

# Questioning Hobbes's Pessimistic Interpreters:

## Hobbes and Transcendence

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Both Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss view Hobbes as someone who dismantles the framework of classical philosophy. Both argue, in somewhat different ways, that his rejection of teleology, his famous eschewal of the *summum bonum*, contributes to this dismantling. Both argue, moreover, that his presentation of human nature essentially obliterates the possibility of transcendent experience which had supplied an orientation for classical and Christian conceptions of the good life. In short, they find that Hobbes has jettisoned the highest parts of human existence while allowing the lowest to remain. These are, of course, forceful reproofs; and they have been influential as well, for they frequently appear on the level of assumptions in more contemporary political-theoretical treatments of Hobbes. And yet there is an alternative way of reading *Leviathan* according to which Hobbes's rejection of the *summum bonum* is seen not as a decline but an advance, given the diversity of human ends; and Hobbes is understood not to sanction all passions indiscriminately but rather to offer a new way of keeping particular passions in check. According to this view Hobbes stands as the originator of a "rule of law" tradition that emphasizes the burden of responsible decision-making for individuals. Moreover, religion is not abandoned but rather placed at the center of moral life--though Hobbes's understanding of religion is far from traditional. This interpretation is intriguing and worthy of further consideration, especially against the backdrop of the prevailing Voegelinian-Straussian

view.<sup>1</sup> [1] This essay begins, therefore, by laying out in summary form both Voegelin's and Strauss's major criticisms of Hobbes before turning to the aforementioned "alternative" interpretation.

At the core of Voegelin's critique of Hobbes is the idea that Hobbes is a gnostic (perhaps the quintessential modern gnostic)--someone who perverts or ignores fundamental categories of existence such as immanence and transcendence, passion and reason, *amor sui* and *amor dei*. In misusing these concepts Hobbes shows himself as someone who opposes the dual traditions of classic and Christian philosophy. According to Voegelin he is, indeed, the first in a long line of subversive thinkers such as Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche<sup>2</sup> [2] and a precursor to modern totalitarianism.<sup>3</sup> [3]

It is Hobbes's rejection of the *summum bonum* and the replacement of this with a *summum malum*, which, in Voegelin's view, marks the decisive break from traditional philosophy. "Aristotelian ethics starts from the purposes of action," writes Voegelin, "and explores the order of human life in terms of the ordination of all actions toward a highest

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1 [1] I am thinking here especially of Michael Oakeshott's famous introduction to *Leviathan* as well as his several other essays on Hobbes, now published in *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1975).

2 [2] Eric Voegelin, *Published Essays 1953-1965*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 11, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 53.

3 [3] Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas, Vol. 7: The New Order and Last Orientation*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 25, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 71.

purpose."4 [4] If this highest purpose is removed, he continues, the source of order disappears not only from the lives of individuals "but also from life in society . . . the order of the life in community depends on *homonoia*, in the Aristotelian and Christian sense, that is, on the participation in the common nous."5 [5] Of course it is Hobbes who first takes this step, and in so doing he undercuts rather than bolsters social life. For social life depends precisely on some shared, fixed point of orientation for the members of a community: the *summum bonum*.

Moreover, in disposing of the *summum bonum*, Hobbes also obliterates the traditional ordering of passion and reason. No longer are human passions regulated by reason as a sort of ruler, but instead the strongest *passion* must rule the others.6 [6] Since Hobbes views the spiritual life itself as only "the extreme of existential passion,"7 [7] he cannot, according to Voegelin, "interpret the nature of man from the vantage point of the maximum of differentiation through the experiences of transcendence."8 [8] In other words, Hobbes rules out any possibility of a transcendent *nous* or *logos* as an ordering principle for the soul, for he views spiritual life as nothing but passion at its most extreme. And since Hobbes will brook no transcendent rationality (for him, life consists only in passions of varying degrees) it follows that

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4 [4] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 180.

5 [5] Ibid., 180. See also Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Washington: Regnery, 1997), 70; *Collected Works vol. 11*, 55; and *Collected Works vol. 25*, 63-65.

6 [6] Without a *summum bonum*, writes Voegelin, there is "no point of orientation that can endow human action with rationality." In *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 70.

7 [7] Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 180.

8 [8] Ibid.

only a passion stronger than all others can keep them in check. This, of course, is the *summum malum*--the fear of death.<sup>9</sup> [9]

Voegelin puts his point another way when he speaks of Hobbes's perversion of the Augustinian categories of love. The *summum bonum* consists in a transcendent *nous* or *logos* that orders human activity through *amor Dei*. When its opposite, *amor sui*, predominates, the proper order of the soul is disturbed and an individual's pride is given full and free rein.<sup>10</sup> [10] The only way to control this largely unregulated *amor sui* is, according to Hobbes, to place a stronger "King of the Proud" over these passionate beings and this, of course, is the Leviathan.<sup>11</sup> [11]

Furthermore, Hobbes collapses the tension between immanence and transcendence in his attempt to establish Christianity as a civil theology.<sup>12</sup> [12] Specifically, Voegelin argues that Hobbes eliminates transcendence because he attempts to show that the immanent (civil law) can and should "contain" the transcendent (the law of nature). Or, put differently, for Hobbes the law of nature derives its force over men *only secondarily* by being God-given law. Its primary force

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9 [9] Voegelin puts it this way: "Since Hobbes does not recognize sources of order in the soul, inspiration can be exorcised only by a passion that is even stronger than the pride to be a paraclete, and that is the fear of death. Death is the greatest evil; and if life cannot be ordered through orientation of the soul towards a *summum bonum*, order will have to be motivated by fear of the *summum malum*." *The New Science of Politics*, 182.

10 [10] *Ibid.*, 184.

11 [11] *Ibid.*

12 [12] Voegelin notes his debt to Oakeshott's analysis of Hobbes's civil theology in *Collected Works vol. 11*, 36. The relevant passages may be found in Michael Oakeshott, "Introduction to *Leviathan*," in *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1975), 73-9.

comes from the fact that it is promulgated by the sovereign. Voegelin summarizes Hobbes's argument as follows: "[the] law of nature, finally, is not a law actually governing human existence before the men, in whom it lives as a disposition toward peace, have followed its precept by combining in a civil society under a public representative, the sovereign."13 [13] Thus divine law is made subject to a human ruler, all opportunity for public debate is eliminated, and the potentially positive tension caused by the conflict between divine and human law is removed. Hobbes has reverted back to the "compactness" of a society in which the distinction between immanent and transcendent is not recognized, denying "the existence of a tension between the truth of the soul and the truth of society."14 [14] As Voegelin reads Hobbes, "civil" theology now exhausts theology itself. This is a crucial element of Voegelin's interpretation of Hobbes as a gnostic. "With this idea . . . of abolishing the tensions of history by the spreading of a new truth, Hobbes reveals his own Gnostic intentions; the attempt at freezing history into an everlasting constitution is an instance of the general class of Gnostic attempts at freezing history into an everlasting final realm on this earth."15 [15]

In this quite negative assessment of Hobbes Voegelin has much in common with Strauss, although they speak in somewhat different terms. Essentially Strauss makes this same point-- i.e., that Hobbes has radically misrepresented society's proper orientation--but he makes it in the context of "classic natural right." As Strauss sees it, classic natural right (which may be broadly understood as that which is naturally correct and good for human beings) depends upon a

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13 [13] Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 154.

14 [14] *Ibid.*, 160.

15 [15] *Ibid.*, 161.

conception of the world as intelligible and ordered, on the one hand, and of human purpose, on the other.<sup>16</sup> [16] A human being thus begins from an experience of an ordered world (even though he is able to apprehend only part of that order) and moves toward his purpose *not* by free construction but by "discovering" his true nature. Like Voegelin, Strauss believes that there exists a *summum bonum* which all human action must strive for, if it is to be rational. As Strauss describes it,

life is activity which is directed towards some goal; social life is an activity which is directed towards such a goal as can be pursued only by society; but in order to pursue a specific goal, as its comprehensive goal, society must be organized, ordered, constructed, constituted in such a manner which is in accordance with that goal.<sup>17</sup> [17]

In other words, for Strauss (as for Voegelin) social life is ordered by its end or purpose, and lacking such an end or purpose it becomes incoherent.

Strauss's conception of natural right, then, is attunement to a cosmic order that is ontologically prior to human experience, the discovery of that order through philosophy, and the fulfillment of one's purpose as a part of that order. It consists primarily in duties and obligations, not rights understood in their modern sense. It presupposes the idea of "purpose" for man and society that may be more or less perfectly apprehended. It is the task of philosophy to apprehend

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<sup>16</sup> [16] See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 180. "The predominant tradition had defined natural law with a view to the end or the perfection of man as a rational and social animal."

<sup>17</sup> [17] Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 34.

this "purpose" or "best regime" as clearly as possible, whether or not it is actually instituted as a real political order in the world. Strauss describes this teleological conception of political philosophy as follows:

If . . . one looks back to Plato [and Aristotle] . . . one must hold that it is not the conviction of man's superiority to all existing creatures but the conviction of the transcendence of good over all being which is the reason why philosophic investigation begins with the ethical and political problem, with the question of the right life and the right society.<sup>18</sup> [18]

Thus in the classic tradition the fundamental question of political philosophy is not "what sorts of institutions are best in government?" but "what is the best life/regime?" Strauss describes this traditional approach to political philosophy as "genetic." Identifying Aristotle as its classic exponent, he explains this approach as a method in which a certain "standard" or image of perfection is held up as an ideal from the outset of an investigation. This standard then "dominates the testing of the individual stages of the development [of the thing being examined]."<sup>19</sup> [19] Order is "immutable, eternal, in existence from the beginning" and independent of human will.<sup>20</sup> [20] Thus philosophizing cannot easily be corrupted by the desires of human beings but takes its bearings from transcendent perfection. Indeed, according

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<sup>18</sup> [18] Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 90.

<sup>19</sup> [19] *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> [20] *Ibid.*, 106.

to this conception man's reason arises not from his own resources but is guided at all times by transcendent reason.<sup>21</sup> [21] This would seem to be equivalent to Voegelin's *nous* or *logos*.

It is essential to understand this view of classic natural right in order to appreciate Strauss's view of just how dramatically Hobbes departs from it. The preceding paragraphs have highlighted Strauss's conception of the major parts of classic natural right: an ordered world that owes its order to a transcendent source and teleological conceptions of the good for man and the good for society. Like Voegelin's emphasis on the *summum bonum* as something that exists prior to any individual's assertion of his preferences, Strauss's view of classic natural right emphasizes a pre-existing, "discoverable" good for mankind, which endows social life with order and rationality. Both Strauss and Voegelin, however, view Hobbes as someone who has rejected this view in order radically to redefine the nature of "right" for his own purposes.

In stark contrast to Aristotle's "genetic" approach, Hobbes's "compositive" approach, as Strauss describes it, begins not with an idea of perfection but with the primitive imperfection of human passions. These passions are the raw material from which Hobbes builds his State; and Hobbes has "no intention of measuring the imperfect by a standard which transcends it."<sup>22</sup> [22] In other words, while Aristotle begins with an idea of perfection (a teleological view of man and society), Hobbes throws out the "end" and looks only to the manifestly imperfect beginnings of political society as building blocks for a future state.<sup>23</sup> [23] There is no sense, in Hobbes, of a

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<sup>21</sup> [21] *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>22</sup> [22] *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>23</sup> [23] See Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 179-181.

philosopher seeking an answer to the question "what ought to be the aim of the state?"<sup>24</sup> [24]

Thus while Aristotle orients himself by transcendent perfection, Hobbes takes his bearings solely from immanent human experience--and, specifically, from man's passionate nature.<sup>25</sup> [25] The character of political philosophy is therefore different; it "no longer has the function, as it had in classical antiquity, of reminding political life of the eternally immutable prototype of the perfect State, but the peculiarly modern task of delineating for the first time the programme of the essentially perfect State."<sup>26</sup> [26] And, in Strauss's view, this is a very unstable basis for political philosophy, for, so he argues, if there is no "superhuman order" then the ground of politics is insecure.<sup>27</sup> [27]

Hobbes also departs from the tradition that understands the world to possess an order of its own prior to the emergence of human society. Contrary to most ancient and medieval thinkers, Hobbes assumes that there is "no natural harmony between the human mind and the universe," and that any human order must be "made," not found.<sup>28</sup> [28] Only if the universe is

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<sup>24</sup> [24] Strauss, *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 152.

<sup>25</sup> [25] "From the outset [Hobbes] sought to answer the question of the best form of State with regard not to man's essential being and the place occupied by him in the universe, but to experience of human life, to application, and therefore with particular reference to the passions." *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>26</sup> [26] *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>27</sup> [27] *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> [28] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 175. Consider Patrick Martin's analysis in "Natural Law: Voegelin and the End of [Legal] Philosophy" in *Louisiana Law Review* 62 (2002), 884. "Specific rules do not make the order of society; rather they *articulate* the true order. When enacted they are not the order of society; rather, they are a means of *securing* the true order." See also Voegelin, as quoted in this article: "The inquiry into the true order of society . . . develops, in the classic philosophers, into an autonomous occupation of the human mind--an

unintelligible will man have the true freedom to construct his world as he sees fit.<sup>29</sup> [29] And, Strauss implies, an unintelligible universe must lack a transcendent "orderer"; and thus there can be no God, for Hobbes.<sup>30</sup> [30] Man therefore must assume the task of ordering, and must do so with the consciousness of being the "most excellent work of nature."<sup>31</sup> [31] He can be sovereign only because "there is no cosmic support for his humanity . . . because he is absolutely a stranger in the universe."<sup>32</sup> [32]

What does Strauss see as the implications of Hobbes's denial of a cosmic order? First, traditional philosophy must be abandoned because (among other reasons) its preoccupation with transcendence and the divine is unnecessary. And second, the denial of order clears the way for Hobbes's fundamental ontological premise: that the state of nature is fundamentally hostile, and that men must rely on their own resources to escape from it. As Strauss argues, "[o]nly if man is not subject to a higher power . . . can the relation of men among themselves . . . be determined . . . not by mutual obligations but by (justified or unjustified) claims of each on each."<sup>33</sup> [33] On

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enterprise that can be successful only because the true order of society is the order in which man can unfold fully the potentialities of his nature," 886.

<sup>29</sup> [29] Ibid. See also p. 201 "[T]he very fact that the universe is unintelligible permits reason to rest satisfied with its free constructs, to establish through its constructs an Archimedean basis of operations, and to anticipate an unlimited progress in its conquest of nature."

<sup>30</sup> [30] Ibid., 169-70, Strauss, *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 74-5.

<sup>31</sup> [31] Strauss, *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 91.

<sup>32</sup> [32] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 175.

<sup>33</sup> [33] Strauss, *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 123.

Hobbes's account the traditional assumptions of man's social nature and God's providence are both false.<sup>34</sup> [34]

Thus both Voegelin and Strauss find major problems in Hobbes's theoretical framework. He has denied the existence of a *summum bonum*, of a pre-existing purpose for man discoverable by philosophy. Hobbes's philosophy begins rather with the primitive passions of man (the "compositive" approach, as Strauss puts it), not with Aristotle's "genetic" method. These passions, moreover, submit to no governance by a divine *nous* or *logos*. Hobbes has collapsed the distinction between immanence and transcendence, according to Voegelin, leading to a more "compact" representation of political life. And he has emphasized the love of oneself, *amor sui*, over the love of God as a motivating force for human beings.

On the basis of these arguments, it would seem that any alternative reading of Hobbes has a number of significant obstacles to overcome. If one accepts the arguments of Voegelin and Strauss, Hobbes would appear to be (1) a thinker who denies the existence of God and transcendent reality and (2) someone who explicitly rejects the teleological, scholastic framework of his predecessors in order to found a new hedonist political philosophy on the basis of human passions. Why should anyone mount a defense of Hobbes if these are indeed the positions he represents?

Part of the answer to this question is, of course, that both these premises are subject to considerable debate. The controversy over Hobbes and religion has raged for centuries and there

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<sup>34</sup> [34] Ibid.

is still little scholarly consensus on the subject.<sup>35</sup> [35] There are, however, reasons for thinking that Hobbes was not out to discredit religion absolutely but rather to redefine it in such a way that it might become more compatible with individual reasoning and less apt to terrorize.<sup>36</sup> [36] There is, in addition, ample evidence in Hobbes's writings that his aim was not to found a "hedonist" political philosophy, but rather expressly to *prevent* hedonistic passions (which are always present in human beings) from dominating the better ones.<sup>37</sup> [37] An essay of this length cannot, of course, begin adequately to represent the complexity of these debates. But I want to offer in the following pages two points that might provide a foundation for a more positive reading of Hobbes.

The first point concerns the question of religion in Hobbes's *Leviathan*. While many readers agree with the dominant view of Hobbes's alleged impiety, others make the argument that in the *Leviathan* Hobbes is setting out a particular view of religion which, though not

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<sup>35</sup> [35] For summaries of this debate, see Keith Brown, *Hobbes Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965) and Paul D. Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity: Reassessing the Bible in Leviathan* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> [36] On the terrors of religion, see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), chapter 12.

<sup>37</sup> [37] In chapter 30 of *Leviathan* Hobbes writes: "Again, every sovereign ought to cause justice to be taught, which (consisting in taking from no man what is his) is as much as to say, to cause men to be taught not to deprive their neighbours by violence or fraud of anything which by the sovereign authority is theirs. Of things held in propriety those that are dearest to a man are his own life and limbs; and in the next degree (in most men) those that concern conjugal affection; and after them riches and means of living. Therefore, the people are to be taught to abstain from violence to one another's person by private revenges, from violation of conjugal honour, and from forcible rapine and fraudulent surreption of one another's goods," 224.

familiar or "orthodox," is nonetheless Christian.<sup>38</sup> [38] What does this sort of Christianity look like? First, it relies primarily on the natural reason of human beings and on their rational apprehension of God's word through natural laws and their reading of the Bible. It therefore places a great deal of responsibility on individuals to consider religious questions for themselves; and so although obedience may yet be due to others, the "intellectual faculty" is not to be submitted to anyone else.<sup>39</sup> [39] It is true Hobbes posits an all-powerful sovereign who is to legislate for the commonwealth, but at the beginning of Part III of the *Leviathan* ("Of a Christian Commonwealth") he reminds his readers that

we are not to renounce our senses and experience, nor (that which is the undoubted word of God) our natural reason. For they are the talents which he hath put into our hands to negotiate till the coming again of our blessed Saviour; and therefore not to be folded up in the napkin of an implicit faith . . .<sup>40</sup> [40]

In other words, subjects owe their civil rulers obedience and respect, but these subjects retain the freedom to decide religious matters for themselves.

This understanding of Christianity depends, of course, upon Hobbes's idea that true Christian faith consists largely in "inward" persuasion, for Hobbes downplays the importance of

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<sup>38</sup> [38] See Wendell John Coats, Jr. *Oakeshott and His Contemporaries* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2000) and Timothy Fuller, "The Idea of Christianity in Hobbes's *Leviathan*" in *Jewish Political Studies Review* 4 (1992): 139-178.

<sup>39</sup> [39] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 246.

<sup>40</sup> [40] *Ibid.*, 245.

external professions and actions and stresses the personal, interior character of belief.<sup>41</sup> [41] If a ruler forbids faith in Christ, Hobbes says, "such forbidding is of no effect, because belief and unbelief never follow men's commands."<sup>42</sup> [42] It consists in each person's private faith, which neither a sovereign nor anyone else can perceive. "For internal faith is in its own nature invisible, and consequently exempted from all human jurisdiction,"<sup>43</sup> [43] Hobbes writes, and the civil power has jurisdiction only over a person's *external* actions and words. "And of that which cannot be accused, there is no judge at all but God, that knoweth the heart."<sup>44</sup> [44] Thus the experience of transcendence is unique for each person, and as for "the inward *thought* and *belief* of men, which human governors can take no notice of . . . they are not voluntary, nor the effect of the laws, but of the unrevealed will, and of the power, of God, and consequently fall not under obligation."<sup>45</sup> [45] The sovereign may oblige me to be obedient to his laws but not "to think any otherwise than my reason persuades me."<sup>46</sup> [46]

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41 [41] A problem arises, of course, when one's inward religious beliefs conflict with what the sovereign commands. Hobbes addresses this problem in *Leviathan* chapter 42 and gives an answer that is perhaps not very satisfying to many readers. "This we may say," Hobbes writes, "that whatsoever a subject . . . is compelled to [do] in obedience to his sovereign, and doth it not in order to his own mind, but in order to the laws of his country, that action is not his, but his sovereign's; nor is it he that in this case denieth Christ before men, but his governor, and the law of his country," 339.

42 [42] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 338.

43 [43] *Ibid.*, 354.

44 [44] *Ibid.*, 373.

45 [45] *Ibid.*, 318.

46 [46] *Ibid.*, 246.

Moreover, in addition to his emphases on the individuality and inwardness of the religious experience, Hobbes seems to be attempting to define a sort of Christianity that does not look constantly to the future but rather insists on a type of immediacy in religious experience. This might be one way of accounting for Hobbes's rejection of the *summum bonum*, i.e., not because the idea of good is wholly unimportant, but because the orientation toward such a future good entails a lack of focus on *present* religious understanding. The future is a "fiction of the mind,"<sup>47</sup> [47] writes Hobbes, and as one commentator has put it, what Hobbes actually requires is "an account of revelation that will show how to approach the future in a non-fictive way, or . . . to suspend people's preoccupation with the future in favor of the improvement of their spiritual strength."<sup>48</sup> [48] Religion, if it arises merely out of fear and anxiety about the future, is no better than superstition. For true religion, fear of the future must be downplayed as a motive force in favor of an individual's working out of his own religious understanding by reading the Bible and reflecting on what is found there. Rejecting the *summum bonum*, then,

is to begin to appreciate fully what the life of Christian faith really is. The transformative power of Christian faith is not seen by Hobbes to imply a radical transformation of the world as it now is, but rather to induce a radical transformation in our understanding of the significance, or insignificance, of the present world.<sup>49</sup> [49]

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47 [47] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 14.

48 [48] Fuller, "The Idea of Christianity," 142.

49 [49] *Ibid.*, 172.

Religion, if it is to have any effect on our lives, cannot be superstitious or based on fear of spirits,<sup>50</sup> [50] nor does it depend on some supposed state of future perfection (the *summum bonum*). Hobbes downplays the importance of tradition and church dogma in favor of a reformed version of Christianity that emphasizes personal, inward conviction. While Hobbes's understanding of Christianity does have the practical aim of reducing the conflict between people who claim to be divinely inspired,<sup>51</sup> [51] it does not thereby necessarily preclude the experience of transcendence altogether.

There is yet another ground upon which Hobbes might be defended against his critics. This concerns his notion of the rule of law. As has been noted above, both Strauss and Voegelin take Hobbes to task for emphasizing man's passions at the expense of his reason. Both writers imply that Hobbes *approves* a lack of governance for the passions. It is worth recalling what Voegelin says on this subject:

[in Hobbes's work] the generic nature of man must be studied in terms of human passions; the objects of the passions are no legitimate object of inquiry. This is the fundamental counterposition to classic and Christian moral philosophy . . . Aristotelian ethics starts from the purposes of action and explores the order of human life in terms of the ordination of all actions toward a highest purpose , the *summum bonum* . . . <sup>52</sup> [52]

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<sup>50</sup> [50] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 12.

<sup>51</sup> [51] See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 32.

<sup>52</sup> [52] Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 180.

When the *summum bonum* is taken away, however, the source of order disappears from human life, because for Voegelin, as has been noted above, social order depends on an Aristotelian and Christian *homonoia*.<sup>53</sup> [53] Rationality entails a sort of like-mindedness about the common good of a society. Similar passages may be found in Strauss.<sup>54</sup> [54] But although both Voegelin and Strauss are forceful defenders of the idea that a rationally ordered community must have a point of orientation--a common good for all--there are others who argue just as forcefully that there are alternative ways of conceiving rational political order. Michael Oakeshott is perhaps the most well known example of a philosopher who holds this sort of non-teleological view of political order, despite the fact that he has much else in common with Strauss and Voegelin.<sup>55</sup> [55]

How might this "non-teleological" conception of political order be described? Perhaps it would be best to return to Hobbes himself, since he has so boldly rejected the classic tradition of philosophy.<sup>56</sup> [56] First, although Hobbes forthrightly rejects the *summum bonum* early on in *Leviathan*, it does not necessarily follow that to do so is by definition to be "irrational." For while Voegelin and Strauss both argue for the *summum bonum* as necessary for rational ethics and politics, neither bothers to explain exactly why it is essential. In fact, the idea of a *summum bonum* presupposes (1) that we could know what it is and (2) that we could agree on it--both

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<sup>53</sup> [53] Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> [54] See, in particular, the introduction to Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>55</sup> [55] I am thinking here of the distinction Oakeshott makes between civil association and enterprise association in part two of *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

<sup>56</sup> [56] Note in particular his vitriolic criticisms of Aristotle and others in *Leviathan*, chapter 46.

premises that are questioned by Hobbes. As he famously observes, why has there been "such diversity of ways in running to the same mark, felicity, if it be not night amongst us, or at least a mist?"<sup>57</sup> [57]

If there is a lack of public agreement about the *summum bonum*, as there certainly seems to have been in Hobbes's time, is there an alternative solution that might yet provide the framework for a rationally ordered society? Hobbes's answer is that it is not necessary to agree on the "end" of a society; rather, we ought merely to agree on the "formal" or "procedural" rules that govern that society so that individuals may be free to pursue their self-chosen purposes. This manifests itself in an accepted "rule of law" as an arrangement

that does not elevate, promote, or defend any particular conception of good. The variety of satisfactions human beings imagine to be desirable precludes the use of law to promote or discourage particular versions of fulfillment. Rather, law is an instrumentality indicating a virtue compatible with many different goods. Law maximizes the liberty of individuals to develop their lives as they see fit.<sup>58</sup> [58]

In other words, resolving the question of the *summum bonum* is no longer necessary. What then *does* become necessary is the establishment of a legal framework that minimizes conflicts between individuals. Though this is not the traditional organization of society around a *summum*

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<sup>57</sup> [57] Ibid., 412.

<sup>58</sup> [58] Fuller, "The Idea of Christianity," 113.

*bonum*, it is nevertheless a moral agreement in which the actors acknowledge that they will abide by the "rules of the game." Oakeshott makes this point in *On Human Conduct*:

Civil association is a moral condition; it is not concerned with the satisfaction of wants and with substantive outcomes but with the terms upon which the satisfaction of wants may be sought. And politics is concerned with determining the desirable norms of civil conduct and with the approval or disapproval of civil rules which, because they qualify the pursuit of purposes, cannot be inferred from the purposes pursued.<sup>59</sup> [59]

This is, indeed, a different way of thinking about politics, and it may be unsatisfactory to many. It does, however, provide a rational alternative to Voegelin's and Strauss's requirement that society be oriented toward a common good.

Furthermore, in the context of this "rule of law" society, the sovereign--often understood by critics to be equivalent to a tyrant--is instead merely the emblem of this rule of law and "not the trustee or director of a common substantive purpose."<sup>60</sup> [60] Hobbes believes that it is in the sovereign's interest to *follow* the natural law as well as to make the laws. It is, of course, true that the sovereign's power is absolute, but this absolute power is not given so that the sovereign can abuse his subjects or take advantage of them. The interest of the sovereign and his people is

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<sup>59</sup> [59] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 174.

<sup>60</sup> [60] *Ibid.*, 233.

one and the same, Hobbes says; and thus a prudent sovereign will act within strict limits.<sup>61</sup> [61]

William Connolly is especially clear on this point:

What happens if the sovereign overreaches himself and tries to govern too many areas of life? First, Hobbes thinks that a sovereign power that overreaches itself will fail eventually. Because the laws will become too many and too complicated, and many will be unenforceable. But second, the sovereign, though created by an earthly pact, is ultimately accountable to God. This is a central reason Hobbes prefers monarchy to either democracy or aristocratic rule. While the monarch does not sin against his subjects in acting capriciously or ruthlessly, he does sin against God in breaking a law of nature. This unity between the will of the sovereign and the will of the individual is not operative in other forms of rule; its presence in this case makes it possible to hold the monarch responsible as an individual when sinning against God in his capacity as sovereign: "But in a monarchy, if the monarch makes any decree against the laws of nature, he sins himself; because in him the civil will and the natural are all one."<sup>62</sup> [62]

The sovereign is compelled to protect the safety of his people "not by care applied to individuals, further than their protection from injuries when they shall complain, but by a general providence, contained in public instruction, both of doctrine and example, and in the making and executing

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61 [61] See Hobbes, *Leviathan*: "The riches, power, and honour of a monarch arise only from the riches, strength and reputation of his subjects. For no king can be rich, nor glorious, nor secure, whose subjects are either poor, or contemptible," 120.

62 [62] William Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 36-37.

of good laws."63 [63] In short, there is to be no special treatment for certain people: just a general providence for all alike. This, then, is the rule of law in Hobbes: a formal, procedural set of rules overseen by a sovereign who shares the interest of his people.64 [64] The state thus no longer depends on a *summum bonum* and is understood instead as "the embodiment of rules of conduct for minimizing the collisions and maximizing the forbearance among *individuals who cannot know one another's destinies*."65 [65] Virtue, here, is self-restraint. It is true, of course, that this is not an outwardly heroic virtue; but it does argue against the idea that Hobbes's emphasis on "passions" was meant to encourage the indiscriminate expression of those passions.

The Hobbesian contract, the mutual renunciation of individual power to the sovereign, incorporates a renunciation of the right to seek unlimited power over others. The purpose of the state is not to encourage the oppression of the weak by the strong, but rather to give individuals the opportunity to use their peaceful, creative and non-adversarial powers to develop the benefits of civilization.66 [66]

Hobbes has thus set out the conditions for society organized around the "rule of law" in the absence of a *summum bonum*.

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63 [63] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 219.

64 [64] This does beg the question of how one could be certain that the sovereign would not abuse his power.

65 [65] Coats, *Oakeshott and His Contemporaries*, 63.

66 [66] Peter Hayes, "Hobbes's Bourgeois Moderation" in *Polity* 31 (1998): 74.

The purpose of this essay has been to suggest two starting points for an alternative reading of Hobbes: that there is a conception of religion to be found in *Leviathan* and that Hobbes does not sanction all passions but rather constructs a "rule of law" meant to rein in certain passions. Of course, any full treatment of Hobbes would have to come to terms with a number of questions that could be raised about these points. First, does Hobbes's focus on the "inwardness" of religion neglect the outward religious actions that arise as a *result* of that inward belief? Can Christianity be understood as primarily an inward religion? And second, it may be good so far as it goes to discuss a rule of law in Hobbes, but what kind of safeguards does Hobbes provide against a sovereign who chooses to abuse his powers and to destroy that fragile rule of law? These are legitimate objections to the "alternative" reading I have set out above.

Nevertheless, this reading does counterbalance what I take to be a too-pessimistic view of Hobbes on the part of both Strauss and Voegelin. Although they write forceful critiques of Hobbes--particularly regarding Hobbes's rejection of the classical and Christian philosophical framework--there would seem to be room for a more nuanced view of Hobbes that takes into account his discussion of religion in parts three and four of *Leviathan* (which neither Strauss nor Voegelin considers at any length) as well as Hobbes's significant emphasis on restraint and moderation within a rule of law.

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