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Hobbes, Human Nature VII.1-2, XII, XI; cf. *De Corpore* XXV.12-13
(Gaskin, 43-44, 70-73, 64-70, cf. 226-28)

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. How is pain defined on Hobbes' mechanical conception of the workings of the mind?
2. How are appetite and fear defined?
3. Explain the connection between will, appetite, fear, and deliberation.
4. When are we said to be at liberty?
5. What is the relation between liberty and deliberation?
6. When is an action said to be voluntary?
7. If terrorists threaten to kill your loved ones unless you smuggle something for them, and you do smuggle the goods, is your action voluntary? Explain Hobbes' reason for answering the question as he does.
8. If, due to an innate character flaw, you are quick to anger, are the actions you perform out of anger voluntary? Explain Hobbes' reason for answering this question as he does.
9. If you will to perform an action, is your willing voluntary?
10. What can we know about God?
11. Why do people believe that God exists?
12. What is the erroneous and what the true conception of spirits?
13. What does a miracle prove?
14. How can we tell whether a revelation, or message, or inspiration that has been given to someone really came from God?
15. What is the basis for the belief that the Christian scripture is the word of God?
16. What side did Hobbes take in the dispute over whether the individual or the Church is to be the ultimate authority in the interpretation of scripture?

NOTES ON THE READING

a. Human nature VI.7-9 *and* XI.7-10. In addition to prudence, or knowledge based on past experience, and philosophical or scientific knowledge, which proceeds by deduction from stipulative definitions of universal names, Hobbes recognized two other grounds for opinion, trust in the testimony of others (*Human nature* VI.7-9) and revelation or "inspiration" (*Human nature* XI.7-10). The definition of opinion (as distinct from prudential or scientific knowledge) is easy to gather from the text and is left to you as an exercise.

Most of what we think we know is in fact not knowledge but opinion based on the testimony of others, who claim either to have had sense experience of something or to be able to demonstrate it. If I have never been to Paris, for instance, then I can only have the opinion that it exists based on the testimony of others. And if I do not know how to demonstrate the Pythagorean theorem, I can only have the opinion that it is true based on the testimony of others who claim that it can in fact be demonstrated.

There is an interesting relation between revelation or inspiration and trust in the testimony of others. Hobbes held that supernatural knowledge is obtained when a supernatural being, an angel, a devil, or God himself, appears to a prophet and tells that person something. The ten commandments that the Christian scripture describes God as having given to Moses on the

mountain are revelations of this kind. The prophet who receives such a message is said to have been inspired.

But how do we know that the message was given to the prophet by a supernatural being and not by some charlatan masquerading as such a being? The traditional answer is that the message would have to be accompanied by a sign to show that it really came from God. Such a sign would be the performance of some deed that it would be beyond the powers of any human being to achieve and that only a supernatural being could perform — a miracle.

However, Hobbes observed that simply receiving a message from a supernatural being, even one backed up by a miracle, is not enough to warrant being inspired by that message. Just as there are wicked people, who lie in their testimony to us, so there are devilish supernatural beings, who may give us false messages. Before we accept a revelation we must know for sure that it came from God or an angel of God, and not a devil.

The test for this, Hobbes claimed, is that the message should conform to what is said in the Christian scripture. No message contrary to what is said in the Christian scripture, and no message given by a being who does not confess the divinity of Christ, could be accepted as a message worthy of credence.

This just pushes the problem back another step. The Christian scripture is itself just a book of revelations received by the Apostles and prophets who saw God or Christ and reported on the miracles that God or Christ performed in their presence. How did they know that those revelations were in fact given by God?

Hobbes took faith in the testimony of other (human) witnesses to support revelation. We trust people whom we respect as being of good and wise character. If those people tell us a story that they got from other good and wise people, who got it from other good and wise people, and so on back to original good and wise eye witnesses, then we trust the story to the extent that we can trust the entire chain of testimony that it is built on. This is what Hobbes took to be the case with the Christian scriptures. We trust that those scriptures report the authentic revelations of God on the strength of our respect for the entire Church (the group of ministers and elders) and the entire Church history (the ministers and elders who made up the Church in the past) that reports it to us. We think that these people are honourable and would not deceive us and so we think that these scriptures are the ones that ought to be believed.

There are obvious problems with this entire account. Just one of them is that it appears to teeter on the brink of a dangerous circularity. The Church as a whole must be only as trustworthy as the first Christians, the Apostles and other followers who actually saw Christ and reported on the miracles Christ performed. But how did these people know that they were being appeared to by God and not by a supernatural being who was impersonating God and giving them a false message? We cannot say, “because the message Christ delivered was in accord with scripture,” because there was no scripture yet. (Or if there was, then the question of the authenticity of that scripture arises and the question just gets pushed back to the authors of that scripture, e.g., Moses.)

Despite its problems Hobbes would have been attracted to the account for personal political reasons. Hobbes’ lifetime spanned one of the most tumultuous periods in British history, the period of the Puritan revolution, Cromwell’s dictatorship, and the Restoration. Events in Britain at the time were driven by sectarian religious commitment. There were two main sects, who for want of better names can be referred to as the Puritans and the Episcopalians. The Puritans believed in the priesthood of all believers and in a deeply inward form of religion that focused on

the individual's direct communication with God. At the time, this form of religious belief was often referred to as "enthusiasm," particularly by those who did not share it and who meant the word as an insult. The Puritans rejected all merely outward forms of worship, such as rituals, ceremonies, statuary, vestments, and holy days, as well as any form of hierarchal or church government. Their egalitarian religious sentiments were closely allied to republican political sentiments and for this reason they did not receive a warm reception from either the Bishops in the Church of England or the Tudor and Stuart monarchs, Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I. The monarchs, particularly James and Charles, attempted to combat the increasingly violent enthusiasm and republicanism of the people by introducing and sustaining a degree of hierarchy, order, and ceremony in the practices of the English Church. These efforts were viewed by the Puritans as attempts to inject what they called "superstition" or Popery back into the church, and aroused even more violent opposition until matters culminated in a civil war, the capture and execution of Charles I by the Puritans, a period of republican government that degenerated into a military dictatorship, and an eventual restoration of the monarchy under Charles II that remained far from peaceable.

The weaknesses of Hobbes' position on religion need to be understood in this context. Hobbes had been profoundly disturbed by the civil and religious strife of his time, and concern with civil and religious strife was never far from his mind (witness the example at the outset of HN IV: "from St. Andrew the mind runneth to St. Peter, because their names are read together; from St. Peter to a stone, for the same cause; from stone to foundation, because we see them together; and for the same cause from foundation to church, from church to people, and from people to tumult"). Even before the civil war got under way, he had fled into exile in France out of fear that his political views on the deference that subjects owe to the sovereign (views that he had developed as part of a project to calm passions and argue against a revolution) would lead to his persecution were he to remain in England should Cromwell gain control. But these same views argued as effectively against a restoration once Cromwell's authority was established, and made Hobbes unpopular with the court in exile. In taking the view on the basis for religious faith that he did Hobbes was trying to combat an extreme enthusiasm that would vest faith simply in the intense, inward conviction of having been born again in the word and filled with certainty of the divine message through an irresistible infusion of the Grace that God arbitrarily disperses to the elect. This enthusiasm had made the English bold enough to overthrow and execute their sovereign. Hobbes found it wild and dangerous. He wanted to found religious faith depend on some sort of more stable and sober communal authority and argue for a degree of respect for an established church and its hierarchy.

b. Human nature VII.1-2 *and* XII. The discussion of prudence, scientific knowledge, trust in testimony, and revelation completes Hobbes' attempt to provide a mechanistic account of the cognitive operations of the mind. The next thing he did was turn to the conative operations, action and will. These, too, he supposed to be mechanically caused. They result from the motions producing desires and aversions in us.

Hobbes' position on the origin of desire and aversion has already been discussed in connection with his account of deliberation in *Human nature* IV. The main points are nicely outlined in *Human nature* VII.1-2 and *De corpore* XXV.12-13. In Human Nature XII, he applied these points to an account of the nature of the will.

As Hobbes understood these matters, when I say that I will something, what I am really saying is that I want or desire it. Desires and wants, however, arise mechanically from the

communication of motions from the brain to the heart, producing pleasure or pain, and thereby desire and aversion, as already discussed in connection with deliberation. If the will is nothing more than desire or aversion, then it, too, must be mechanically caused, and this is just the conclusion that Hobbes proceeded to draw: our wills are not free, but determined by antecedent mechanical causes.

We might object that the will is something more than desire or aversion, and that this is proven by the fact that we do not always will to do what we desire to do or refrain from doing what we have an aversion to doing. But as far as Hobbes was concerned this never happens. If I do not always act to bring about what I desire or avoid what I fear, it is only because my will ends up being determined by some subsequent desire or aversion that demands a different course of action. For example, suppose I am penniless and desire some oranges that I see on display, but refrain from stealing them because I can foresee that I might be caught and punished. In this case we might say that I am doing what I do not will to do. But Hobbes would say I am doing exactly what I want to do. My *initial* desire may have been to grab the oranges. But we need to consider that this initial desire first motivated me to consider the means of satisfying that desire (reaching out and grabbing), but that a contemplation of this means brought to mind consequences to which I have an aversion, and the aversion made me refrain. So while I did not do what I at first wanted to do, I did do what my finally arising aversion directed. We speak loosely and misleadingly of not wanting to do what we want to do when in fact what has happened is that a complete consideration leads us to modify our initial desire and to act in accord with a different, subsequent desire.

Often, we hesitate in our action because the desire to act is checked by an aversion, which is checked by a further desire, which is checked by a new aversion, and so on. Hobbes identified the succession of desires and aversions that we experience as we contemplate the means to and consequences of an action with the act of deliberation. So, deliberation, for Hobbes, is not the act of weighing opposed considerations and reaching a decision based on rational choice. It is just the circumstance of having an initial desire to act balked at its initiation by an aversion arising from a contemplation of some means or consequence of that action, of having this aversion in turn balked by some other desire or aversion, and so on until a last desire or aversion finally emerges. The last desire or aversion in the chain of deliberation results in action. Reaching the last desire or aversion constitutes making up one's mind, and making up one's mind means willing. This is why Hobbes identified the will with the last desire or aversion to emerge from the process of deliberation.

On Hobbes' view, we are at liberty or free as long the process of deliberation is still ongoing. We also need to have the physical capacity or the resources to either act to realize the goal we are deliberating about, or prevent this goal from being realized. However, once we have finished deliberating and made up our minds we are no longer at liberty. After all, once your mind is made up, you are determined to act and proceed immediately to do so, and there is no chance of your doing any differently. If there were, you could not truly be said to have made up your mind yet. This is why Hobbes said that someone who has drawn up a will really only makes up their mind the day they die, since prior to that time it is always possible for some further desire or aversion to arise that will lead them to change the will.

It follows from Hobbes' definitions of "liberty" or "freedom" and "will" that there can be no such thing as free will, any more than there can be round squares or married bachelors. This is because being free means not having made up your mind yet and having no will, whereas

making up your mind and acquiring a will to do a particular thing means terminating your freedom.

However, even though Hobbes believed that our wills are determined, he still maintained that there is an important distinction to be drawn between voluntary and involuntary action. The Latin, "voluntas" just means willed, and an action is said to be voluntary when it is willed or, more precisely, caused by the will. Involuntary actions, in contrast, are those that are not caused by the will. For example, someone who throws a punch at someone else can be said to act voluntarily insofar as they willed to throw the punch, whereas someone who is thrown through the air by an explosion and hits someone else as a result can be said to have acted involuntarily since they did not move their body or will to move their body. Of course, in the first case, where the person is said to have acted voluntarily because they willed to throw the punch, it is still the case that their will is determined.

It might be objected that if an action proceeds from the will, but the will is determined, then the action is likewise determined. But Hobbes would not have disagreed. He would simply have observed that there are two kinds of determined actions, the voluntary or willed ones and the involuntary or unwilled ones. Voluntary actions are ones that are determined by causes that move through the will; involuntary actions are ones that are determined by causes that short-circuit the will and move the body directly. This view, that actions can be called voluntary or involuntary depending on whether or not they are caused by the will of the agent, but that the agent's will is not itself voluntary, is what is known as *soft determinism*. (Soft determinism is a kind of determinism because it holds that the will is not free, but it also holds that it still makes sense to draw a distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions. A "hard" determinist would hold that this distinction is pointless.)

The opposed view, that my willing to perform an act must itself be voluntary, is one that Hobbes considered to be absurd. He pointed out that since "voluntary" just means "done by the will," voluntary will is willing will. But the notion of willing willing is absurd. To see why, recall that "will" is equivalent to "last desire or aversion." We might think that "willed will" could be understood as "willed last desire or aversion," but this is nonsensical. I cannot will what my last desire or aversion will be. For one thing, my last desire or aversion is going to be mechanically caused by the mechanical interaction of motions around my heart and in my brain, not spontaneously chosen by some mysterious capacity of the mind. For another, talk of a "will" to have a last or strongest desire would be tantamount to talking of a last desire or aversion to have a last desire or aversion and that too is nonsense. Any desire or aversion I have that influences the desire or aversion I finally end up feeling is going to have to be a part of the process of deliberation; that is, it would have to be one of the earlier desires or aversions that occurs while I am deliberating about what I want and fear the most. The last desire or aversion is by definition the desire or aversion that occurs last in the process of deliberation and there can be no other that is last by definition. So by definition I cannot have any last desire or aversion to have a last desire or aversion. I can only have the last desire or aversion I end up being determined to have by the process of deliberation.

It is a consequence of Hobbes' view that actions proceeding from drunkenness, rage, or other sudden passions are all voluntary. It will not do to object that in such cases the alcohol or the passion interfered with our will or our judgment and made us do what we did. For, it is *always* the case that something influences the course of our deliberations and makes us end up with the last desire or aversion that is our will. There is no reason to treat cases where passion or

inebriation influences the course of deliberation any differently from cases where fear of punishment or desire to win praise influences the course of deliberation.

Similarly, being put in difficult circumstances that compel you to make a certain choice does not change the fact that your act is voluntary. An act is voluntary as long as you will it and if your willing it was compelled by threats or fears that makes no difference. The will is always determined by antecedent desires and aversions of one sort or another so that there is no difference between sticking to your diet because of your aversion to getting fat and perjuring yourself in court because of your aversion to having your family murdered by gangsters.

However, Hobbes was willing to allow that, insofar as actions can sometimes be considered as complex events resulting from mixtures of simpler actions or aspects of actions, there can be mixtures of voluntary and involuntary elements. Actions typically consist of motions, and any motion can be considered to have two aspects: speed and direction, both of which can be compounded from different factors. This opens the possibility that one component of a motion, its speed, for example, might be voluntary while another, its direction, might be involuntary. Hobbes gives the example of a prisoner being led off to prison on the end of a rope. The prisoner voluntarily goes at a walking speed so as not to be painfully dragged by the rope, but the direction is not voluntary.

Hobbes' position on the will has profound implications. If people's wills are determined in the ways that he thought then it is futile to simply teach people a set of moral precepts and expect that they will follow them. However just and well-considered those moral precepts may be, no one will follow them just because they know about them. People will do whatever their last desire inclines them to do, and their last desire will in turn out to be determined by mechanical causes. Nor can they be blamed for doing otherwise, since the power to do so is not something that they have but something that, if Hobbes is right, it is absurd to think they have. (This is the consequence of saying that you cannot will to will.) This raises interesting questions about the usefulness of moral rules and about the justice of praise, blame, reward and punishment. (It suggests, for instance, that rather than worry about articulating ethical rules and principles, we should be worried about politics: how to construct a Commonwealth where people will be mechanically induced to desire to do what is best for the common good.)

These questions are particularly interesting when set against the Christian belief that God will reward the just and punish the wicked in an afterlife. What justice, we might wonder, is there in punishing people for something they were determined to do and had no choice not to do? Interestingly, this is not a question that would have given Hobbes' Puritan fellow citizens in England any trouble. From the very beginning of the Protestant Reformation, the reformers had opposed what they considered to be the Pelagian view that one can be saved by good works. Adhering to the darker Augustinian doctrines of predestination they maintained that we are all born in a state of total corruption and that it is impossible for any of us to do a truly good work unless we have first been given the power to do so by a gracious gift of God. This gift must be truly gracious (that is given for free) because no one can deserve it. Before getting the gift, you are corrupt and do not merit it, and cannot possibly do anything to escape your state of corruption since good deeds only become possible after getting the gift. (To suppose any otherwise would be to "render the cross of Christ of none effect," as Augustine put it, for it would suggest that people could earn salvation through their own good works, and in that case Christ's sacrifice would have been unnecessary.) The gift, moreover is irresistible (God being all-powerful, his grace cannot be resisted) so that those who get the gift are in effect compelled

to be good. For his own inscrutable reasons, God has determined that not all are to be saved. Accordingly, again for his own inscrutable reasons, he gives the gift to some and withholds it from others. Those who get it are the elect; those who do not will be damned, and justly so for they are totally corrupt and wicked. We must praise God for freely condescending to elevate the few undeserving wretches that he does rather than dare to question why he does not save all. And we must not question God's justice in condemning people to eternal torture in hell for doing things they were predestined from the beginning of time to do as a consequence of God's decision to withhold Grace. God's justice is not our justice but justice of a more supreme and perfect kind than we can understand.

These views were vigorously upheld by those in the dominant Puritan and Presbyterian congregations of Hobbes's England, and obviously, his views on freedom of the will would hardly have bothered them, had they bothered to consider them very carefully. Had Hobbes written in a Catholic country, he might have had more serious problems.

c. Human nature XI.1-6 *and* 11-12. Radical as was in the application of his materialism, Hobbes hesitated to extend his mechanistic views beyond physical and human nature to the nature of God. He believed there is a God, and that we can rationally demonstrate God's existence by appeal to a cosmological argument that he sketched over Human Nature XI.2. But his rigorous commitment to the mechanical philosophy evaporated when it came to describing the nature of God. Rather than take God to be an extended, corporeal being who created the world by building machines out of pre-existing, unorganized parts, Hobbes took God to be indescribable. Perhaps he did this because he was afraid of the charges of heresy or atheism that would be laid against him had he said that God is just a machine made up of moving parts. Or perhaps he was simply persuaded by the logic of the argument that if God is the being who first created matter, as Christianity (which Hobbes claimed to accept) teaches, then God could not himself already be material.

Either way, Hobbes found himself in a very difficult situation. On the one hand, he could not say that God is a material being or a machine made up of moving parts. But neither could he say that God is a spiritual being. Hobbes considered the words "spiritual being" to be as much a contradiction in terms as the words "free will." The term "spirit," he observed, had originally been coined to refer to transparent bodies, like air or smoke or swamp gas or fumes of alcohol (which we still call "spirits"). These are material things, though invisible to the eye. They take up space and have moving parts and interact mechanically with other things. But then people began using the term, "spirit," to refer to the images they saw in dreams, and the word came to acquire the sense of some sort of immaterial being. As far as Hobbes was concerned, this is nonsense. Something cannot both be and be nowhere.

But then what are we to say of God? Hobbes could get around the difficulty for angels, by claiming that the only angels ever described in the Christian scriptures are not explicitly said to be immaterial, and so may be either invisible but material beings of a special sort created by God, or simply images directly created by God in some prophet's mind. The latter images would have no independent existence but would be simply "messages" from God. He could also get around the problem for human souls (which the Bible also assures us exist), by claiming that while revelation may assures that we have souls, it does not tell us that they are immaterial. Our souls might be gaseous, material spirits that dissipate or decay along with the parts of the body when we die, and there would be nothing contrary in Christianity in this, since Christianity does not actually teach the immateriality of the soul, but only the resurrection of the body. However,

while these devices might solve the problem with angels and human souls, what of God himself? Hobbes could not admit that God is an immaterial spirit without giving up his claim that the notion of immaterial spirits is contradictory, and opening the door to the possible existence of other kinds of spirit as well. In the end, he set upon the device of claiming that God is simply unknowable. We can be sure that God exists by reasoning from the cosmological argument, but God is simply too great a being for his nature to be within our grasp.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Drawing on the notes, HN VI.5-9 and XI, and *Leviathan* I.xi, III.xxxiii, xxxvii, and xlii, describe Hobbes' account of the basis for religious faith, being careful to specify the role played by each of testimony, miracles, conformity to scripture, and authority in that account. Try to reach a verdict on the respective roles of reason (say in authenticating miracle claims, adjudicating testimony, or drawing conclusions from the design in nature) and revelation (whether accepted by a leap of faith, on the evidence of reason, or as a result of irresistible Grace) in that account. Outline some problems with the account in addition to the one mentioned in the notes.
2. Did Hobbes make a compelling case for denying freedom of the will?
3. Did Hobbes make a compelling case for soft determinism?
4. Supposing Hobbes was right in what he said about the will, does it still make sense to praise, blame or punish people for their actions? Does it make any sense to legislate moral rules? Even if it does not make sense to legislate moral rules, might it still make sense legislate civil laws and enforce them with punishments?
5. How would Hobbes have accounted for what is termed weakness of the will?