced the mercy of God, or calleth to him for vengeance on himself<sup>15</sup>.

The obligation to form a covenant and create a civil government cannot be derived from self-interested calculation made by each individual. Hobbes argues that the fear of death, the *summum malum*, may be the rational motive under which men decide to leave the state of war. But given the natural diffidence created by the absence of a coercive power in the state of nature, the fear of death is also a powerful obstacle for human association. Men fearing death would not limit their rights of nature unless they have enough guarantees that the any collective agreement would be enforced. It is not a defect of reason what prevents men

<sup>12</sup> For a more general interpretation of the influence of the Book of Job in Hobbes’ theological interpretations, see, Halliday, R.J., Kenyon, Timothy and Reeve, Andrew, “Hobbes’ belief in God”, in *Political Studies*, 1983, pp. 418-33.

<sup>13</sup> See *Leviathan*, particularly, Chs. 18 and 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 17, p. 223.

<sup>15</sup> Id., Ch.14, p. 200 [my emphasis]. This passage can also be related to the idea that whereas covenants of ‘mutual trust’ are ‘void’, because “there is a fear of no performance on either part”, “covenants entered into by fear, in the condition of mere nature, are obligatory”, Ch. 14, pp. 199 and 198, respectively [my emphasis].

to act rationally in the state of nature; it is a problem of the will. Men would not renounce or limit their absolute rights of self-preservation and create a civil government unless they feared that by not doing so, they would be punished by an entity even more powerful than other men<sup>16</sup>. Hobbes suggests that in the state of nature this entity is God and in the civil state a god-like figure: the Leviathan.

The fact that men are self-interested individuals and yet unable to realize their long-term interests is the underlying theme in Hobbes' analysis of the origins and preservation of civil order. For Hobbes, men are endowed with reason, conceived as the capacity to calculate. This instrumental rationality is in principle the basis for the creation of a commonwealth and for assuring obedience to the sovereign under the permanent threat of death. Reason, however, is a slave of the passions that dominate the will. Pride and the desire for gain can always frustrate the emergence and maintenance of a peaceful political order. Only if it were possible to reproduce in the sovereign the irresistible power of an omnipotent God would it be possible to create a permanent check on pride.

## 2. *The role of the Leviathan in sacred history*

In an age still dominated by a theo-centric conception of the universe, Hobbes used religious images and theological concepts to solve the problem of how to create political power and enable the sovereign to impose his authority. But this is only half of his project. Religion plays an ambivalent role in human conduct. On the one hand, it may induce reverence toward political authority and therefore secure obedience, peace, and civil society. This is the reason why Hobbes constructed the state as an all-powerful, god-like figure. On the other, however, it may also transform men into unpredictable, superstitious beings unable to live in a peaceful state. In fact, Hobbes argues that religion and superstition arise from the same source: the "fear of powers invisible"<sup>17</sup>. This fear may be extremely subversive for a civil order when exploited by those who claim to be mediators and interpreters of the word of God on earth: the priests and the church. The aim

<sup>16</sup> A different argument on the origin of political obligation was provided by Warrender, who maintained that men enter into covenants by a moral obligation created by the natural law understood as a command of God. The problem with this interpretation is that by transforming the obligation to leave the state of nature into an objective moral duty, Warrender disengages Hobbes' nominalist account of human motivation from the origins of civil association. See, Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

<sup>17</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 6, p. 124. On the conflict in Hobbes' analysis between the model of man as a rational being, driven by a realistic fear of death and the image of an unpredictable and irrational man possessed by an imaginary fear of things invisible, see Johnston, David, *The Rhetoric of the Leviathan* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986).

of the second half of the *Leviathan*, then, is to complement the rhetorical divinization of the state with a rational critique of the theological doctrines that represent an instrument of power for the rival authorities of the state.

One of the main themes of parts III and IV of the *Leviathan* is to attack what Hobbes regarded as the most common and dangerous source of conflicts in a commonwealth: the existence of two sovereigns: civil and ecclesiastical. Opposing this doctrine, he maintains the Erastian principle according to which the church never had a commission to make laws, that priests are the sovereign's ministers and that every Christian king is the head of the church<sup>18</sup>. This doctrine, in fact, was neither new nor heterodox. It merely reproduced one of the dominant doctrines of English reformers in the XVI century. Yet, the way in which Hobbes interprets the problem of the kingdom of God in the context of sacred history also provides the rationale for an understanding of the relation between the spiritual and temporal orders that is original of his new political philosophy.

According to Hobbes, the kingdom of God upon his chosen people (that is, the "prophetic" kingdom) is an earthly kingdom in which God himself reigns through his vicars or lieutenants<sup>19</sup>. This kingdom existed in the past, when God spoke to Abraham and Moses and when Christ was sent to save man from his sins. After the resurrection of Christ, however, this kingdom ceased to exist, not to be restored until Christ's second coming at the end of history. The interpretation of God's kingdom as an authentic civil Commonwealth that will not come until the return of Christ, has important political consequences. The first, and most evident, is to undermine the claim that there is any church authorized to represent the kingdom of God in the present time<sup>20</sup>. Since the kingdom of God must be on earth-but only in the future-the logical conclusion is that there is "no other government in this life, neither of state nor religion, but temporal and it can only be represented by the civil sovereign"<sup>21</sup>. In other words, there is no separation in Hobbes between a temporal "City of Man" and a spiritual "City of God". Both are one in a Christian Commonwealth.

Hobbes' reinterpretation of the scriptures, however, does not merely pursue the subordination of ecclesiastical authorities to the sovereign. As Joshua Mitchell points out, Hobbes also wants to transform the figure of the civil sovereign into a 'viceregent' of God<sup>22</sup>. To do this, Hobbes goes back, once more, to

<sup>18</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 43, pp. 567-609.

<sup>19</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 35, p. 447.

<sup>20</sup> As Johnston points out, the target of this critique was not only the Catholic church, which claims to represent the *spiritual* union of all believers, but also the Calvinists, which claim that the *earthly* kingdom of God is already existent and that the temporal and spiritual powers must be in hands of the presbytery. See, Johnston, David, op. cit., pp. 170-1.

<sup>21</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 39, p. 499.

<sup>22</sup> See his *Not by Reason Alone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 46.

the Old Testament to find in the authority held by Abraham and Moses the justification of his unified sovereign<sup>23</sup>. Three are the most important lessons he obtains from the government that God established through his covenant with Abraham and Moses. First, since God spoke only to Abraham, all subjects to whom God has not spoken directly must receive the positive commandments of God from their sovereign. Second, no member of this kingdom could disobey the sovereign by claiming a direct revelation from God. Third, and most important, the sovereign alone has the power to determine what is and what is not the word of God<sup>24</sup>. These functions are the ones that in the present correspond to those who have the place of Abraham in a Commonwealth. Just like Abraham, the civil sovereign must be considered as the viceregent and representative of God's person on earth<sup>25</sup>.

There is, however, an important difference between the kingdom established by God among the Jews and the Christian Commonwealth represented in the Leviathan. Whereas in the past God spoke in person to his people through the authority of his vicars, we are living in an era in which God has disappeared from history and will not intervene until the restoration of his kingdom at the end of history<sup>26</sup>. Human beings who live in the interim between Christ's first appearance on earth and his return have entered, as it were, the realm of profane history. There is no prophesy in the present to make the word of God visible. Miracles, says Hobbes, now cease, and "we have no sign left, whereby to acknowledge the pretended revelations, or inspirations of any private man; nor obligation to give ear to any doctrine, farther than it is conformable to the Holy scriptures"<sup>27</sup>. In the absence of prophecy, then, the interpretation of the scriptures as the revealed word of God will replace revelation itself. But interpretation is a matter of authority, and in the present time the only authority that stands between man and the transhistorical God is the civil sovereign. He is the only power authorized to interpret the word of God and, at the same time, *represent* his person until the end of history.

Following this interpretation, the characterization of the Leviathan as a "mor-

<sup>23</sup> In the authentic religious authority of Abraham, Moses, and Christ, Hobbes finds what he calls "divine politics" as different from merely "human politics", which consists in the simple use of religion to support a purely secular authority. See *Leviathan*, Ch. 12, p. 173.

<sup>24</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 40, p. 500.

<sup>25</sup> *Leviathan*, id., p. 504.

<sup>26</sup> As Pocock points out, Hobbes' God resembles the notion of the eschatological *Deus Absconditus* of modern radical theologians. He was in direct relationship with us only when he spoke to us directly and that relationship will be restored only when he speaks to us directly again, which will be in his second kingdom, which is to come. See, Pocock, J.G.A., "Time, History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes", in *Politics, Language and Time* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 184.

<sup>27</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 32, p. 414.

tal god” and the construction of the authority of the sovereign upon the model of the omnipotent god, acquires a clearer meaning. Whereas the fear of ‘powers invisible’ may be a source of irrational and superstitious behavior and a potential danger for the commonwealth when it is exploited by authorities other than the sovereign, it could be a source of political stability if the fear of the invisible is substituted with the fear of a *visible* sovereign power which acts *as if* it were a divine power. The idea that in the present time God is absent from history provides the rationale of this interpretation. The sovereign represents the image of a God who is not present here and now and whose kingdom will not come until an unknown future. Between the past and the future, the only way to trace the existence of God is the god-like figure of the sovereign. If God’s existence is to be feared, then, it can only be feared through the power of he who has the authority to interpret his word and speak in his name.

In conclusion, Hobbes is aware that it is “not in man’s power to suppress the power of religion”<sup>28</sup>. But where religion is natural, the scriptures are not. They are a human artifact that, as such, requires interpretation. Hobbes’ reading of the scriptures has a double objective. On the one hand, he aims at destroying the subversive claim that there is any authority different from the sovereign able to determine what the word of God is and what is necessary for salvation in the other life. On the other, he attempts to reinforce the obedience to the laws by transforming the potentially superstitious fear of unknown powers into a rational fear of the visible quasi-religious powers of the sovereign. There is, however, a major problem that Hobbes must resolve in order to complete his project of unified sovereignty: the possible conflict between secular and divine sanctions.

### 3. *Salvation and the politics of death*

In a purely secular world, fear of physical death could be sufficient to convince men to curb their passions and subject themselves to a common sovereign authorized to inflict corporal punishments. But this is not how men are necessarily expected to behave if they believe that there are punishments greater than death. In this case, men could disobey the sovereign and accept corporal death if by doing so they believe to avoid eternal damnation. Fear of God’s punishments could then be a source of anarchy rather than the basis of civil obedience. As Hobbes points out, “no man can serve two masters; nor is he less, but rather more of a master, whom we are to obey for fear of damnation than he whom we obey for fear of temporal death”<sup>29</sup>. Or as Hobbes puts it in the *Leviathan*:

<sup>28</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 12, p. 179.

<sup>29</sup> *The Citizen*, Ch. 6, p. 179.



The maintenance of civil society depending on justice, and justice on the power of life and death, and other less rewards and punishments residing in them that have the power of the Commonwealth; it is impossible a Commonwealth should stand where any other than the sovereign hath a power of giving greater rewards than life, and inflicting greater punishment than death<sup>30</sup>.

One way to resolve this problem was for Hobbes to maintain that “all that is necessary to salvation is contained in two virtues, faith in Christ, and obedience to the laws”<sup>31</sup>. But this may not be enough to secure obedience in a world where the authority of the sovereign is challenged by those spiritual leaders who promise salvation as a reward for faithfulness to Christian doctrine as they interpret it. As Hobbes indicates in *Behemoth*: “As much as eternal torture is more terrible than death, so much [the people] would fear the clergy more than the King”<sup>32</sup>. A bolder step is therefore needed to secure obedience to sovereign’s commands: show that the scriptures do not provide any evidence that the soul of man is by its nature eternal nor that eternal rewards and punishments—heaven, hell or purgatory—are to be understood literally. This is one the most important points of his radical reinterpretation of the scriptures.

As Johnston points out, the novel – and potentially subversive – interpretation of the scriptures that Hobbes introduced to eliminate the possible conflict between civil and divine sanctions was the doctrine of “mortalism”<sup>33</sup>. Against the most accepted Christian interpretations, Hobbes claims that the soul is corporeal and does not have an existence apart from the body. In his view, the soul must perish with the death of the body and enjoy immortality with it only at the resurrection in the next world. This doctrine complements in part the previous discussion about the kingdom of God. Since the kingdom of God, neither temporal nor *spiritual*, exists here and now, Hobbes argues that it would be a gross mistake to believe that eternal salvation – or damnation for that matter – will take place before the millennial *regnum* of Christ is established at the end of time:

But spiritual Commonwealth there is none in this world: for it is the same thing with the kingdom of Christ; which he himself saith is not of this world, but shall be in the *next* world, at the resurrection, when they that have lived justly, and believed he was Christ, shall though they died *natural* bodies, rise *spiritual* bodies;

<sup>30</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 38, p. 485.

<sup>31</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 43, p. 610. See also, *The Citizen*, Ch. 18, p. 370.

<sup>32</sup> *Behemoth*, ed. cit., Dialogue I, pp. 14-15.

<sup>33</sup> See Johnston, David, “Hobbes’ Mortalism”, in *History of Political Thought*, Vol. X, No. 4, Winter 1989, pp. 647-663. This doctrine was not adopted in his previous works and, as Johnston points out, it was the main reason for the widespread rejection of Hobbes’ interpretation of the scriptures in the *Leviathan*. Contemporary revisions of Hobbes’ theology neglect in general the doctrine of mortalism and claim that Hobbes’ alleged atheism in his time arose merely from his attack on ecclesiastical authority. See, for instance, Eisenach, E.J., “Hobbes on Church, State and Religion”, in *History of Political Thought*, 3, no. 2 (1982), p. 223.

and then it is that our Saviour shall judge the world, and conquer his adversaries and make a spiritual commonwealth<sup>34</sup>.

Christ's first coming, according to Hobbes, did not restore eternal life here and now but only the *hope* of resurrection in the future world. In other words, Hobbes' interpretation of the scriptures delays eternal life to an unknown and distant future, the day of the final judgment, in which "the faithful will rise again, with glorious and spiritual bodies"<sup>35</sup>. In the meantime, however, we have to accept that our physical death is equivalent to a state of non-existence. It is apparent that this doctrine is part of a political strategy. By undermining the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, Hobbes hopes to make men understand that there is no greater power than the sovereign, nor greater evil than corporeal death. In this sense, Hobbes' mortalism represents an outright attack on the supernaturalist elements of religion<sup>36</sup>. But Hobbes' reformulation of the doctrine of salvation and immortality also has another face: the supernatural powers of the sovereign. Given the correlation that Hobbes maintains between civil obedience and salvation, his critique of the idea of immortality in this life, makes the power of the sovereign to resemble even more the power of a secularized god. Whereas salvation in the other world is uncertain, disobedience to the sovereign's laws may in this world entail, if not our eternal damnation, at least a certain eternal death.

#### 4. *Conclusions: politics as secularized theology*

There is a permanent tension throughout the *Leviathan* between the role of politics and religion, reason and faith, in political life. However, to keep one of the terms while eliminating the other would bring only a partial and inaccurate picture of Hobbes' political philosophy. The traditional interpretation maintains that theological argument does not count, or plays just a secondary role in a political theory that constructs a political order based on arguments of rationality and self-interest. This view neglects the fact that Hobbes did not base the *Leviathan* on arguments of reason alone.

According to Hobbes, men are rational beings. But at the same time they are slaves of the passions that dominate the will. Whereas all men would benefit by submitting their wills to the rule of a common coercive power, this step is often frustrated by their natural tendency to regard themselves as more powerful than others and engage in a perpetual and futile search for domination and vain glory. Even if we assume the existence of the state as a datum, self-interest is not a secure basis for political order. The rational fear of death is not necessarily a powerful deterrent for disobedience if the subjects still believe they can challenge the

<sup>34</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 42, p. 604 [my emphasis].

<sup>35</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 44, p. 646.

<sup>36</sup> See Johnston, David, art. cit., p. 663.

secular authority of the sovereign. In this case, if the opportunity is given, the subjects could try to become sovereigns themselves. Only by making men believe that civil authority represents an omnipotent and unchallengeable power would it be possible to obtain the kind of obedience that requires a peaceful order. As Hobbes points out, “men’s actions are derived from the opinions they have of the Good and Evil, which from those actions redound unto themselves”<sup>37</sup>. The Leviathan is then created as a mythical figure that resolves the problem of human pride by inducing in the subjects a fear that is similar to the fear of an omnipotent God.

It would be wrong, of course, to lose sight of the fact that religion plays an ambivalent role in Hobbes’ philosophy. Fear of unknown and invisible powers may, for Hobbes, be manifested in true religion, when “the power imagined, is truly as we imagine”, or in superstition, when the power imagined is merely “feigned by the mind”<sup>38</sup>. In other words, the belief in magic and witchcraft arises from the same fear that makes men believe in the existence of God or in the divinity of Christ. In this sense, Hobbes realizes that whereas a pious reverence to the authority may be a source of political stability, superstition is a source of irrational and unpredictable behavior. Superstitious beings are easy to manipulate by those religious authorities that claim to possess the keys of the kingdom of God and therefore the power to determine the salvation or eternal damnation of the subjects. The way that Hobbes finds to combat superstition is a radical reinterpretation of what is essentially a human artifice: the scriptures and the deceitful doctrines that different churches derived from them.

Hobbes’ reinterpretation of the scriptures is, then, part of a strategy of political persuasion<sup>39</sup>. By claiming that the kingdom of God is an earthly kingdom that existed in the past and will not be restored until Christ’s second coming, and that there is no salvation nor immortality until the end of history, he both undermines the authority of the Church and reinforces the deterrent power of civil sanctions. At a time where human history was still interpreted in sacred terms, Hobbes puts God beyond history, in a distant past and in a distant future. According to Hobbes, men live in a profane time where the only visible authority is the secular authority of the state.

This cultural transformation, however, did not simply consist in the rationalization of religious beliefs. The counterpoint of Hobbes’ attack on the supernatu-

<sup>37</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 42, p. 567.

<sup>38</sup> *Leviathan*, Ch. 6, p. 124.

<sup>39</sup> Most of recent revisions of Hobbes’ theology seem to neglect this point. In this respect, they fall in exactly the opposite mistake of the traditional interpretation. While for the latter the use of theological arguments is irrelevant, the revisionists claim that Hobbes’ political philosophy is in fact subordinated to what Hobbes believed to be a correct interpretation of biblical history. Perhaps the most provocative of these interpretations is presented by Joshua Mitchell. See *op. cit.*, note 22.

ralistic elements of Christianity was the mystification of political authority. Hobbes argued that God was absent in this life but only to transform the civil sovereign into a “lieutenant” and representative of an utterly transcendent God. Fear of powers invisible is then transformed into the fear of a visible omnipotent authority that resembles the image of an omnipotent God. Put it differently, Hobbes’ critique of religious beliefs also intended the transformation of politics into a secularized theology. This is, I suggest, the final purpose of calling his commonwealth “Leviathan”, a biblical monster whose terrifying power can only be compared to God’s.

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