

SIMON KOW

Corporeal Interiority and the Body Politic in Hobbes's *Leviathan*

CHARLES TAYLOR HAS ARGUED THAT the modern notion of the self can be understood as a radical inward turn. In contrast to various pre-modern and non-Western conceptions in which the soul (and sometimes the body) is inseparable from a higher order of things, modern thinkers radicalized the inward turn initiated by Augustine's revision of Plato, giving rise to the culturally and historically specific idea that the self relates to the world as subject to object. In early modern Europe, this new sense of interiority was expressed in different ways, including Descartes' dualism, Locke's empiricism, and Montaigne's search for self-discovery.¹ Can Hobbes's thought be situated within Taylor's developmental scheme? A work such as *Leviathan* might appear a most unpromising source for thinking about interiority, given its character as political theory, i.e., concerned with public life as opposed to the private self. Hobbes, however, argued that knowledge of "The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-wealth" (1)² must begin with an investigation into human nature. *Leviathan* may be read in part as a philosophy of the self.

Taylor regards the political expression of early modern interiority in such thinkers as Hobbes and Locke as atomistic and individualistic. While atomism and individualism are elements of Hobbes's political theory, there are arguably aspects of interiority present in Hobbes's *Leviathan* which are not addressed in Taylor's account. In particular, *Leviathan* may be interpreted as advancing a notion of corporeal interiority, an inwardness of the bodily self, in contrast to the spiritual interiority of radical Protestantism in seventeenth-century Britain. Moreover, Hobbes's treatment of the com-

¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) 111–207.

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991). Parenthetical page references are all to this edition.

monwealth as "Artificiall Man" (9) suggests that the sovereign person who represents the commonwealth is a corporeal self writ large. Against Taylor's critique of early modern political individualism as an inadequate expression of the contexts within which the self is embedded, this idea of the body politic entails that for Hobbes (though not for Locke) the sovereign state is a moral source.

Corporeal vs. Spiritual Interiority

The subject-matter of *Leviathan* concerns the human creation of "that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH ... which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended" (9). The sovereign state may be an imitation of nature, which is God's art, but it is only an imitation. It is a creature of human artifice, not in itself natural or divine as Hobbes's predecessors had conceived political society. His Leviathan is technological, not teleological (as Aristotle regarded the polis, which realizes the human *telos* as a political animal); and the institution of the sovereign is a fundamentally human act, not God's fiat which establishes the divine right of kings. In contrast to James I, for example, Hobbes thought a sovereign assembly as theoretically valid as a monarch. Hobbes's sovereign is necessarily the mediator between subject and God, but only because it has been instituted by the people through a social contract.

Given the commonwealth's status as artificial creation, Hobbes deduces its nature through an internal examination of human nature, the artificer. Scholars have noted Hobbes's resolute-compositive method, by which he strips down the commonwealth in his mind to its constituent elements and reconstructs it in his political works.³ This idea of beginning the reconstruction of the state with human nature means that comprehending the creation of the artificial man proceeds from interior investigation. Can the considerations of human nature in *Leviathan* be properly regarded as interior examination and not simply a description of human psychology in objective, scientific terms? Doubtless Hobbes is not interested in the particularities of each interior self. But as Taylor remarks, the inward turn of Lockean empiricism is a philosophy of the self which is paradoxically disengaged and objective relative to the sort of personal subjectivity explored by Montaigne.⁴ Hobbesian inwardness displays a similar paradox.

³ See Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 10.

⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 175.

Moreover, Hobbes explicitly justifies his account of human nature as demonstrable from internal examination: “whosoever looketh into himself, and considereth what he doth, when does *think, opine, reason, hope, feare, &c.*, and upon what grounds; he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts, and Passions of all other men, upon the like occasions.” Hobbes adds: the passions of all human beings are similar, not the objects of the passions. This is the difficulty posed by the interior search: to discern our common human nature despite the diversity of tastes, customs, education, and in particular the problem of erroneous doctrines which “blot” and “confound” self-knowledge (10; Hobbes’s italics). Only a perspicacious and unprejudiced internal examination will yield knowledge of human nature.

There is an implicit opposition suggested in the introduction to *Leviathan*: on the one hand, a true interior reading of one’s self; and on the other, “dissembling, lying, counterfeiting, and erroneous doctrines.” What doctrines does he mean? In Chapter 29 of *Leviathan*, concerning “things that Weaken, or tend to the DISSOLUTION of a Common-wealth,” Hobbes mentions among other things the “poyson of seditious doctrines,” including the teachings that each private person is judge of good and evil, that every individual must obey her private conscience, and that faith and sanctity arise from supernatural inspiration. Hobbes regards these doctrines as dangerous to the commonwealth because they would, if accepted, wrest supreme moral authority away from the public laws and place it in the hands of the common people, or worse, their priests (223–24). What these doctrines share is the idea of spiritual interiority, i.e., that the interior self is a spiritual substance in a direct relation to God, and thus is the ultimate arbiter of what is right, holy, and revealed. We can discern this idea in radical Protestantism, including the teachings of the religious seducers of the people who contributed to the outbreak of the British civil wars, according to Hobbes.⁵ A prominent example—though mentioned only once, and dismissively, in Hobbes’s works—would be Milton, for whom God sent the holy spirit to dwell within the faithful few.⁶ If I look within myself, according to this view, I find a divine spark within me despite my bestial inclinations: the human self is a soul that would rise to heaven but is tied down by fleshly concerns. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

⁵ Hobbes, *Behemoth*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990) 2–3. For an account of Protestant conscience and its critics, including Hobbes, see Edward Andrew, *Conscience and its Critics* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001).

⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Leonard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000) 283–84.

Against the seditious doctrines of spiritual interiority, Hobbes expounded a theory of corporeal interiority. The opening chapters of *Leviathan* establish a philosophy of nature as wholly matter-in-motion, but unlike Descartes, Hobbes thought that no part of a human being is constituted by a substance qualitatively distinct from the rest of nature. Taylor and others argue that Descartes' conception of the self as thinking thing is a radicalization of Augustine's turn inward, under the influence of Plotinian Neo-Platonism.⁷ Whatever the merits of this interpretation, Hobbes arguably rejects Cartesian scepticism and its resolution. Hobbes does not doubt sense-experience and arrive at indubitable knowledge of the *res cogitans*; rather, he begins with sensation as prior to knowledge of the self. Sense-experiences may not always be reliable sources of knowledge of the external world, but they are the only sources of knowledge. Consequently, all thought is ultimately derived from sensation. According to Hobbes, then, I am not primarily an immaterial thinking thing, but a bundle of sensations. What is the I which experiences these sensations? Hobbes does not theorize an immaterial entity which processes these sensations. Instead, we are left with the body, which produces sensations in reaction to the collisions of matter upon the sense-organs. As reflected in the Third Set of Objections to Descartes, we are corporeal beings living in a material world. "We cannot," writes Hobbes, "separate thought from the matter that thinks."⁸

The Instability of the Corporeal Self

The philosophical system of *Leviathan* does not rest on the indubitable certainty of the self, even if the self is shown to be indubitably corporeal. Prior to the institution of the commonwealth, there is arguably no fixed sense of the self at all. The account of human nature serves to show how lacking we are in autonomy and independence. We are dependent on our senses for our knowledge of the world, but the retention of images especially when we sleep gives rise to dreams and other fancies: these distorted images may be mistaken for spirits and ghosts, the belief in which is exploited by "crafty ambitious persons [who] abuse the simple people" (19). Mental discourse necessarily arises from experience, but the conjecture of future consequences based on similar occurrences in the past is highly erroneous because memory is but decaying imagination, and prudence does not discern cause and effect (22). Speech is a means of signifying our thoughts and ordering them properly, but it is subject to as many abuses, particularly by

⁷ See Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 143.

⁸ *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, ed. Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins

the learned, as proper uses (25). And even reason, which properly orders experience and thus provides causal knowledge, is an artificial method, not a natural faculty of human beings: in any controversy, all the parties will claim right reason, and only an arbitrary human authority can settle the dispute (32–33). In sum, folly and credulity are characteristic of human nature, not reason and autonomy: because we are at bottom corporeal beings, we are easily bewitched by faulty sensation and pretence of learning, and blinded by our passions.

The uncertainty of the self and its place in the world manifests itself in moral relativism. Humans are fundamentally passionate creatures. Even their thoughts “are to the Desires, as Scouts, and Spies, to range abroad, and find the way to the things Desired” (53): all mental discourse searches for the means to obtain the objects of our desires, and reason is nothing more than a reliable servant to the passions. Desire and aversion describe internal motions toward and away from real and perceived objects, and we call objects of our desire good, and objects of aversion evil. Because of the subjectivity of such names, there is nothing called good or evil which is “simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of Good and Evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the Person of the man (where there is no Common-wealth;) or, (in a Common-wealth,) from the Person that representeth it; or from an Arbitrator or Judge, whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up” (39). In the absence of an overarching authority, each individual is final judge of good and evil. Given that the objects of the passions vary from person to person, and change over time even within the same person, there is no fixed standard of morality without judges and governments. It is because Hobbes places the self in the continually fluctuating body, not in a spiritual substance which might contain the moral law within itself or relate to a higher order of being, that a common moral language is absent and thus morality is fluid and subjective.⁹

The natural condition of mankind is an hypothetical state which demonstrates the anarchic consequences of private definitions of good and evil. Bound by no absolute moral standards except *in foro interno*, human beings regard each other instrumentally, relative to the goods they wish to pursue and the evils they wish to avoid. Hobbes in turn deduces the restless desire for power in all human beings, natural equality, and the war of every one against every one. In this war, he concludes, “nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place. Where there is no common Power, there is no Law; where no Law, no In-

⁹ Richard Tuck, *Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) 55–56.

justice. Force, and Fraud, are in warre the two Cardinall vertues" (90). In other words, everyone's body is potentially subject to continual invasion. In the absence of binding morals on one's conduct, one has the right to do anything judged necessary to preserve oneself. The corporeal self of human beings in the natural condition is insecure in the absence of government and laws.

Constructing the Self as the Body Politic

By instituting the commonwealth, individuals are able to secure the means of comfortable self-preservation. To what extent does this political act constitute the construction of a fixed basis for the interior self, and not simply a rational decision taken out of concern for one's external needs and wants? It seems contradictory to regard political institution as having an interior dimension, as if Hobbes were interested in the integrity of the interior self. Hobbes's discussion of justice, however, is arguably informed by a concern with interiority. In order to end the war of every one against every one and thus secure peaceful and commodious living, individuals must lay down their natural rights to all things on condition that others do so. No one can be expected to lay down such a right without the expectation of others' performance of their part of the social contract. Such a contract is a covenant, in that each party promises now to perform later and requires a common power to ensure performance. Consequently, Hobbes defines justice as the performance on covenants made, and thus the obedience to the laws of the sovereign power which validates the social covenant.

Hobbes's discussion of the fool who says in his heart, there is no justice, suggests a politicization of interiority. In the *Proslogion*, Anselm replied to the Biblical fool who says in his heart, there is no God. Anselm argues that the fool contradicts his own thought, for that than which nothing greater can be thought must exist in reality as well as in the understanding.¹⁰ Hobbes takes a similar tack in his reply. Hobbes's fool argues that it may be more reasonable to commit injustice, i.e., to break one's covenants, when it would clearly benefit oneself. Hobbes replies that it can never be against reason to observe justice: one cannot reasonably expect to get away with injustice, or to receive the aid of others once one has broken the law. Moreover, even if one could get away with injustice, it is "against the reason of [one's] preservation" (103). Like Anselm's fool, Hobbes's fool contradicts himself, for having agreed to perform his covenants made and enter

¹⁰ Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995) 100.

society, he acts against reason in then breaking his covenants and in effect casting himself out of society as a beast. As Hobbes writes, injustice is like an absurdity, “voluntarily to do that, which from the beginning [one] had voluntarily done” (93).

The crucial difference is that Anselm’s fool denies the existence of God in his thoughts, whereas Hobbes’s fool denies justice in his thoughts and deeds. Taylor characterizes Anselm’s account and Descartes’ ontological proof for God’s existence as following from and radicalizing Augustine’s search for certainty of God within himself. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed, Taylor says, a “flowering of Augustinian spirituality.”¹¹ In this way, both Protestantism and the Catholic Reformation could be interpreted as connecting Augustine’s thought with modern expressions of interiority. As I’ve argued, Hobbes sought to displace spiritual interiority with a corporeal conception of the self and the world. His reply to the fool suggests, moreover, that the search for corporeal interiority necessarily has a political dimension absent from the earlier accounts of spiritual interiority. In other words, Hobbes is concerned to establish a stable basis for the corporeal self, but he finds this stability not in God within but in the commonwealth without. The laws of the sovereign provide the standards of right and wrong missing in the natural condition. In contrast to the Protestant emphasis on the sanctity of private conscience, Hobbes asserts that “the Law is the publique Conscience” (223). This political dimension is missing from Taylor’s account of the inward turn in early modern thought.

The commonwealth itself can be interpreted as a corporeal self writ large. The idea that the state is a body politic is at least as old as the thought of John of Salisbury, and Plato theorized an analogy between city and soul. What is novel in Hobbes’s thought is the idea that the sovereign is the person of the body politic because a multitude of individuals have instituted it through the social covenant. In *Leviathan* as opposed to his earlier political writings, Hobbes introduced the language of personation to explain how a multitude of individuals unite into one artificial person. Each individual authorizes the sovereign person, whether monarch or assembly, and thus becomes the author of the latter’s actions. The sovereign has authority because it has been chosen to represent the people. The multitude thus appoints “one Man, or Assembly of men, to beare their Person;... and therein to submit their Wills, every one to his Will, and their Judgements, to his Judgement” (120). Like a natural person, the sovereign, who is the person of the commonwealth, exercises will and judgement. This artificial

¹¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 140–41.

person is not the metaphysical embodiment of its subjects, a key concept in medieval theories of kingship; we must keep in mind that the "artifice" in creating the sovereign is purely human in origin. The Leviathan is a mortal God, but only because we have covenanted to obey its laws.¹²

The chapters on the nature of the commonwealth are imbued with the language of the sovereign state as body politic. Just as individuals in the natural condition have absolute natural rights, and then retain certain rights in society, the sovereign too enjoys certain rights; and because the sovereign is bound by no law, its rights are considerable, though limited by the inalienable rights and liberties of subjects. Moreover, the sovereign has the right of punishment not because the subjects had granted a right to harm themselves, but because the sovereign retains the natural right to preserve itself; and because the sovereign is the person of the commonwealth, its self-preservation entails the protection of the people. Most strikingly, Hobbes describes seditious doctrines as diseases of the commonwealth. The comparisons between republicanism and hydrophobia, ecclesiastical ambition and epilepsy, separation of powers and mutated birth, dissolution of the commonwealth and death, etc., tend to be passed over in discussions of *Leviathan*. The underlying premises of these comparisons are, however, notable for our discussion: the commonwealth should be regarded as the body of all the subjects, and to know how to maintain and strengthen the commonwealth, one should engage in an interior examination of the body politic in an analogous way to the interior examination of the corporeal self. An investigation into human nature leads to the conclusion that the self finds stability only by entering the commonwealth; the representative person of the commonwealth finds stability when able to preserve the lives of its subjects and promote peaceful, commodious living.

It may appear that the cost of finding moral and physical stability for the individual self is an overwhelming transfer of power to the tyrannical person of the commonwealth. The idea, however, that Hobbes moves the site of corporeal interiority from the individual to the state informs an understanding of Hobbes's account of the office of the sovereign. The sovereign enjoys absolute rights granted by its subjects, but it necessarily has certain duties towards the body politic. The sovereign has the duty, above all, to procure the safety of the people, which includes the duties to make good laws and to instruct the people in the rights of sovereignty. Hobbes writes that "the good of the Sovereign and People, cannot be separated"

¹² Clifford Orwin, "On Sovereign Authorization," *Political Theory* 3 (1975): 39-40.

(240),¹³ because the sovereign represents the entire commonwealth. Just as all individuals seek to preserve themselves as comfortably as possible, so the sovereign should have no interest in harming itself. The body politic ought to be kept in good common-health.

Furthermore, the duty to instruct the subjects reflects the extent to which Hobbes thinks laws and punishment to be necessary but not sufficient means to maintain the commonwealth. Is public instruction tantamount to ideological control? Certainly, Hobbes seeks to root out the seditious doctrines promulgated in the universities and churches, including teachings on conscience and inspiration which rest on a conception of spiritual interiority. He feels that educating the public in the principles of the true philosophy is necessary for the lasting preservation of the commonwealth: "if men had the use of reason they pretend to, their Common-wealth might be secured, at least, from perishing by internal diseases" (221). Consequently, the teaching that the human self is corporeal and finds its stability only in the commonwealth, which is a corporeal self writ large, is itself the means of convincing the people to obey the sovereign. Hobbes desires that individuals be more rational if possible, or at least that they accept rational doctrines.¹⁴ Thus the idea of corporeal interiority, with its strong political implications, is intended to make life more peaceable.

Taylor argues that Lockean inwardness entails a politics of extreme disengagement, in which subjects are seen as nothing but atomistic individuals, and which in turn neglects the larger moral context of the self. I have argued that Hobbes's *Leviathan* presents a materialist interiority which fully acknowledges the dependence of the individual on the sovereign state to provide the moral stability lacking in a state of lawless individualism. It is true that members of the Hobbesian commonwealth do not see themselves as members of an organic community, but rather pursue their enlightened self-interests under the protection and regulation of their sovereign. Hobbesian interiority does not meet the communitarian standards which Taylor thinks are lacking in Lockean thought. Nevertheless, a major point upon which Hobbes and Locke disagree—namely, whether there are enforceable standards of right and wrong prior to the institution of the commonwealth—suggest a moral source in Hobbes's thought which is missing in Lockean individualism. Locke is conventionally regarded as

¹³ For a discussion of sovereign duty in Hobbes's theory of the "art of government," see Deborah Baumgold, *Hobbes's Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 113–14.

¹⁴ Gabriella Slomp, *Thomas Hobbes and the Political Philosophy of Glory* (Houndsmills: Macmillan Press, 2000) 114.

having improved vastly over Hobbes in asserting individual rights and private judgement against the state; but Hobbes's view that the sovereign state alone provides moral stability for its subjects might be considered an important corrective to the atomism of his more respected successor.