

Hobbes on Submission to God

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17.1 Kingdom of God by Nature

In chapter 31 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes introduces the “Kingdom of God by Nature,” or natural kingdom. A number of recent studies examine this chapter,¹ yet none considers the question that interests me: namely, how exactly does one become a subject in this kingdom? Hobbes does not address this question. He is clear about one thing: not everyone is a subject in the natural kingdom, or natural subject. Hobbes excludes atheists and deists.

The fact that Hobbes excludes some people from the natural kingdom helps resolve a puzzle from earlier in *Leviathan* concerning whether justice is possible in a state of nature. Hobbes appears to offer conflicting answers: at 13.13, he says no:

To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent: that 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 injustice (Hobbes 2012 196; 1651, 64).

In the very next chapter (14.7), Hobbes provides an account of how injustice is possible after all in a state of nature. When one renounces or transfers a right to something, then one is,

OBLIGED or BOUND not to hinder those to whom such right is granted or abandoned from the benefit of it; and that he ought, and it is his DUTY, not to make void that voluntary act of his own, and that such hindrance is INJUSTICE (Hobbes, 2012, 200; 1651, 65).

I have proposed resolving the apparent conflict by adopting a modified version of the distinction Martinich draws between primary and secondary states of nature.² A

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primary state of nature is one inhabited only by atheists, and this situation is truly natural: it has no sovereign whatever – including God – and thus no law – including laws of nature – and no justice, as Hobbes remarks in chapter 13. The sense in which justice is impossible in such a state of nature is that nothing can count as law or violating law: with no sovereign whatever, people have no legal obligations. With no legal obligations, neither obedience to nor violation of the law is possible; and this seems to be the sense in which Hobbes intends in chapter 13 to claim that justice is impossible in a state of nature.

A secondary state of nature contains theists, and its inhabitants are subjects of God's natural kingdom (we will refine this account and consider the situation of deists below). They have no civil sovereign, however, and so are still in a state of nature. At the end of chapter 15 (15.41), Hobbes distinguishes between two roles for the precepts of the laws of nature (Hobbes 2012, 242; 1651, 80). They are rationally deducible, and so he says that they are "natural theorems." But they gain the normative status of proper law – and become obligatory – only for God's subjects.³ God's natural subjects are obligated by the laws of nature as proper laws in virtue of their submission to God. And so, in a secondary state of nature, justice (and injustice) are possible in virtue of the possibility of obeying or violating the law (as such). The distinction between subjects and non-subjects in God's natural kingdom provides a basis for explaining the apparent problem about justice.

Previously (Byron 2015, 90), it seemed to me that if not believing in a providential God excluded one from God's natural kingdom, then believing should be sufficient for inclusion. Following Hobbes, I call the act of making oneself a subject of a commonwealth or kingdom (one kind of commonwealth) "submission." So it seemed to me that one submitted to God by having faith (with perhaps some constraints on the object thereof). I now refine this position: Hobbes says that belief, including religious faith, is involuntary; yet submission, for reasons I address below, must be voluntary. But still: the distinction between theists and atheists seems to be belief in God. And this problem brings me to the questions I hope to answer here, namely: how exactly does one submit to God, and what role does belief in God play in that submission?

Hobbes explains in considerable detail how one submits to a civil (human) sovereign, whether in a commonwealth by acquisition or by institution. Regardless of the method of commonwealth building, I submit when I covenant with others and thereby transfer (most of) my right of self-governance to another, who becomes my sovereign. The methods of commonwealth building differ regarding my covenant partners. In what Hobbes calls a commonwealth by acquisition, I covenant with the one who has vanquished me: the victor agrees to spare my life, and I agree to obey that person as my sovereign. In a commonwealth by institution, I covenant with others who are also willing so to submit, and we agree to treat someone (or some assembly) as our sovereign (Hobbes 2012, 262; 1651, 88). Either way, the covenant entails a transfer of right to another person, thus creating the (vast) disparity of right characteristic of the relation between Hobbesian sovereigns and subjects, and the correlative obligation to obey.

This account cannot be correct for the natural kingdom. The reason is that the required disparity of right between sovereign and subject already exists, independent of anyone's submitting to God.⁴ Because Hobbes defines (14.9) the constitutive purpose of

any covenant as a transfer of right,⁵ we cannot explain submission to God and God's constitution as sovereign of the natural kingdom in terms of a covenant.⁶ Hobbes consistently maintains that God's omnipotence – God's "irresistible" power – confers on God "dominion" over the world. Further, no covenant I might make with other people is relevant to the question of whether I am God's natural subject. So the model of submission built on a covenant with another human being is inadequate to account for submission to God.

Hobbes simply does not explain submission to God. We can reconstruct his thinking by building on what he does say, especially on his exclusion of atheists and deists from the natural kingdom.

17.2 Exclusion from the Natural Kingdom

The argument begins with the claim that not everyone is a natural subject. Hobbes explains exclusion from the natural kingdom by contrasting the proper sense in which God reigns with God's omnipotence. God's omnipotence follows from God's providence – traditionally held to be God's infinite power, knowledge, and goodness – which entails that God has causal power over everything.⁷ If $O_p g$ represents the statement that God is omnipotent, $O_k g$ that God is omniscient, and $O_b g$ that God is omni-benevolent, Hobbes's assumption of a providential God can be represented, following the traditional formula, as follows.

$$1. O_p g \cdot O_k g \cdot O_b g \quad \text{Premise}$$

The premise that God's omnipotence entails causal power over everything (S_p , or being subject to God's causal power) is:

$$2. O_p g \rightarrow (\forall x)S_p x \quad \text{Premise}$$

And from (1) and (2) it follows that God has causal power over everything (everything is subject to God's causal power).

$$3. (\forall x)S_p x \quad (1, 2)$$

Crucially, however, this (mere?) causal power does not entail that God literally "reigns" over everything. Hobbes remarks at 31.2, "But to call this power of God (which extendeth itself not only to man, but also to beasts, and plants, and bodies inanimate) by the name of kingdom is but a metaphorical use of the word" (Hobbes 2012, 554; 1651, 186). What "beasts," plants, and inanimate objects lack is the power of language and the related capacity to be addressed and commanded. They cannot be motivated by promised rewards for compliance or threatened punishments for disobedience.⁸ God is properly said to reign only over creatures who can understand and respond to promises and threats. Thus those who cannot be subjected to God's commands (S_c) cannot be subjects in God's natural kingdom (S_n).

$$4. (\forall x)(\neg S_c x \rightarrow \neg S_n x) \quad \text{Premise}$$

The contrapositive of (4) provides a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of being a subject in the kingdom of God by nature, namely the capacity to be the subject of God's commands (and thus responsive to God's promised rewards and threatened punishments).

$$5. (\forall x)(S_n x \rightarrow S_c x) \quad (4)$$

The criterion of being a natural subject is not complete, because having the power of speech is not sufficient: Hobbes excludes atheists and deists, who have the power of speech and so far seem to be capable of understanding rewards and punishments.

17.3 Omnipotence and Subjects

Before discussing the place of atheists and deists in the argument, it is worth delving into some important consequences of Hobbes's excluding plants, non-human animals ("beasts"), and inanimate objects from the natural kingdom. The basis for this exclusion is the assumption that these things are not apt recipients of God's commands. Non-humans are not apt subjects of God's commands, which we may represent as follows, where H is the set of human beings.⁹

$$6. (\forall x \notin H) \neg S_c x \quad \text{Premise}$$

As a result, we have that non-humans are excluded from being God's natural subjects.

$$7. (\forall x \notin H) \neg S_n x \quad (4, 6)$$

God does not literally reign over them with promised rewards and threatened punishments, so saying God "reigns" over such things is merely a figure of speech.

Assuming that something exists besides human beings, it follows that there are beings who are subject to God's causal power, but who are not subjects in the natural kingdom.

$$8. (\exists x)(S_p x \cdot \neg S_n x) \quad (\text{Given } x \notin H \neq \emptyset, 3, 7)$$

And this statement in turn entails that being subject to God's causal power is not sufficient for being God's natural subject.

$$9. \neg(\forall x)(S_p x \rightarrow S_n x) \quad (8)$$

Because God's causal power over everything is a consequence of God's omnipotence,¹⁰ it follows that God's omnipotence is also not a sufficient condition for being a natural subject.

$$10. \neg[O_p g \rightarrow (\forall x)(S_n x)] \quad (2, 8)$$

To summarize so far: assuming that God is omnipotent and that omnipotence is or entails that God has causal power over everything, Hobbes introduces a necessary condition for reign and so for being a subject in the natural kingdom. Reigning involves

promising rewards and threatening punishments, so being capable of understanding those promises and threats – the capacity to be commanded – is necessary for being a subject in the kingdom of God by nature. Not everything satisfies this condition, which is thus non-trivial.

17.4 Atheists and Deists

Before continuing to unpack Hobbes's argument, it will be useful to define some terms. Theists (T) believe in the existence of God (B_g).

$$11. (\forall x)(Tx \leftrightarrow B_g x) \quad \text{Def. } T$$

Atheists ($\neg T$) deny the existence of God and are thus the complement of the set of theists. Deists (D) are theists who do not acknowledge or recognize God as providential (I explain acknowledgment below).

$$12. (\forall x)[Dx \leftrightarrow (B_g x \cdot \neg A_g x)] \quad \text{Def. } D$$

Note that being a deist is sufficient for being a theist.

$$13. (\forall x)(Dx \rightarrow Tx) \quad (11, 12)$$

It is worth distinguishing theism – a term Hobbes does not employ – or (mere) belief in the existence of God from what Hobbes often (though inconsistently) calls “faith.”¹¹ The distinctive, salvific faith of Christians is the belief that Jesus is God or the Christ, and having faith obviously entails theism. But Jews, Muslims, and deists as well as Christians are theists. Deists, who adopt what some describe as a “clockmaker” view of God, maintain that God created the universe and laws of nature and then left it alone. Specifically, deists deny God's revelation and providential involvement in the affairs of human beings.¹²

Hobbes explicitly excludes atheists and deists from the natural kingdom, and he does so because they lack the capacity to be commanded.

Subjects, therefore, in the kingdom of God are not bodies inanimate, nor creatures irrational (because they understand no precepts as his), nor atheists, nor they that believe not that God has any care of the actions of mankind (because they acknowledge no word for his, nor have hope of his rewards, or fear of his threatenings) (Hobbes, 2012, 554; 1651, 186).

Although atheists and deists, like everything else, are subject to God's causal power, they are not subject to God's commands because they do not *acknowledge* them as such. This notion of acknowledgment plays a key role in the argument. What atheists and deists share is not being subject to God's commands.

$$14. (\forall x)[(\neg Tx \vee Dx) \rightarrow \neg S_c x] \quad \text{Premise}$$

And so they are not subjects in the natural kingdom.

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$$15. (\forall x)[(\neg Tx \vee Dx) \rightarrow \neg S_n x] \quad (4, 14)$$

It follows from (15) that deists are not natural subjects.

$$16. (\forall x)(Dx \rightarrow \neg S_n x) \quad (15)$$

If there are deists (as there were in Hobbes's time at least), then at least some theists are not natural subjects.

$$17. (\exists x)(Tx \cdot \neg S_n x) \quad (\text{Given } (\exists x)Dx, 13, 16)$$

In turn, we may infer that theism, or belief in God's existence, is not sufficient for being a natural subject.¹³

$$18. \neg(\forall x)(Tx \rightarrow S_n x) \quad (17)$$

Moreover, because theists are human beings, it follows that omnipotence is not sufficient for people to be natural subjects.

$$19. \neg[O_p g \rightarrow (\forall x \in H)(S_n x)] \quad (10, 18)$$

Note that though (19) is similar to (10), its domain is restricted to human beings. (10) relies on the fact that non-human animals and inanimate objects lack reason and "understand no precepts as" God's to claim that some things are not subjects of God's reign, properly so called. (19) relies on the fact that there are people who reject God's commands. Such people, Hobbes declares, are God's *enemies*.¹⁴

17.5 Natural Subjects and Acknowledgment

We noted in (5), $(\forall x)(S_n x \rightarrow S_c x)$, that being an apt subject of God's promises and threats (S_c) is a necessary condition of being a natural subject (S_n). The key to understanding why it is not also sufficient is supplied by Hobbes's exclusion of atheists and deists from the natural kingdom. It is, in short, a further necessary condition of being a natural subject that one not be an atheist or deist.

$$20. (\forall x)[S_n x \rightarrow \neg(\neg Tx \vee Dx)] \quad (15)$$

It follows from this exclusion that atheists are excluded,

$$21. (\forall x)(S_n x \rightarrow \neg\neg Tx) \quad (20)$$

and in turn, given the relation between theism and atheism, that theism is a necessary condition for being a natural subject.

$$22. (\forall x)(S_n x \rightarrow Tx) \quad (21)$$

As we have seen, however, theism, or belief in the existence of God, is not sufficient for being a natural subject. If theism were sufficient for being a natural subject, then deists

would be natural subjects and not enemies. Natural subjects must therefore be theists who are not deists.

$$23. (\forall x)[S_n x \rightarrow (Tx \cdot \neg Dx)] \quad (20)$$

By the definition of deists, we have:

$$24. (\forall x)S_n x \rightarrow [Tx \cdot \neg(B_g x \cdot \neg A_g x)] \quad (12, 23)$$

Using the definition of theists as those who believe in God's existence, we can simplify this expression.

$$25. (\forall x)S_n x \rightarrow [Tx \cdot \neg(Tx \cdot \neg A_g x)] \quad (11, 24)$$

$$26. (\forall x)[S_n x \rightarrow (Tx \cdot A_g x)] \quad (25)$$

Now we may observe that acknowledging God's providence is a sufficient condition for theism:

$$27. (\forall x)(A_g x \rightarrow Tx) \quad \text{From def. } A_g$$

We can accordingly simplify the right side of (26) to yield:

$$28. (\forall x)(S_n x \rightarrow A_g x) \quad (26, 27)$$

(28) states that a necessary condition of being a natural subject is acknowledging God's providence. Because this acknowledgment entails the other conditions of being a natural subject (being subject to God's commands and being a theist), and assuming that the only categories of people Hobbes excludes from the natural kingdom are atheists and deists, it follows that acknowledgment is the criterion of being a natural subject.¹⁵

$$29. (\forall x)(S_n x \leftrightarrow A_g x) \quad (28)$$

And that is the result we have been seeking. Submission to God in the natural kingdom must be an act of acknowledging God's providential involvement with the world, which only atheists – who deny God's existence – and deists – who believe in God's existence but deny God's providence – fail to do.

17.6 God's Dominion

We might worry that this conclusion is in tension with Hobbes's views about God's dominion over people. If God has dominion over all of creation, how could some of us not be God's natural subjects? Further, how could some fail to be obligated by the laws of nature, even in a primary state of nature? God's dominion is not mere causal power: it is the *right* to rule.¹⁶ So if God has a right to rule everyone, what sense can it make to exclude anyone from the natural kingdom?

Hobbes claims that God's omnipotence grounds God's dominion ($D_m g$) over all (see note 4).

$$30. O_p g \rightarrow (\forall x)D_m gx \quad \text{Premise}$$

So because Hobbes presupposes the existence of an omnipotent God, God has dominion over everyone.

$$31. (\forall x)D_m gx \quad (1, 30)$$

We may detach the consequent of (30) given God's omnipotence.

Dominion is the right to rule, and Hobbes conceives of rights as liberties.¹⁷ What we have liberty to do, we may do without wrong or injustice. Thus, what we have a right to do to others we may do without wronging them.

$$32. (\forall x, y, a, x \neq y)(D_m xy \leftrightarrow Lxay) \quad \text{Def. of } D_m$$

$$33. (\forall x, y, a, x \neq y)(Lxay \rightarrow \neg Wxay) \quad \text{Def. of } L$$

(32) states that for any two distinct people, x and y , and for any act a , x has dominion over y just in case x has the liberty to do a to y ($Lxay$). And (33) expresses the idea that having the liberty to do a to y entails that it is not wrong for x to do so ($\neg Wxay$).

Dominion over others thus entails that, whatever we do to those others, we do not wrong them.

$$34. (\forall x, y, a, x \neq y)(D_m xy \rightarrow \neg Wxay) \quad (32, 33)$$

In light of the fact that God has dominion over all, God may do anything to anyone without wronging them. Hence, we have:

$$35. (\forall x, a)\neg Wgax \quad (31, 34)$$

Whatever God does to God's creatures, God is not wrong to do so and commits no injustice. This consequence is a crucial feature of Hobbes's conception of God's dominion.

17.7 Obligation

Having this conception of God's dominion over creation, we are in a better position to resolve the apparent tension between the exclusion of some people from the natural kingdom and God's dominion over all. To do that, we must examine the idea of obligation.

First, it might seem that dominion, or the right to rule, must impose correlative obligations on those who are ruled. Hobbes discusses both together when he introduces his account of obligation in chapter 14. But there, of course, he is arguing for the civil commonwealth, and human sovereigns are crucially different from God: they are not omnipotent. God has the right to rule by nature. Human sovereigns acquire dominion

only by voluntary transfer of right. And that voluntary transfer, not the right to rule per se, entails obligation.

Hobbes claims that obligation most generally is the result of a voluntary transfer of right, for example, in a contract or covenant.¹⁸ He is quite explicit there that obligations are undertaken only voluntarily. Legal obligations in particular are undertaken by a covenant of a specific kind, namely a promise to obey commands. This promise is a voluntary act and, under the right circumstances, part of a covenant that those who join a commonwealth offer in the sovereign-constituting act of submission.

In chapter 26, Hobbes notes that law is a species of command.¹⁹ Its differentiae include that the commanded is “formerly obliged” or has previously promised to obey. Those whom I have not promised to obey may command but cannot legally obligate me. Whatever the grammatical form of their imperatives to me, those will not constitute laws or entail obligations. In the context of commonwealths, including the natural kingdom, the promise to obey partly constitutes the act of submission. So we may write Hobbes’s general conditions for legal obligation as:

$$36. (\forall x, y, a, x \neq y)[Oxya \rightarrow (Cyxa \cdot Sxy)] \quad \text{Premise}$$

This premise states roughly that, for any distinct persons x and y and for any act a , it is a necessary condition for x to be (legally) obligated to y to do a ($Oxya$) that y has commanded x to do it ($Cyxa$) and that x has submitted to y (Sxy).²⁰

It follows from the conception of natural subjects that all and only those who submit to God are subjects in God’s natural kingdom (already labeled S_n). We may represent this premise thus:

$$37. (\forall x)(S_n x \leftrightarrow Sxg) \quad \text{(Def. of } S_n)$$

And, because natural subjects are all and only those who acknowledge God’s providence, it follows that submission is that act of acknowledgment.

$$38. (\forall x)(Sxg \leftrightarrow A_g x) \quad (29, 37)$$

We know further that some people do not acknowledge God’s providence, are not natural subjects, and are rather God’s “enemies,” so we have:

$$39. (\exists x)\neg S_n x \quad (17)$$

Hence, some people have not in fact submitted to God.

$$40. (\exists x)\neg Sxg \quad (37, 8)$$

Submission is a condition of a command constituting law and imposing obligation. It follows from the necessary conditions for obligation and the fact that some people have not submitted to God that some are not obligated to obey God’s commands.²¹

$$41. (\forall x, a, x \neq g)[Oxga \rightarrow (Cgxa \cdot Sxg)] \quad (36)$$

$$42. (\exists x, a)(Cgxa \cdot \neg Oxga) \quad (40, 41)$$

This seems to be the point where we run up against the worry about dominion: how can God have dominion over everyone, and yet some not be obligated to obey God's commands as laws?²²

The answer is that God's dominion concerns God's right to command, not whether those commanded are obligated by the commands as laws. God's right to rule is grounded in God's omnipotence, not a transfer of right. The transfer of right, not mere possession of the right, entails obligations. Hence, God's act of commanding those who are not God's subjects is not wrong, but also does not entail obligations for them.²³

$$43. (\forall x, a)[(c = Cgxa \cdot \neg Sxg) \rightarrow (\neg Wgcx \cdot \neg Onga)] \quad (35, 41)$$

This statement says roughly that for any person x and act a , if God commands, c , that x do a , and if x is not God's subject, then it is not wrong for God to issue command c , but God's doing so also does not impose an obligation on x to do a .

This conclusion might seem perplexing, but Hobbes says something analogous about civil sovereigns who punish subjects. If the punishment concerns a right that Hobbes regards as inalienable, such as the right to life, then a sovereign's command to forfeit my life cannot obligate me.²⁴ I cannot possibly have promised to obey such a command. And yet, as I am a subject of this sovereign the command is rightful. The case of God's enemies is parallel: God's commands to enemies are rightful because God has dominion over them; yet the enemies are not bound by a legal obligation to obey them because they have not submitted to God.

We may draw two further conclusions. First, the fact that God has dominion over all and commands certain precepts for all – the laws of nature – is not sufficient to make all God's subjects.

$$44. \neg(\forall x, a)[(D_mgx \cdot Cgxa) \rightarrow Sxg] \quad (31, 40)$$

In turn, because being obligated to obey God's commands as laws depends on having submitted to God, God's having dominion and issuing commands are not sufficient to make those precepts obligatory for all.

$$45. \neg(\forall x, a)[(D_mgx \cdot Cgxa) \rightarrow Onga] \quad (41, 44)$$

God's dominion thus does not entail obligations, in particular the obligation to obey the laws of nature as laws.

17.8 Acknowledgment

It remains to be shown that Acknowledging God's providence is a voluntary act of promising to obey. The argument here must change tacks. Though Hobbes uses the verb "acknowledge" in various forms throughout *Leviathan*,²⁵ and seemingly consistently, he does not address the relationships among faith, belief generally, submission, and this act of Acknowledgment. The argument to this point has been a rational reconstruction of the position to which Hobbes commits himself with his account of natural subjects in chapter 31. Some of that reconstruction has been interpretative, as when I

interpreted Hobbes's notion of atheists and deists in a particular way. I need a different kind of argumentation for this more interpretative section of the chapter, and will deploy a cumulative case argument.²⁶

17.8.1 "Voluntary"

Hobbes uses "acknowledge" and its cognates throughout *Leviathan*, and his usage seems to satisfy his definition of "voluntary." To acknowledge is not to know or believe scientifically, nor to believe or have faith religiously, but rather to express something (I will be more specific about the content below) in speech or action. For example, in chapter 7 (7.5) Hobbes discusses belief and faith generally (not specifically or exclusively to do with religion) (Hobbes 2012, 100; 1651, 31). Hobbes contrasts believing a "saying" or statement with belief or faith "in" a person. In the following paragraph (7.6), he considers "believing in a doctrine."

But by *believing in*, as it is in the creed, is meant, not trust in the person, but *confession and acknowledgment* of the doctrine. For not only Christians, but all manner of men, do so believe in God as to hold all for truth they hear him say, whether they understand it or not; which is all the faith and trust can possibly be had in any person whatsoever; but they do not all believe the doctrine of the creed. (Hobbes 2012, 102; 1651, 31; latter emphasis added)

Clearly, acknowledgment here means more than merely believing (or "believing in"): it entails confession, assertion, or recognition.

Such an expression in speech or writing is a performative speech act: like apologizing, promising, or forbidding, acknowledging names a kind of action performed by its own expression. Just as I apologize to you by saying "I apologize," so I acknowledge, say, your owning a piece of land by saying, "I acknowledge that you own this land." Acknowledging God's providence, which I will distinguish by capitalizing the word, need not be explicit. Other performatives that tacitly Acknowledge God's providence include honoring God, worshiping, going to church, praying, and swearing an oath.²⁷ And just like other performatives, Acknowledgment must be sincere. Insincere statements cannot be performatives because they do not constitute the actions that they purport to express.

Hobbes defines (6.1) voluntary motion as synonymous with "animal motion," or movement of the limbs or body caused by the mind, in particular, the passions (Hobbes 2012 78; 1651, 23). He defines (6.53) deliberation as the interaction of (possibly contrary) motives prior to action. The will is the last motive before action (Hobbes 2012, 92; 1651, 28), and because Hobbes understands the etymology of "voluntary" (from the Latin *voluntas* or will), any motivated act will count as voluntary. "For a *voluntary act* is that which proceedeth from the *will*, and no other.... *Will* therefore is the last appetite [or aversion] in deliberating" (Hobbes 2012, 92; 1651, 28).

Performative speech acts satisfy this conception of voluntary action because they are motivated, deliberate actions and so result from will. When we explicitly Acknowledge God, then, such action is voluntary in virtue of being a performative speech act. Even when we tacitly Acknowledge God, in prayer, worship, or other form of honoring God,

these acts are also voluntary. So Acknowledgment, which constitutes submission to God, satisfies the definition of “voluntary.”

17.8.2 *Faith*

Acknowledgment and faith are species of different genera. As we just saw, Acknowledgment is a performative speech act that is the causal result of our motives. Hobbes regards faith as a cognitive state that is set apart from our motives, and so is not a causal consequence of the will. Faith is thus not voluntary, which Hobbes often, though not consistently, maintains.

Curley remarks that “It’s not clear to me that Hobbes has a consistent view on the extent to which faith may be a voluntary act on the part of the believer” (Hobbes 1994, 527, n. 17). He mentions four passages in this context, including the one (40.2) most commonly cited to support the claim that Hobbes thought faith was not voluntary. “As for the inward *thought* and *belief* of men, which human governors can take no notice of (for God only knoweth the heart), they are not voluntary, nor the effect of the laws, but of the unrevealed will, and of the power, of God, and consequently fall not under obligation” (Hobbes 2012, 738; 1651, 249).²⁸ Hobbes seems to be clear, at least very often in *Leviathan*, that belief is not voluntary. If we assume that faith is a species of belief or thought, then it follows that faith, too, is involuntary. In that case, faith cannot be the act of submission that constitutes people as natural subjects.

17.8.3 *Submission*

God’s natural subjects are obligated to obey the laws of nature in virtue of their submission to God and its (perhaps tacit) promise to obey. If Acknowledgment constitutes voluntary submission to God, then it must include a promise to obey.

Hobbes links acts of worship, prayer, and sacrifice to submission and obedience in chapter 31. The context of these passages is the claim (31.29) that it is a “general precept of reason” that divine worship must be “signs of the intention to honour God” (Hobbes 2012, 568; 1651, 191). First, consider what he says (31.34) about “heathen” religions: he explains that the heathens “did absurdly to worship images,” but that their songs and prayers honored their gods appropriately and thus were “reasonable” and satisfied this general precept of natural reason.

Also that the beasts they offered in sacrifice, and the gifts they offered, and their actions in worshipping, were *full of submission*, and commemorative of benefits received, was according to reason, as proceeding from an intention to honour him. (Hobbes 2012, 570; 1651, 192; emphasis added)

Hobbes thinks that the heathens had false religion; but their acts of acknowledging their gods were rational, not least because they properly expressed submission to their gods. Had they been Christians Acknowledging God, they presumably would also be submitting, and doing so correctly.

Hobbes goes on to add (31.36) that, “obedience to his laws (that is, in this case, to the laws of nature) is the greatest worship of all. For as obedience is more acceptable to God

than sacrifice, so also to set light by his commandments is the greatest of all contumelies” (Hobbes, 2012, 570; 1651, 192). He seems to say here that worship and its attendant forms of honoring God includes a promise of obedience, in particular to the laws of nature (which are, of course, the laws of the natural kingdom). If worship is a form of Acknowledgment, and the “greatest worship” is obedience, then it follows that those who voluntarily Acknowledge and submit to God thereby commit themselves to obeying the laws of nature.

Conclusion

I conclude by tying Acknowledgment to the account of justice in states of nature with which we began. A primary state of nature includes atheists, or so says (Martinich 1992, 76ff.). We are now in a position to be more precise: a primary state of nature is inhabited by God’s enemies, both atheists and deists. Those are the people for whom there is no justice or injustice (13.13): “where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice” (Hobbes 2012, 196; 1651, 63). God’s enemies have no common power because they Acknowledge none, and so they submit to no one. They can have little hope of escaping the state of nature.²⁹

It would, of course, be irrational to choose to be an enemy of an omnipotent being. Hobbes here underscores the irrationality of God’s enemies by condemning them to a permanent and irredeemable state of war in a primary state of nature. The best that they may hope for is to use whatever powers of reason they possess to discern the rational theorems given by God in the precepts of natural law, and to accept those principles on purely rational grounds (not as commanded by God). Doing so might enable these unhappy souls to avoid what Hobbes calls (31.40) God’s “natural punishments” for those who violate the laws of nature (Hobbes 2012, 572; 1651, 193).

In contrast, those who Acknowledge God’s providence fare no worse than a secondary state of nature. In that state, though still having no civil sovereign or law, nor civil commonwealth, all are God’s natural subjects. They are accordingly obligated by the laws of nature as laws, and their submission to God by Acknowledgment affords them the possibility of justice and injustice. Once the inhabitants of a secondary state of nature Acknowledge God and thereby submit, they constitute themselves as natural subjects and become obligated to obey the laws of nature as God’s commands.

Distinguishing between a primary and secondary state of nature allows us to avoid attributing a blatant contradiction to Hobbes. Jones (2019, 452) contends that Hobbes has higher priorities than mere logical consistency: “Hobbes is often willing to appeal to different values and assumptions—even contradictory ones—in an effort to persuade a broad range of readers to accept those conclusions as necessary for peace.”³⁰ Beyond being a hermeneutical last resort in general, we should be especially loath to find contradictions in Hobbes on methodological grounds. Hobbes claims, after all, to have shown *deductively* that the commonwealth is the only way for people to live in peace. Attributing a contradiction to him regarding so basic a premise as the state of nature threatens to trivialize his conclusion. Fortunately, with a proper understanding of Acknowledgment and submission to God in the natural kingdom, we can do justice to the text.

Notes

- 1 See for example Jones, (2019), Martinich, (2018), and Abizadeh, (2017). Far more attention has been paid to the questions of whether Hobbes was an atheist or had a natural theology. See Tuck, (1992), Stauffer, (2013), and Lupoli, (2016). For convenience, I convert Hobbes's Roman numeral chapter numbers to Arabic numerals.
- 2 Martinich (1992, 76ff.) proposes the distinction for the same purpose, but draws it on a different basis. See Byron (2015, ch. 1) for the details of my appropriation of this distinction.
- 3 I defend this normative analysis of the laws of nature in Byron (2015, ch. 2).
- 4 "To those, therefore, whose power is irresistible, the dominion of all men adhereth naturally by the excellence of power; and consequently it is from that power that the kingdom over men, and the right of afflicting men at his pleasure, belongeth naturally to God Almighty, not as Creator and gracious, but as omnipotent" (Hobbes 2012, 558; 1651, 187).⁴
- 5 "The mutual transferring of right is that which men call CONTRACT" (Hobbes 2012, 204; 1651, 66). Two paragraphs later Hobbes defines a covenant as a species of contract in which the performances of the two parties occurs at different times.
- 6 Compare God's prophetic kingdom, which is built on God's covenant with Abraham, in which God rules one particular nation for his subjects by positive laws (Hobbes 2012, 556; 1651, 187).
- 7 "Whether men will or not, they must be subject always to the divine power. By denying the existence or providence of God, men may shake off their ease, but not their yoke" (Hobbes 2012, 554; 1651, 186). Cf. the cognate passage in *De cive*, 15.2 (Hobbes 1998, 172). It is worth pointing out that Hobbes tends to emphasize divine power and knowledge, mentioning divine goodness far less in *Leviathan*. Still, nothing in the text hints that he rejects any elements of the traditional conception. Hobbes might have issues with "infinite" power, knowledge, etc. given his nominalism and psychology. These concerns will not affect my argument, and might be finessed if Hobbes learned the modern distinction between infinite and indefinitely large quantities.
- 8 "For he only is properly said to reign that governs his subjects by his word, and by promise of rewards to those that obey it, and by threatening them with punishment that obey it not" (Hobbes 2012, 554; 1651, 186).
- 9 Note that I capture Hobbes's negative point: non-humans are excluded from the set of those who are subject to God's commands. From this it does not follow that all humans are included, as we see below.
- 10 A "consequence" because God's omnipotence arguably includes the capacity to do all logically possible acts, not only all nomologically possible acts. If those sets coincide, then God's causal power over everything *is* omnipotence.
- 11 See for example 42.11, where Hobbes refers to "faith in Christ" (Hobbes 2012, 784; 1651, 271). Chapter 42, by far the longest chapter in *Leviathan*, is especially rich with additional examples.
- 12 Hobbes does not use the term "deist," but instead refers to those who deny God's revelation and providence. See 31.2 (Hobbes 2012, 554; 1651, 186), cited just below. And again from chapter 31 (31.17): "they who attributing (as they think) ease to God take from him the care of mankind, take from him his honour; for it takes away men's love and fear of him, which is the root of honour" (Hobbes 2012, 564; 1651, 190). Hobbes's friend, Herbert of Cherbury, was an early deist who made these very claims in *De Veritate* (1624); see the discussion in Springborg, 2016.
- 13 This point begins to refine the claim I have made (Byron 2015, 90), where I stated that theism was sufficient for being a natural subject. Although mere belief in God's existence is not sufficient for being a natural subject, Christian faith is, as it entails both theism and acknowledgment of God's providence.

- 14 “They, therefore, that believe there is a God that governeth the world, and hath given precepts, and propounded rewards and punishments to mankind, are God’s subjects; all the rest are to be understood as enemies” (Hobbes 2012, 554; 1651, 186).
- 15 Here we may assume that the set of those with the capacity to Acknowledge already excludes people Hobbes thinks are not natural subjects: “natural fools, children, and madmen” (Hobbes, 2012, 422; 1651, 140).
- 16 In a passage already quoted, Hobbes writes (31.5), “To those, therefore, whose power is irresistible, the dominion of all men adhereth naturally by the excellence of power; and consequently it is from that power that the kingdom over men, and the right of afflicting men at his pleasure, belongeth naturally to God Almighty, not as Creator and gracious, but as omnipotent” (Hobbes 2012, 558; 1651, 187).
- 17 See 26.44: “For *right* is *liberty*, namely that liberty which the civil law leaves us; but *civil law* is an *obligation*, and takes from us the liberty which the law of nature gave us” (Hobbes 2012, 450; 1651, 150).
- 18 See 14.7 (Hobbes 2012, 200; 1651, 65), quoted in Section 17.1 (this chapter).
- 19 See 26.2: “And first, it is manifest that law in general is not counsel, but command; nor a command of any man to any man, but only of him whose command is addressed to one formerly obliged to bey him” (Hobbes 2012, 414; 1651, 137).
- 20 I defend this reading of Hobbes on obligation in (Byron 2015, ch. 3).
- 21 Martinich (2018, 40, n.61) points out that Hobbes had argued in *De cive* (15.7) that omnipotence entails an obligation to obey (Hobbes 1998, 174–5). But Hobbes famously *omitted* this claim and its supporting argument from both the English and Latin texts of *Leviathan*: his mature view is that omnipotence and dominion do *not* entail obligations, as I have shown.
- 22 I say “obligated to obey God’s commands as laws” because the precepts commanded may (and according to Hobbes do in fact) have a distinct normative standing. The very same precepts, Hobbes notes at the end of chapter 15 (15.41) (Hobbes 2012, 242; 1651, 80), are both rational theorems and divine laws. As rational theorems, their status is prudentially binding. Reason requires that we follow these precepts. But the same precepts become laws only where the commanded are subjects who have promised to obey. I defend this view in Byron 2015, ch. 2.
- 23 We all have, of course, *prudential* reasons to follow the precepts of the laws of nature because those are rational theorems. It does not follow that the laws are obligatory for all.
- 24 See 28.2: “[N]o man is supposed bound by covenant not to resist violence, and consequently, it cannot be intended that he gave any right to another to lay violent hands upon his person. ... But to covenant to assist the sovereign in doing hurt to another, unless he that so covenanteth have a right to do it himself, is not to give him a right to punish” (Hobbes 2012, 482; 1651, 161).
- 25 Relevant examples of “acknowledge” and its cognates include: 10.21, 12.7, 15.21, and 26.24 (Hobbes 2012, 136, 166, 234, 434; 1651, 43, 53, 77, 144).
- 26 Cumulative case arguments are common in criminal prosecution. Prosecutors often argue, for example, that defendants had the motive to commit the crime, that they had the means, and the opportunity, and that they lacked an alibi, and that there was an eyewitness, and that there was DNA evidence. These arguments together aim to demonstrate the guilt of defendants beyond a reasonable doubt. The metaphor usually invoked to explain cumulative case arguments is that of the legs of a table: though no one leg may be sufficient to support the table, together they do so. Similarly, though none of the arguments I present in this section on their own might be sufficient to establish my conclusion, together they make it highly probable.
- 27 See 10.21 (Hobbes 2012, 136; 1651, 43) for example, and especially 45.12 (Hobbes 2012, 1028; 1651, 357): “Therefore, to pray to, to swear by, to obey, to be diligent and officious in serving—in sum, all words and actions that betoken fear to offend or desire to please—is

- worship, whether those words and actions be sincere or feigned; and because they appear as signs of honouring, are ordinarily also called honour.”
- 28 The other passages Curley mentions are 26.41, 42.11, and 46.38 (Hobbes 2012, 444, 784, 1096; 1651, 149, 271, 378; though latter’s relevance is unclear). Curley’s footnote quoted earlier is a note to the Appendix 2.31 (Hobbes 2012, 1202; 1651, 351), where Hobbes refers to “a man whose faith is chosen,” which seems to undercut his view that faith is involuntary.
- 29 Hobbes remarks in the Latin Appendix (2.38) that “in every commonwealth the law commands religion and the recognition of the divine power, and it is essential to every commonwealth that people keep faith in covenants, especially if their faith is confirmed by an oath. Therefore, because an atheist cannot be obliged by swearing, he ought to be cast out of the commonwealth, not as someone who is obstinate, but as someone who is harmful to the public” (Hobbes 2012, 1206; 1651, 352). I have shown (Byron, 2019) that Hobbes’s Foole must be an atheist on related grounds.
- 30 Jones attributes this interpretative approach to Hoekstra (2006).

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