

The Political implication of Hobbes' Conception of God

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I. Introduction: the conception of God in Hobbes' Political Philosophy

It is uncontroversial that the main purpose of Hobbes' *Leviathan* is to provide human being, at least English men, the way to attain internal peace. Hobbes' *Leviathan*¹ makes the Sovereign as interpreter and executor of natural law. Being the ultimate mediator on earth, Hobbes' sovereign rewards the obedient and punishes the disobedient. Since natural law is God's Law, and human law is the positive law that takes natural law into practice, the duty of sovereign inevitably contains theological implication.

The maintenance of civil society depends on the power over life and death, and a commonwealth should not perpetuate with other having a greater power than giving greater reward and punishment than life and death. According to Hobbes, eternal life and torment are greater than *life present* and *death of nature*. Since Hobbes accepts the eschatological vision : that Christ will return to restore the kingdom of his father on earth and reign over us on Judgment Day, and the righteousness will be given life eternal and the damn will suffer eternal death. Consequently, the interpretation of God's Will must be crucial to Hobbes' political theory.

And hereupon two questions may be asked - (1)Can we get the idea of God? (2) How do we know God? Hobbes considers that "the nature of God is incomprehensible" and the attribute we give him is nothing but most honorable name.² This does not suggest that Hobbes' denial of existence of God. Hobbes delineates human being as the animal lust for the caring of knowing causes, they should reason from seen effect to the next and immediate cause, and finally find the

¹ I cited the text of *Leviathan* by chapter and paragraph number, as given in Edwin Curley edition-see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan with Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, ed. E. Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) (hereafter cited as *Leviathan*). Curley notes the significant difference between Latin edition and English edition in his footnotes.

²Hobbes, *Leviathan*,xxxiv,4.

first mover which is eternal cause of all things - that is God.³ God plays the role as epistemic limitation and genesis of universe simultaneously.

God reveals his will through prophecy and revelation, and the Sacred History is constituted of God's prophetic word. It follows that God can't be known through reason, but through history. The distinctions between true and false prophet may contribute to the understanding of God's Will. The validity of Sacred History is not concerning about the way of reasoning, but faith. Hobbes views 'faith in the man' as 'belief' both of the man and his saying.⁴ Our whole body of faith can be reduced to a system of belief, which consists of the author and the messenger that pass the Will of God to human-being. There is a crucial difference between the authority constituted of faith and the authority erected by reasoning. This difference exist in the whole scheme of *Leviathan*⁵

Is Hobbes' political philosophy independent of his theology? If the answer is negative, another question may follow: does conception of God play an essential role in the political philosophy of Hobbes? In this essay, the question must be approached in two ways (1) Hobbes sets an ambiguous distinction between possibility of knowing God and the existence of God, he questions the former and insists on the latter. The essay intends to clarify such two concepts of God. (2) Through analysis the two conceptions of God, this essay intends to explore 'the covenant with God in Hobbes'

³ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, VII,6.

⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, VII,7.

⁵ Many writings on *Leviathan* ignores Part3&Part4. They seem to think that Hobbes do not sincerely believe in God, and the bulk of writing may be meaningless or just a rhetoric device. In Methodological sense, J.G.A.Pocock suggests that many historians of philosophy have assumed that the history can be subsumed under the history of successive philosophic systems. PartIII&PartIV of *Leviathan* are not philosophy, and thus the overlooking of these parts seems to be reasonable. Hobbes attempts to set the proper distinction between philosophy and faith in PartI of *Leviathan*. In Chapter viii, Hobbes said, "The Scripture was written to show unto men the kingdom of God, and to prepare their minds to become His obedient subjects, leaving the world, and the philosophy thereof, to the disputation of men for the exercising of their natural reason." (*Leviathan*, VIII,26) See J.G.A.Pocock, "Time, History and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes", in the *Diversity of History: Essays in Honour of Sir Hebert Butterfield*, ed. J.H.Elliott and H.G. Koenigsberger (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), reprinted in J.G.A.Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time* (London & Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 148-201. Citations here refer to the latter work.

theological writing. Given God is incomprehensible and omnipotent, does Hobbes deny the possibility of covenant with God?

This essay intends to conclude that although such two conceptions of God may overlap or contradict with each other, they appear as a subtle thread running through Hobbes' political thought.

II. Conception of God: How to prove the existence of incomprehensible God?

This section deals with the relation between Hobbes' theology and philosophy. Recent writings on this issue divide into two groups regarding the role of religion in Hobbes' political thought. One side claims that the materialism and suspect atheism of Hobbes can support the argumentation of *Leviathan* independent of his theology. The other side claims that the obligation of natural law derives from the command of God in Scripture. In order to get the better understanding of the issue, we should clarify the relation between theology and philosophy in Hobbes' thought.

Although Hobbes' political thought may contain philosophy and theology together, he separates theology from philosophy; then this section attempts to unravel the overlapping between theology and philosophy in Hobbes, and examine his conception of God in both fields.

In the first chapter of *De Corpore*, Hobbes sets the distinction divorcing between philosophy and theology. As he emphasizes, the attribute of God cannot be approached through philosophical way. In the polemics against Descartes' *Meditations*, Hobbes cites Descartes' *Mediation VI* and remarks on it.

When I think a man, I am aware of an idea or image made up of a certain shape and colour; and I can doubt whether the image is the likeness of a man or not; and the same applies when I think of the sky. When I think of a chimera, I am aware of an idea or an image; and I can be in doubt as whether it is the likeness of a non-existent animal which is capable of existing, or one which may or may not have existed at some previous time.

But when I think of an angel, what comes to mind is an image, now of a flame, now of a beautiful child with wings; I feel sure that this image has likeness to an angel, and hence that it is not the idea of an angel...

In the same way we have no idea or image corresponding to the sacred name of God. This is why we are forbidden to worship God on the form of an image.⁶

Hobbes rejects the possibility of having an image of God. Only after perceiving by sense, can we start to conceive. We cannot conceive a thing that cannot be sensed. We have no image of God, and then the name we attribute to the nature of God is nothing more than to honor God or embody the greatness or power of God. The Hobbessian incomprehensibility of God can be reduced to the following syllogism:

- (a) If X cannot be sensed, X cannot be conceived.
- (b) We have no image of God; God cannot be sensed.
- (c) We are incapable of knowing God.

According to Hobbes, 'the incomprehensibility of God' does not follow' non-existence of God.' But, can Hobbes prove the existence of an incomprehensible thing in philosophy? Hobbes insists on the "existence of God," and he says:

...though they cannot have any idea of him in their mind answerable to his nature. For as a man that is born blind, hearing men talk of warming

⁶ For Hobbes' critics of Descartes, see 'Third Set of Objections With the Author's Replies' in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume II*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch.(Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press,1985),p.121-137.

themselves by the fire, and being brought to warm himself by the same, may easily conceive, and assure himself, there is somewhat there, which men call fire and is the cause of the heat he feels, but cannot imagine what it is like, nor have an idea of it in his mind such as they have that see it; so also, by the visible things of this world, and their admirable order, a man may conceive there is a cause of them, which men call God, and yet not have an idea or image of him in his mind.⁷

It is worthy noting that the possibility of demonstrating God's existence may oppose the argument for our failure of knowing God. Hobbes excludes theology from his philosophy project. The doctrine of God is 'eternal, ingenerable, incomprehensible, and in whom there is nothing neither to divide nor to compound, nor any generation to be conceived.'⁸ According to Hobbes, philosophical activity is the way acquiring causal relation through ratiocination. After discussing body and accident in Part II of *De Corpore*, the discussion of causal relation occurs. For Hobbes, only bodies in motion can cause effects. Any quantitative or qualitative change can be elucidated in causality of bodies in motions. Since we have no image of God, and therefore, we are not sure whether the object working upon the organs of sense is God. We cannot sense God empirically. Can Hobbes acquire the cause through uncertain effect?

Hobbes takes the warm fire as an example, attempting to conceive God's existence without experiencing the being directly. Reoccurring to hypothetical way: if X exists, X must have a cause. The earliest presentation of proof for God's existence is in *Elements of Law*, demonstrating the existence of God can be reduced to the causal argument. Hobbes says:

⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XI, 25.

⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Philosophy: The First Section, Concerning Body* in *The Collected Works of Thomas Hobbes Volume I*, originally collected and edited by Sir William Molesworth (London, 1839) This collected works are reprinted with a new introduction by G.A.J.Rogers (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1992)(here cited as *De Corpore* and this article cited the text of *De Corpore* by chapter and paragraph number as given in the reprinted edition.), I, 8.

For the effects we acknowledge naturally, do necessarily include a power of their producing, before they were produced; and that power presupposeth something existent that hath such power; and the thing so existing with power to produce, if it were not eternal, must needs have been produced by somewhat before it; and that again by something else before that: till we come to an eternal, that is to say, to the first power of all powers, and first cause of all causes. And this is it which all men call by the name of GOD: implying eternity, incomprehensibility, and omnipotency.⁹

In subsequent writings of Hobbes, such argumentation is confirmed for many times. In *De Cive*, we can find another version of the same argument: "...in which God the first mover of all things, produces natural effects through the order of secondary cause."¹⁰In the same book, Hobbes attempts to reveal two propositions that "(1) world is eternal and (2) world is God" may result in the denial of God's existence. His prove is a *reduction ad absurdum*. Here is a terse version of it. Suppose that World is eternal. Then World is not created and there is no cause of World. From this it follows that there is no God.¹¹

In short, in *Elements of Law* and *De Cive* Hobbes stresses the incomprehensibility of God, the name we attribute to God's attribute aiming to honour his greatness. Incapable of knowing God is tempted to conclude that God is not existent. For Hobbes, through acquiring causal relation continually, natural reason still plays an essential role to persuade us of God's existence. Obviously, the demonstration of God's existence is not in religious sense, but to some extent explained philosophically. The distinction between philosophy and theology seems to be blurred.

⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law: Natural and Politics*, edited with an introduction by J.G.A.Gaskin (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)(here cited as *Elements of Law* and this article cited the text of *Elements of Law* by chapter and paragraph number as given in the Gaskin's edition),XI, 2.

¹⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive, or On The Citizen*, edited and translated by Richard Tuck and M. Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) (here cited as *De Cive* and this article cited the text of *De Cive* by chapter and paragraph number as given in the Tuck's edition), XIII, 1.

¹¹ Hobbes, *De Cive*, XV, 14.

But, if we comparing such position (in *Elements of Law* and *De Cive*) with the polemics work written in 1642-1643, Hobbes seems to deal the issue from the different perspective. After publishing *De Cive*, Hobbes started to deal with the issue, which is concerned by the first section of his philosophy. Hobbes commented on Thomas White's writing, *De Mundo Dialogi Tres*(1642)point by point.¹² The central issue between them, however, concerns the relationship between theology and philosophy. White attempted to demonstrate the existence of God in the third dialogue of his *De Mundo*, and this provides the best target for Hobbes. Hobbes refutes White's point and reveals the incoherence of White's argumentation. Two philosophers differ concerning the possibility of demonstrating God's existence. White tries to demonstrate the existence of God: God is in itself its own cause and the cause of all. As Galileo influence looming over the debate, White attempts to give philosophical explanation to theology.

For Hobbes, we should be pious to God in worship, and any private interpretation of the article of faith is inequitable. In *Anti-White*, Hobbes says," It is our purpose not to philosophize about God but to honour him." According to Hobbes, we could say nothing of God but his existence.

Personally, while I hold that the nature of God is unfathomable, and that propositions are a kind of language by which we express our concepts of the nature of things, I incline to the view that no proposition about the

¹² Thomas Hobbes, *Thomas White's DE Mundo Examined*, translated from Latin by Harold Whitemore Jones (London: Bradford University Press, 1976) (here cited as *Anti-White*, and cited the text of *Anti-White* by chapter and paragraph number as given in this edition.). The manuscript criticism of White's *De Mundo* was composed in Paris, which saw the light in 1973. Richard Tuck places *AntiWhite* as a best beginning in a study of Hobbes' theology. Arrigo Pacchi suggests that the detailed discussion of this work may form the background of *De Corpore*. See Richard Tuck, "The Civil Religion of Thomas Hobbes" in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. N.Phillipson and Q.Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993),p.120-138.Arrigo Pacchi, "Hobbes and the Problem of God" in *Perspectives on Thomas Hobbes*, ed. G.A.J Rogers and Alan Ryan (New York, U.S.: Oxford University Press, 1988),p.171-187.

nature of God can be true save this one: God exists, and no other title correctly describes the nature of God other than the word 'being.' Everything else, I say, pertains not to the explanation of philosophical truth, but to proclaiming the states of mind that govern our wish to praise, magnify and honour God. Hence those words 'God sees, understands, wishes, acts, brings to pass' and other similar proposition which have only one meaning for us – 'motion' – display, not the Divine Nature, but our own piety- [a piety of us] who desires to ascribe to Him the names most worthy honour among us. Therefore the [words cited] are rather oblations than propositions, and the names [listed], if we were to apply them to God as we understand them, would be called blasphemies and sins against God's ordinance (which forbids us to take His name in vain) rather than true propositions. [Again] neither propositions nor His nature are to be argued over, but are a part of our worship and are evidences of a mind that honours God. Propositions that confer honour are correctly enunciated about God, but the opposite ones irreligiously; we may reverently and as Christians say of God that He is the author of every act, because it is honourable to do so, but to say 'God is author of sin' is sacrilegious and profane. There is no contradiction in the matter, however, for, as I said, the words under discussion are not the propositions of people philosophizing but the actions of those who pay homage. A contradiction is found, [wherever one is found,] in propositions alone.¹³

At this time, Hobbes rejects any philosophical explanation to theology. Hobbes concludes that any philosophical elucidation of God's relation to world, or problem of evil will result in profane.

If the interpretation of *Anti-White* is correct, the question arises: why does Hobbes change his attitude toward theology and philosophy during 1640-1643? *Anti-White* is not well known until it was published in 1973. A.P. Martinich refutes the views that Hobbes believes in the unpublished book than the published (*De Cive, Elements of Law*) sincerely. In *Anti-White*, Hobbes rejects the possibility of demonstrating God's existence. Martinich thinks Hobbes's theological position in

¹³ Hobbes, *Anti-White*, XXXV, 16.

Anti-White is compatible with other works. For Martinich, two questions should be taken into account seriously. First, there is no evidence to reveal Hobbes' rejection of publishing the book, only that he intended to publish *Anti-White*. Furthermore, Martinich suggests that the necessity of clarifying the distinction between 'demonstration' and 'proof' in Hobbes' philosophy.¹⁴ According to Martinich's reading, demonstration is a kind of proof for existence, but not every proof is a kind of demonstration necessarily. Demonstration is the concatenation of valid syllogistic reasoning. Demonstrations consist of necessary premise and conclusion. Only the necessary proposition can be its premise, and syllogism consists of definitions. 'Therefore, demonstrable truth lies in logical inferences, and in every demonstration the term that forms the subject of the conclusion demonstrated is taken as the name, not of a thing that exists, but of one supposed to exist. A conclusion, therefore has a force that is not categorical, but is merely hypothetical.'¹⁵

If we accept Martinich's suggestions to set a clear distinction between 'demonstration' and 'proof' in Hobbes' thought, then the problem of Hobbes' ambiguous attitude toward the demonstration of God's existence in various places can be resolved. The belief in the existence of some object is on the basis of our sensation, but we are lack of experience linkage with God. Although God cannot be sensed, the demonstrative procedure still provides us a rational ground for believing in God's existence.

Arrigo Pacchi also notes the two different images of God in Hobbes' philosophy and theology.¹⁶ The philosophical God is the same as necessity itself, causally connected in a process of sequent events. Theological God is an invisible and

¹⁴ Martinich stresses the importance of 'demonstration' as a technical term. See A.P.Martinich, *A Hobbes Dictionary* (U.S.: Blackwell, 1995), p.123 -126.

¹⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Anti-White*, XXVI,2.

¹⁶ Arrigo Pacchi, 'Hobbes and the Problem of God', p.186-187.

physically personal being which warrants human society orderly. For Pacchi, Hobbes' philosophical God not only warrants the operation of moving bodies in a material world, but also suggests the materialist interpretation of Bible that brings the supernaturally inexplicable world into earthly materialistic one, which can be decoded in rational terms.

Hobbes' conception of God has been explored in those places where the connection between his belief in God's existence and the impossibility of knowing God seems to be troublesome. It is suggested that Hobbes still attempts to persuade his reader of God's existence rationally regardless of His unfathomable nature. The problem remains. Since God is omnipotent and inconceivable, does Hobbes deny the possibility of the covenant with God?

III

In the chapter XXXI of *Leviathan*, Hobbes asserts that God has twofold kingdom: Natural and Prophetic. In natural kingdom, God reigns over men on the basis of his omnipotent power. The prophetic kingdom is a peculiar one, which is instituted through establishing a covenant between God and his chosen people. This covenant is constituted by votes of the people in Israel upon God's promising land.¹⁷ In his view, contract is a 'mutual transferring of right.'¹⁸ Covenant is a contract in which one (or both) trustful parties perform in the future. Since God is incomprehensible and omnipotent, the questions arise: (1) how could man covenant with an unconceivable being? (2) why an omnipotent one needs to lose A in order to gain B back?

What is Hobbes' reply to these criticisms? For Hobbes, there may be an epistemological problem in covenant with God directly. 'Only through mediation of

¹⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXV, 2.

¹⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIV, 9.

such as God speaketh to', can 'covenant with God' become possible.¹⁹The mediator is necessary to make sure whether or not our covenant is accepted.

Let us turn our concern from epistemological question to another. According to Hobbes, men can lay their right to everything in order to attain common peace through common consent. And therefore, there is no reason why should not obey a man who has irresistible power that can protect us according to his discretion. If we examine Hobbes' interpretation of the Book of Job, these replies seem to be inconsistent.

How does the Book of Job relate to Hobbes' political thought? Here is the story. Job is an upright and prosperous person. Satan doubts that his steadfastness and pious attitude is on the basis of his felicity. Satan suggests testing Job's faith, to make sure that the Job's obedience is derived from his loyalty to God, not from the rewards he received. Satan gets God's permission to test Job in painful and unpleasant way. Satan increasingly inflicts horrible sufferings on Job. Even the property and children was destroyed, he rejects the suggestion of his wife and still stays firmly in a position of loyalty to God. Job's friends, which are called comforters witness the suffering and doubt the innocence of Job. They says: 'God is just. He would not permit these terrible things to happen to you unless you deserved them. So however innocent you may appear to be, however innocent you may think you are, you must have done something to deserve what is happening to you.' Job asserts his innocence and demands God to make clear his fault. Out of whirlwind, God replies Job with questions: 'Where were thou when I laid the foundation of the earth?'

Hobbes relates the discussion of the Book of Job into his explication of God's kingdom by nature. In his view, the problem of evil: 'why evil men often prosper, and good men suffer adversity' should be decided by God, 'not by arguments derived from

¹⁹ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIV, 23.

Job's sin, but his own power.' ²⁰Hobbes points out that God refutes the doctrine of comforters through helping Job restoring to a state of happiness which is more prosperous than before. Job keeps his faith firmly and passes the trial. God's absolute sovereignty and man's unconditional obligation to God is based on his omnipotence.

Edwin Curley suggests that the comforter's argument and God's reply represent the different strands in Biblical thought.²¹ The one is covenant strand: The signification of God's justice implies in keeping his promise to reward the loyal and punish the disobedient. The other is absolutist strand: God has a right to all things in virtue of his irresistible power. His omnipotence incurs our unconditional obligation to Him. Hobbes' philosophy is in the tension between these two competing strands. Furthermore, Curley also reveals the logical faults in Hobbes' interpretation of God's twofold kingdoms. Covenant strand involves the 'mediation doctrine' (such doctrine is called by Curley).²² Only through a mediator, can we make sure whether our covenant is accepted or not. But the question remains. Should the mediator require another mediator to make sure that he knows? Consequently, it may generate an infinite regress logically. The conception of omnipotent God may face another logical difficult. Covenant is mutual transferring of rights. It means both parties try to get something in expense of losing something. Given omnipotence is essential property of God, is God still omnipotent when he lose something? Can God cease to be omnipotent?²³ If God can, He would no longer have irresistible power as before. And then, He will be incapable of reigning over his subject. By strict examination, Curley concludes that Hobbes rejects the possibility of covenant with God.

²⁰ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXXI, 6.

²¹ Edwin Curley, 'The Covenant with God in Hobbes' *Leviathan*', presented at the Hobbes conference in London in May 2001. The article cited here is available at www.sitemaker.umich.edu/emcurley.

²² Edwin Curley, 'The Covenant with God in Hobbes' *Leviathan*', p.4-10.

²³ See William E. Mann, 'Paradoxes of Omnipotence' in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (U.S.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.643-644.

Is Curley's argumentation cogent enough? In the previous, it is suggested that Hobbes' demonstrative procedure can persuade readers of God's existence rationally. If we review Curley's interpretation again, the incomprehensibility of God is his main argument. It follows that mediation doctrine cannot be tenable logically. Granted that Curley's interpretation is totally rejected, although the problem caused by incomprehensible God is partially solved, the mediation doctrine still faces the difficulty of infinite regress. Is there any mediator that can assure the impartiality of the secular sovereign?

It is suggested that the Hobbesian sovereign should be a temporal government in the scheme of sacred history. Secular sovereign plays the role as a lieutenant of God, which is the ultimate mediator on earth and no otherwise. Only in this sense can we get the proper understanding of Hobbes' political thought in the tension between two conceptions of God.

ABSTRACT In *Leviathan*, Hobbes outlines the concept of the "Kingdome of God by Nature" or "Naturall Kingdome of God", terms rarely found in English texts at the time. This claim, he argues, comes with the subversive implication that the church possesses spiritual and temporal authority, and caused great turmoil during the English Civil War. Hobbes' materialism provides the foundation for his conception of human nature and his deduction of the laws of nature in Part 1 and for his theory of sovereignty in Part 2. This same materialism, along with the other principles of biblical exegesis used by Hobbes, forms the foundation for the interpretations of Scripture that are used to argue in Part 3 that the Hobbes political theory is derived from psychology which, in turn, is based on his mechanistic conceptions of Nature. Hobbes, like Machiavelli, was concerned with the secular. Modern political thought. School of distance education. "This is the Generation of that Great Leviathan, or rather of that Mortal God to which we owe under the Immortal God, our peace and defence". Nature and attributes of hobbesian state. Before and after Thomas Hobbes, the concept of political absolutism has been defended by various scholars on various grounds. But Hobbes was the first political thinker to defend absolutism on scientific grounds. Hobbes freed the doctrine of sovereignty of limitations imposed by Jean Bodin and Grotius. Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy A concise and incisive analysis by Sharon A. Lloyd. Thomas Hobbes: social contract. In his account of human psychology and the human condition, Hobbes identifies a first law of nature: "by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved." [*Leviathan*, Ch. VI].