
A Comparison and Evaluation of Interpretation: Voegelin and Strauss on Thomas Hobbes

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In the beginning of his essay on Thomas Hobbes in *What is Political Philosophy*, Leo Strauss asks the rather salient question of why we, as students of political philosophy in contemporary times, should read Hobbes?²⁹ [1] The simplicity of this question, to say nothing of its relevance, cannot be overlooked. To study Hobbesian political philosophy is to say that it is relevant to us in some way; it speaks to us precisely because it allows us the ability to understand ourselves more fully. As our self-understanding is at least partially informed through the modern perspective, it makes sense to return to the thoughts of one who was influential in creating that perspective. This was certainly the standpoint of both Strauss and Eric Voegelin, two of the most influential political philosophers of the last century. By returning to Hobbes's thought, both Strauss and Voegelin wished to revive those insights that

²⁹ [1] Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 170.

played a crucial role in defining how we understand ourselves today. This essay, then, is first and foremost a general attempt to understand the ways in which both Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss used Hobbes's political philosophy as a means through which the modern project, or modernity more simply, could be better understood. This will involve an examination of the key themes that both Voegelin and Strauss thought important to properly understand Hobbes's political philosophy in particular, and its relationship to modernity more generally.

I. Voegelin's Hobbes

In beginning the examination with Eric Voegelin's thoughts on Thomas Hobbes, what stands out is two interrelated themes whose scope exceeds that of Hobbes himself. Voegelin's interpretation of Hobbes, while fully accounting for the political philosophy, is at the same time an interpretation of the essence of modernity. For Voegelin, Hobbes's thought represents the quintessential modern moment whereby a western society came of age through a series of spiritual and temporal conflicts whose origins lie outside of modernity itself. To understand Voegelin's Hobbes, then, is to understand how the themes of history and politics play themselves out on the world stage, or more specifically, how the movement of history and the particularity of the political inform one another's self-interpretation. The themes of history and politics must first be examined separately, and then in relation to one another, so as to understand Voegelin's Hobbes, particularly as he relates to the essence of modernity.

The Relevance of History

The theme of history in the writings of Eric Voegelin is of fundamental importance. As Voegelin says in the memorable lines that begin *The New Science of Politics*, ♦The existence of man in political society is historical existence; and a theory of politics, if it penetrates to principles, must at the same time be a theory of history.♦³⁰ [2] History is inextricably linked with philosophy, as the former provides the substance upon which the latter can base both interpretations and speculations. An interpretation of a philosophical system, such as that of Thomas Hobbes, must both examine the historical particulars with which the philosopher had to deal, as well as the effectiveness and accuracy of the answers he suggested. Voegelin♦s Hobbes is uniquely situated between the two; his philosophy is both the product of historical circumstances in which he found himself, as well as a key factor in the subsequent course of history, particularly that of modern history. Voegelin♦s interpretation fulfills both criteria by providing a deep and penetrating account of the way history shaped and was shaped by Hobbes♦s political philosophy.

To interpret Hobbes♦s political philosophy, then, requires our examination to digress momentarily in order to frame the theoretical perspective through which Hobbes can be properly understood. According to Voegelin, Hobbes♦s political philosophy falls into the second of three great epochs that have defined the history of western civilization.³¹ [3] This epoch, which on the one hand is marked by St. Augustine♦s theoretical influence, and on the other hand is mired in the crisis precipitated by the concurrent fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity, sets the historical stage from which Voegelin♦s Hobbes emerges. The Roman Empire represented a unification of both temporal and spiritual order, maintained and expressed through an existential and transcendent

30 [2] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 1.

31 [3] *Ibid.*, p.2.

polytheistic symbolism. As the empire crumbled and Christianity rose to the level of imperial orthodoxy, the temporal sphere of human existence was de-divinized; the polytheistic symbolism lost its existential meaning when Rome no longer served as a source of temporal order and the divine sphere was pushed beyond history into the transcendent. The new spiritual symbols of grace and salvation as represented in the church helped to precipitate this de-divinization of politics and secular society, and the concomitant notion of a final kingdom, whether immanent or transcendent, tended to occupy the vacuum left by the now defunct imperial symbols.

This historical circumstance is the context in which we find the theoretical relevance of Augustine. Augustine dismissed the possibility of an immanent kingdom that would be realized in the foreseeable future. The divine came in the form of the church, representing the spiritual order of society and existing until the last judgment, apart from any temporal order that existed in human history. Augustine's influence had the effect of splitting western civilization into two wholly separate spheres. Whereas the Roman Empire unified the existential and transcendental order, western civilization, under the influence of this Augustinian dualism, maintained separate representation and symbolism for both the temporal and spiritual orders. Each order had its own head, the emperor in the temporal order, and the pope in the spiritual. However, because this new representation was built upon the remnants of the once mighty empire, remnants that had not fully withered away, a tension between the two orders existed, one that tended toward their reunification.

In effecting this change of orientation, Augustine also influenced western civilization in another fundamental way. The kingdom of God had no equivalent in the existential order, and as such, the plight of individual men was symbolized as a pilgrimage towards salvation that existed beyond time. This had the resulting effect of de-emphasizing temporal things. Human history in its purely temporal aspects, which is man's experience in the existential realm, was rendered essentially meaningless.

Man's political existence in history had no intrinsic meaning other than as a transition to the transcendent kingdom of God. The purposelessness of Augustine's historical perspective, given the tension created by the separation of the temporal and spiritual orders, paved the way for a new aggregate of symbols that would represent the self-interpretation of the period. It is here that Voegelin introduces Joachim of Flora, the man who would affect the re-divinization of history.

The relevance of Joachim of Flora as the purveyor of modern Gnosticism is well known to anyone that has any acquaintance with Eric Voegelin's thought. It is Joachim that breaks with Augustine's thinking, rejecting the purposelessness of history, "The Joachitic speculation was an attempt to endow the immanent course of history with a meaning that was not provided in the Augustinian conception."³² [4] In addition, Joachim marks the first significant attempt to remedy the uncertainty that is a part of the Christian faith. In order to do so, Joachim proposed a new notion of history, one that imbued both a sense of purpose and an element of certainty through a new aggregate of symbols. These four symbols, which include the three-phase periodization of history, the leader, the prophet of the new age, and a brotherhood of autonomous persons, became the paradigm through which western society would interpret itself.³³ [5]

The attempt to achieve certainty in the realm of history, according to Voegelin, is the product of Gnostic speculation:

The attempt at immanentizing the meaning of existence is fundamentally an attempt at bringing our knowledge of transcendence into a firmer grip than the *cognitio fidei*, the cognition of faith, will

³² [4] Ibid., p. 119.

³³ [5] Ibid., pp. 111-112.

afford; and Gnostic experiences offer this firmer grip in so far as they are an expansion of the soul to the point where God is drawn into the existence of man.³⁴ [6]

The essence of modernity, then, is to be found in the conception of history that Joachim elaborated.

Modernity is characterized by an ever-increasing tendency to speculate on the meaning of history. But this tendency found itself within the larger symbolic structure of Augustine, one where the separation of existential and transcendent order was still intact. The outcome of Joachim's influence on the separation was to heighten the existing tension toward a complete unification of order. It is this tension that returns our examination to its specific theme.

Voegelin places Hobbes's political philosophy in the middle of a unique case study that makes clear how this Joachitic-Augustinian turmoil played itself out in political reality. The English context in which Hobbes found himself was dominated by a single event that influenced his thinking — the English Civil War. The civil war in England was, according to Voegelin, the product, in particular, of the Puritan insurrection and, more generally, of the residual effects of the reformation. The Puritan movement, characterized by Voegelin as a Gnostic movement, was a challenge to the existing English temporal order. Its uniqueness centered on the exclusivity of its complete and unquestionable claim to scriptural truth, a claim that translated into a justification for revolution under the auspice of divine righteousness; — The various groups engaged in the civil war were so heaven-bent on having the public order represent the right variety or transcendent truth that the existential order of society was in danger of floundering in the melee.³⁵ [7]

³⁴ [6] Ibid., p. 124.

³⁵ [7] Ibid., p. 162.

Hobbes's political philosophy, according to Voegelin, was an attempt to answer the challenge presented by the Puritan movement to the public order. The issue itself was simple,

On the one hand, there is a political society that wants to maintain its established order in historical existence; on the other hand, there are private individuals within the society who want to change the public order, if necessary by force, in the name of a new truth.³⁶ [8]

The answer that was posed was equally as simple: Hobbes solved the conflict by deciding that there was no public truth except the law of peace and concord in a society; any opinion or doctrine conducive to discord was thereby proved untrue.³⁷ [9] In order to meet the challenges posed by the Puritan movement, the entire basis upon which it rested had to be rejected. All transcendent truth, particularly any that could be derived from divine scripture, had to be rejected in order to secure the peace necessary to preserve the temporal order.

As Voegelin points out, Hobbes's enterprise was not without its merit.³⁸ [10] Any doctrine of truth would do, in so far as it was amenable to the existing temporal order and did not promote divisiveness or sectarian political movements. But by basing his political philosophy on such a foundation, Hobbes made the public order, which is to say the state or the sovereign, the ultimate arbiter of what is true and what is not. The justification for Hobbes's political philosophy could not come from a higher source of order or truth; its justification must lie in its own principles, constructed to meet the needs of internal consistency. Hobbes felt it necessary to construct his own aggregate of symbols that would accurately express the totality of man's existence while also justifying his political

³⁶ [8] Ibid., p. 153.

³⁷ [9] Ibid., p. 153.

³⁸ [10] Ibid., p. 161.

philosophy. By doing so, and affectively freezing history under the dominion of the sovereign, however, Hobbes himself fell into the trap of Gnosticism.³⁹ [11]

The Political Solution

Now that that theme of history and its relevance to Hobbesian political philosophy has been explored, our examination must turn to the practical prescriptions that Hobbes advocated. Hobbes's historical context forced him to deal with the issue of public order, one that he hoped could be settled permanently. The result of his enterprise was the creation of three wholly new symbols, that of a new psychology, a new nature of man, and the Leviathan.⁴⁰ [12] The first of these symbols, the new psychology of man, was, according to Voegelin, Hobbes's way of expressing what he understood to be the reality of his situation.⁴¹ [13] In the absence of a teleological end for man that was beyond doubt, or more specifically, of absolute certainty, Hobbes decided to deal with man from the perspective of his most basic elements. According to Voegelin, a fundamental dichotomy characterizes Hobbes's theory of human nature; it is at the same time defined by both an appetite toward pleasure and an aversion to pain.⁴² [14] There is no higher good, no *summum bonum* towards which man's nature is compelled. There is only pleasure and pain, and happiness is the fulfillment of the desires to attain pleasure and

³⁹ [11] Ibid., p. 160-161.

⁴⁰ [12] Ibid., p. 184-186.

⁴¹ [13] Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas, Volume VII: The New Order and Last Orientation*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 25*, (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press), p. 59-62.

⁴² [14] Ibid., p. 62.

avoid pain. But because man is forced, of necessity, to pursue his desires in a natural world of scarcity in which other men also live, conflict exists as a necessary part of man's existence.

The new psychology that Hobbes presented in his aggregate of symbols expressed the depth of this ever-present conflict. Since man is always in competition, what secures his victory and the fulfillment of his desires is his power. Man's only concern is with the greatness of his power, that is, the ways in which he can further secure his future felicity. Pride, then, is the derivative of man's existential situation; man can concern himself with his own greatness only when the meaning of his life is a product of a competition with others like him. Moreover, because pride is the derivative of the desires and has no structure within which it can orient itself, it admits of excess, excess that ultimately becomes madness.

Hobbes's new psychology characterizes man in terms of sensual self-interest; his existential nature ranges from being proud to obsessive vanity to madness. For Voegelin, this new psychology was the way in which Hobbes understood the Puritan movement.⁴³ [15] The grandest expression of madness is to think one's self divinely inspired, and then to translate that belief into immanent and revolutionary political action. Hobbes's answer to the Puritan problem is to reinvent man, constructing a hypothetical state of nature in which man, defined by this new psychology, exists as a radically autonomous individual. Man's new nature is defined by radical self-interest, and his existential situation escalates to a war of all-against-all. Man's basic desires to gain pleasure and avoid pain are played out on the field of life and death competition. Hobbes's solution is to institute the Leviathan, the third of his aggregate of symbols.

⁴³ [15] Ibid., p. 64.

Since there is no *summum bonum*, a community of men cannot be constructed from a common social bond. By constructing a new psychology and human nature predicated on appetite and aversion, however, Hobbes is able to institute a society based on a *summum malum*. The greatest of all desires is the fear of death, a fear to which even those stricken with madness are susceptible. Man, desperate to get out of this state of nature plagued by an ever-present possibility of death, surrenders his right to seek what will fulfill his appetite for pleasure in exchange for allaying his aversion to death. Agreeing to the contract breaks down the radically autonomous individual; all that remains once the contract is final is the sovereignty of the omnipotent mortal god.

The problem of public order for Voegelin's Hobbes, then, is solved in and through the creation of the Leviathan. The Leviathan is the unquestionable arbiter of truth, and as Voegelin points out, affects both the spiritual and legal closure of the state.⁴⁴ [16] This culmination of Hobbes's political philosophy in the form of the mortal god Leviathan is the first step to understanding Voegelin's perspective on modernity. Hobbes's historical situation was shaped by the growing presence of Gnostic movements in the sphere of political reality. The tendency to collapse the temporal and spiritual orders symbolized in Augustine's thought and replace them with Joachitic symbols reached political significance in Hobbes's time, demanding a response to the immanent threat to public order. In doing so, however, Hobbes himself appropriated several Gnostic elements, rendering his solution almost as dangerous as the problem it was meant to cure:

Hobbes in his zeal has contributed importantly to the understanding of the totalitarian state; his recipes for the total spiritual and intellectual control of the people are followed to the letter by present totalitarian governments, perfected by modern techniques. And this technique of control

44 [16] Ibid., p. 68-70.

by the mortal God is probably the inevitable instrument of peaceful order among men who have lost their immortal God.⁴⁵ [17]

The political philosophy of Voegelin's Hobbes, then, is both the product of Gnostic movements and the cause of modern Gnostic political manifestations. By positioning Hobbes at the crossroads of Gnostic influences and modern development, Voegelin's interpretation sets the stage for a comprehensive understanding of the modern project.

II. Strauss's Hobbes

When turning from Voegelin's interpretation to that of Leo Strauss, one is struck almost immediately by a rather obvious, yet fundamental, difference from what has gone before. Whereas Voegelin demanded that his reader come to terms with the influence of history on Hobbes's political philosophy, Strauss's approach demands a completely different orientation – one that is almost entirely devoid of historical context. In the only book Strauss devoted singularly to the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, there is nothing like the treatment of history offered by Voegelin present in the examination.⁴⁶ [18] The difference of orientation may be summed up for now in this way: according to Voegelin, – . . . the substance of history is to be found on the level of experience, not on the level of ideas.⁴⁷ [19] For Strauss, the exact opposite is true. Strauss's hermeneutical approach,

⁴⁵ [17] Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁶ [18] Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952). This also holds true for Strauss's other writings that deal with Hobbes in the context of other examinations.

⁴⁷ [19] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, p. 125.

then, is first and foremost a systematic study of ideas, and history is relevant to the study of political philosophy only in so far as it represents accurately the substance of those ideas.

A-Historical History

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The study of political philosophy for one who adopts Strauss's approach is essentially a student's study of an ongoing dialogue carried out over the course of more than two full millennium by a handful of the most intelligent and influential thinkers of all time. To say that the substance of history is on the level of ideas is to say that history is driven and directed by ideas, ideas that are not themselves the product of history. Strauss's pantheon of political philosophers includes those men whose ideas drive the direction of human thought and history. These men are not conditioned by their historical circumstances the way other men are; they are able, by becoming fully aware of themselves through philosophy, to change the future of thinking and history with what they understand to be the truth. According to Leo Strauss, Thomas Hobbes is one of these fundamentally influential human beings, for Hobbes believed that he was affecting a great intellectual change.⁴⁸ [20] Hobbes's political philosophy, from his own point of view, must be understood as the culmination of the history of political philosophy with a notion of the political things that is true simply.

Strauss's Hobbes affects his break by challenging all that had gone before. Most importantly was the tradition of classical political philosophy, a tradition that included such fundamental thinkers as Plato and Aristotle, and that held a great deal of legitimacy even in Hobbes's time. But Hobbes's idea

⁴⁸ [20] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 166.

for a new political philosophy also went beyond the tradition of the ancients; it included another thinker who also thought of himself as the founder of a new way of thinking. Hobbes's intellectual predecessor was Machiavelli, a man who had already staged a quarrel with the ancients and had believed himself victorious. The influence that Strauss believed Hobbes's political philosophy had on modernity, then, can come to light fully only by understanding the nature of Machiavelli's quarrel with the ancient tradition, the shortcomings Hobbes found in Machiavelli's answer, and what Hobbes himself proposed in order to remedy these shortcomings.

Machiavelli's quarrel with the ancient political philosophers can be stated rather simply:

He rejected classical political philosophy, and therewith the whole tradition of political philosophy in the full sense of the term, as useless: Classical political philosophy had taken its bearings by how man ought to live; the correct way of answering the question of the right order of society consists in taking one's bearings by how men actually do live.⁴⁹ [21]

The standard of political activity for the ancient political philosophers had been virtue, that is to say, the perfection of both one's moral and intellectual characters. Machiavelli disagrees with this; the goodness of a society will be determined by how well it deals with men as they actually are, not as they might become. Political philosophy, if it is to be both a truthful expression of political reality and a prescription for future societies, must lower its standards to raise the possibility of achieving stability and order;

Machiavelli consciously lowers the standards of social action. His lowering of the standards is meant to lead to a higher probability of actualization of that scheme which is constructed in accordance

⁴⁹ [21] Ibid., p. 178

with the lowered standards. Thus, the dependence on chance is reduced: chance will be conquered.⁵⁰ [22]

Machiavelli could justify this new standard only by first rejecting the one the ancients had championed. That rejection, however, required more than characterizing the ancient philosophies as utopian. It required rejecting the notion of virtue that underlies the ancient schemes — only if the ancient notion of virtue was proved wrong could the standard of politics be justifiably lowered. Machiavelli accomplished this by rejecting the ancient political virtue *par excellence*: justice. According to Strauss, — Machiavelli justified his demand for a — realistic — political philosophy by reflections on the foundations of civil society, and this means ultimately by reflection on the whole within which man lives. —⁵¹ [23] All societies are founded on acts that are fundamentally unjust, and as such, justice itself can be nothing more than positive law; — all legitimacy has its root in illegitimacy; all social or moral orders have been established with the help of morally questionable means; civil society has its root not in justice but in injustice.⁵² [24]

Machiavelli affects his break with classical political philosophy by renouncing any assertion that there is support for justice outside of the political order. Man is not by nature inclined toward justice in the way the ancients had thought, nor is he inspired toward justice by some higher force. Outside of political society man is selfish and individualistic and must be compelled to harmonious living; — By nature man is radically selfish. Yet while men are by nature selfish, and nothing but selfish, hence bad,

⁵⁰ [22] Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, p.41.

⁵¹ [23] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 178.

⁵² [24] *Ibid.*, p. 179.

they can become social, public spirited, or good.❖53 [25] By suggesting that justice is a creation of civil society, and that civil society must be constructed according to how men actually are as opposed to what they may become, Machiavelli reorients the way political philosophy deals with the problems of political order. Replacing the ancient notion of justice as the goal of political societies with a more ❖realistic❖ goal increases the probability that the goal is achieved. But what is substituted in place of justice is crucially important, for the goal must be one that can order society while being achievable for naturally selfish and self-seeking men. The answer that Machiavelli proposes, according to Strauss, is the common good of existing societies, which is to say those things by virtue of which societies are created and maintained:

By the common good we must understand the objectives actually pursued by all societies. These objectives are: freedom from foreign domination, stability or rule of law, prosperity, glory or empire. Virtue in the effectual sense of the word is the sum of habits which are required for or conducive to this end. It is this end, and this end alone, which makes our actions virtuous. Everything done effectively for the sake of this end is good. This end justifies every means.54 [26]

The achievable political goal in the realm of radically selfish, if not evil, individuals is the common good of those individuals; the political virtue *par excellence* in the new scheme is that which binds and effectively holds individuals together.

For Strauss, Machiavelli affected the break with the classical tradition by substituting a wholly new understanding of man, and hence, political society. As was mentioned before, however, Hobbes believed that he, and not Machiavelli, was the founder of modern political philosophy. Hobbes could

53 [25] Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, p. 42.

54 [26] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

only assert this by disagreeing with the alternative Machiavelli proposed as a substitute to the classical tradition. Machiavelli based his alternative on the notion that political society preceded justice, and hence, that justice had no basis in nature. Hobbes found this supposition untenable. That all societies in all parts of the world throughout all of human history were founded on fundamental acts of injustice was too much to assume for a thinker who sought certainty where none existed before. According to Strauss,

For certainly Hobbes took justice much more seriously than Machiavelli had done. He may even be said to have defended the cause of justice: he denies that it is of the essence of civil society to be founded on crime. To refute Machiavelli's fundamental contention may be said to be the chief purpose of Hobbes's famous doctrine about the state of nature. He accepted the traditional notion that justice is not merely the work of society but that there is a natural right.⁵⁵ [27]

Strauss's Hobbes agreed with Machiavelli that the classical tradition aimed too high. The substitution offered by Machiavelli, however, was equally as flawed. By rejecting the notion that justice was anything more than positive law, Machiavelli, from Hobbes's perspective, had no basis upon which to affect a wholly new philosophical teaching. If there is no justice prior to the inception of society, then it is impossible to say that all societies are founded upon an injustice. For Strauss's Hobbes, there must be something that is right by nature, and this fundamental right, whatever it may be, will provide the foundation for a true political teaching:

It was the difficulty implied in the substitution of merely political virtue for moral virtue or the difficulty implied in Machiavelli's admiration for the lupine policies of republican Rome that induced Hobbes to attempt the restoration of the moral principles of politics, i.e., of natural law, on the plane of Machiavelli's realism.⁵⁶ [28]

⁵⁵ [27] Ibid., p. 48.

⁵⁶ [28] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 179.

The New Political Approach

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The answer to the challenge posed by Machiavelli, for Strauss's Hobbes, was to start from the beginning. In order to prove Machiavelli wrong, Hobbes needed to find the most basic premise from which all political order was derived. But this was no easy task, for as Strauss points out, "reason (according to Hobbes) is impotent because reason or humanity have no cosmic support: the universe is unintelligible, and nature dissociates men."⁵⁷ [29] Hobbes's solution was to look to the one element of nature that was intelligible. Man's nature is intelligible because it is both the source and product of man himself. While reason cannot penetrate the depths that separate and keep all matter unintelligible, it can, under the right circumstances, understand both itself and that which it creates. And those things that are artificial, which man himself creates "such as human institutions and political orders" can be understood because they are extensions of the nature to which they owe their existence. There is, then, a duality in man's nature, one that gives him something with which he can create, as well as the ability to affect such a creation. Hobbes was forced to look for the starting point of political society in the nature of man, or more specifically, in the nature of men who are not now or have ever been a part of political society.

When one examines human nature unencumbered by the pressures brought to bear upon it by civil society, one finds, according to Hobbes, radically autonomous individuals. This specific aspect is not

⁵⁷ [29] Ibid., p. 201. Parentheses added.

in itself new, as Machiavelli made the same observation when examining men as he thought them truly to be. The uniqueness of Hobbes's observation, according to Strauss, is that man's nature, while disassociating him, also endows him with a basic and fundamental right. Every human is born with the most basic and fundamental desire to preserve his own life, that is, every man may use whatever means is necessary to preserve his life and avoid violent death. Pre or a-political man is animated by the responsibility for the preservation of his person, and as such, he is put into a fierce competition with other men over the means to secure that preservation. Man's most basic condition, according to Strauss's Hobbes, is a state where his nature reigns supreme, which is to say, a state where the most basic and fundamental fact is a war of all against all; this means that not the glitter and glamour of glory or pride but terror of fear of death stands at the cradle of civil society: not heroes, if fratricidal and incestuous heroes, but naked, shivering poor devils were the founders of civilization.⁵⁸

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Strauss's Hobbes finds man's foremost and most intelligible condition in the state of nature. This doctrine, if it can be so called, is Hobbes's way of answering both the ancient tradition and Machiavelli's alternative. Instead of finding his starting point in a teleological end that required both perfection and sociability, Hobbes saw fit to begin his political teaching from the most basic and elementary point of existence. Expressed in a slightly different manner, whereas the ancients began from the end or the ceiling, Hobbes began from the beginning or the floor; death takes the place of the telos. Or, to preserve the ambiguity of Hobbes's thought, let us say that the fear of violent death expresses most forcefully the most powerful and the most fundamental of all natural desires, the initial

58 [30] Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, p. 48.

desire, the desire for self-preservation.⁵⁹ [31] And in opposition to the alternative proposed by Machiavelli, Hobbes's state of nature teaching offered a basis for justice and society with more legitimacy than a willful act of injustice on the part of a founder.

The natural right of every man to protect his life translates into the foundation of political society through the state of nature doctrine. The state's most fundamental role, if not its only true role, is to ensure the preservation of each citizen's life by mitigating the competition that is inherent in the state of nature. By founding political society on natural right, Hobbes was able to construct a political teaching that had an end, but an end that preserves the first right of nature, not the teleological end of perfection. The political virtue *par excellence* for Strauss's Hobbes remains as justice, but it is a form of justice whose definition has been reduced to include only those virtues that maintain peace and tranquility — those virtues that mitigate the horrors found in the state of nature:

Just as Machiavelli reduced virtue to the political virtue of patriotism, Hobbes reduced virtue to the social virtue of peaceableness. Those forms of human excellence which have no direct or unambiguous relation to peaceableness — courage, temperance, magnanimity, liberality, to say nothing of wisdom — cease to be virtues in the strict sense. Justice (in conjunction with equity and charity) does remain a virtue, but its meaning undergoes a radical change.⁶⁰ [32]

The end of the political society, then, is not to live well, but merely to live. Those things that promote peaceful living become virtues for Strauss's Hobbes, virtues that take their bearings from the new quintessential good. And in so far as man is now sheltered in civil society from the horrors that plague pre-political man, his concern with his own self-preservation and the fulfillment of his desires can rise to an unprecedented new level; — respectable, pedestrian hedonism, sobriety without sublimity and

⁵⁹ [31] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 181.

⁶⁰ [32] *Ibid.*, p. 187.

subtlety, protected or made possible by power politics this is the meaning of Hobbes's correction of Machiavelli.⁶¹ [33]

The political philosophy of Strauss's Hobbes stands as a fundamental cornerstone for much of what is now known to be the modern project. By disagreeing with the ancients about the end of man and political society, Hobbes was able to set the stage for a political teaching that could be achieved in the realm of political reality. In also rejecting Machiavelli's alternative to the ancient solution, Hobbes could maintain a notion of right by nature that antedated political society, and that could serve as a foundation for a stable and peaceful community. In this way, the political philosophy of Strauss's Hobbes helps one to understand modernity because it is the first true attempt to articulate a teaching of rights or pre-political justice, both of which are commonplace themes in the modern mindset. Moreover, for Strauss's Hobbes, right antedates duty. This rather simple pattern, one that completely reversed the ancient paradigm, serves as a basis for the whole classical liberal tradition upon which so much of modernity is either founded upon or takes as its starting point; If we call liberalism that political doctrine which regards as the fundamental political fact the rights, as distinguished from the duties, of man and which identifies the function of the state with the protection or the safeguarding of those rights, we must say that the founder of liberalism was Hobbes.⁶² [34] The relevance of reading Hobbes for Strauss, then, can be easily summed up by taking seriously the latter's first statement of the thought of the former: Thomas Hobbes regarded himself as the founder of political philosophy or political science.⁶³ [35]

61 [33] Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy*, p. 49.

62 [34] Leo Strauss, *Natural Rights and History*, p. 182.

63 [35] *Ibid.*, p. 166.

III. Comparing Voegelin and Strauss's Hobbes

Having now explored the ways both Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss read and understood Thomas Hobbes, what can be garnered if we compare these two interpretations? While a complete answer to this question would require an endeavor that exceeds the scope of this essay, a few brief and preliminary remarks are in order. Earlier in this examination, a key difference came to light in our transition between Voegelin's interpretation and that of Strauss's. The hermeneutical approach of both thinkers differs with regard to the relevance each places on the notion of history. Voegelin and Strauss, to be sure, have different conceptions of history. The ways in which these conceptions differ signify something about how they approach the writings of Thomas Hobbes, and how those approaches fit within their respective paradigms.

To understand Thomas Hobbes as a political thinker, it is necessary, according to Voegelin, first to understand the situation in which Hobbes found himself when he wrote his political works. From Voegelin's perspective, Hobbes falls within a philosophy of history whose structure, but not substance, has been fully realized. Hobbes's situation, that of a civil war concurrent with the rise of Gnostic movements, produced the historical experiences with which Hobbes had to deal. These experiences also conditioned the response that Hobbes would offer to the situation; a response that, through the course of history, would influence future events and institutions, particularly modern totalitarian governments. Hobbes's thought, then, can be understood from Voegelin's perspective as a politically relevant philosophy in whose form the tensions of pre-modern history came to full realization, and which in turn articulates a responses that provides a foundation for the modern world.

Strauss's interpretation does not differ from Voegelin's over the importance of Hobbes to the modern world. For Strauss, Hobbes is clearly important in order to understand the modern project. In fact, if Hobbes is truly the author of the modern project in the way that he himself says he is, his writings are of utmost importance. The difference between the two interpretations, as has been said before, lies in the relevance of history. For Strauss, Hobbes was a first rate philosopher who shaped the course of history and modernity by stepping outside of history, to the realm of ideas on whose plane he could affect a change in theoretical and practical perspectives that Machiavelli had attempted but failed. Modernity, for Strauss, is defined most easily and properly as a break with the classic tradition. But for this break to be complete, it had to be done properly, which is to say, it had to be done effectively. Strauss's Hobbes thought that he had truly affected this break because he was the first, in his opinion, to offer a substantive and consistent alternative to the ancient paradigm that could serve as a stable and peaceful base for political society.

The political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, for Strauss, must be taken on its own terms; his teaching must be studied as if it were true simply and relevant for all times and societies. To understand modernity and the influence Hobbes had on it is to understand his arguments as he understood them himself. Only once one has done this can the audience to whom those arguments are directed be properly understood, and the way in which this ongoing philosophical dialogue shapes subsequent thinking be made clear. It would not be too far of a stretch, in light of these two approaches to characterize their relationship by saying that, for Voegelin, Strauss represents a variant of the Gnostic experience, and for Strauss, that Voegelin embodies the essence of historicism.