

James R. Martel, *Subverting the Leviathan: Reading Thomas Hobbes as a Radical Democrat*.  
New York: Columbia University Press, 2007

James Martel discusses Hobbes's political and religious views, focusing on *Leviathan*.  
*Subverting the Leviathan* is based on an interesting suggested procedure: apply the theory of reading found in *Leviathan* to *Leviathan* itself.

Martel is keen to stress the connections between his reading of Hobbes and those of seventeenth-century readers. Most importantly, Martel finds Hobbes's contemporary critics thinking that *Leviathan*'s "text was somehow dangerous and slippery" (5). And Martel himself thinks that *Leviathan* contains – as well as the views of society and government usually associated with Hobbes – another political view, one that is perhaps less clearly presented, but there to be seen if we read *Leviathan* carefully.

Thus Martel argues that his procedure reveals a radically different political view than the sovereign-focused one that's usually associated with Hobbes. This alternative view is, indeed, "antisovereign" (222), something that Martel acknowledges might seem "perverse" as a reading of *Leviathan*. But, he argues, this view is present in *Leviathan*. Further, Martel thinks this view is not just a historical curiosity, but one worthy of consideration now. The first half of *Subverting the Leviathan* looks at Hobbes's views on rhetoric and reading, and the second then tries to draw the alleged hidden view out of the text.

The procedure that Martel suggests, applying Hobbes's theory of reading to Hobbes's texts, is an interesting one that seems worthwhile. The antisovereign view that emerges from Martel's discussion is also interesting in its own right. I have worries, however, about the

discussions and arguments with which Martel supports his view. Consider for instance what Martel says about Hobbes as a skeptic.

Though Martel repeatedly calls Hobbes a skeptic, it's unclear what skeptical views he takes Hobbes to have. On the one hand he tells us about "Hobbes's radical skepticism" (24), "Hobbes's radical nominalism and skepticism" (66), and "the kind of extreme skepticism that Hobbes illustrates in the earlier parts of *Leviathan*" (159). On the other hand, we're told that "Hobbes's skepticism is not utter, is perhaps not even skepticism at all" (104-5). And elsewhere, Martel seems to want to strike a balance by arguing that "Hobbes's skepticism ... is radical in that it relentlessly undermines all forms of expression and knowledge even as it demands and permits that there be expressions and that there be knowledges" (106). It's far from obvious how to reconcile these various statements. Moreover, why should we think that Hobbes is a skeptic at all? This too is far from obvious.

One short section of *Subverting the Leviathan* is devoted to skepticism, and one would hope that it would clarify both what view Martel attributes to Hobbes, and why he attributes it (81-2). Martel begins the section by quoting Hobbes from chapter 7 of *Leviathan*. There Hobbes says that "No discourse whatsoever can end in absolute knowledge of fact, past or to come. For as for the knowledge of fact, it is originally sense, and ever after, memory" (Hobbes 7.3).<sup>1</sup> Martel follows the quote by saying "For Hobbes, we only experience "facts" through an interpretive lens and, as with Scripture, our interpretations tend to be very problematic" (81). But why follow that Hobbesian text with this interpretive

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Ed. Edwin Curley. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994. I refer to *Leviathan* using chapter and paragraph numbers, following the paragraph numbering of Curley's edition.

claim? Hobbes is contrasting knowledge of fact with “conditional knowledge”, which he also calls “SCIENCE” (Hobbes 7.4). Knowledge of fact is genuine knowledge, and is grounded in sense and memory. Conditional knowledge, knowledge of what brings about what, is genuine knowledge too. Hobbes returns to this distinction in chapter 9 of *Leviathan*: “There are of KNOWLEDGE two kinds, whereof one is *knowledge of fact*, the other *knowledge of the consequence of one affirmation to another*” (Hobbes 9.1). This division of knowledge into two kinds may or may not be helpful, and may or may not be true. But it’s an odd sort of thing to call skeptical, and appears unrelated to Martel’s claims about an “interpretive lens”.

Martel’s discussion continues by looking at a puzzling part of Hobbes’s responses to Descartes’s *Meditations*. I don’t have space here to work through Martel’s puzzling claims about that text in detail. But in any case, the problem here isn’t really the disagreement about whether Hobbes is some sort of skeptic. There’s room for reasonable disagreement about that issue. Rather my worry is that Martel makes bold claims about this issue (and seems to rely on them elsewhere) which are not always well connected to the texts he quotes and glosses.

One might raise similar questions in other areas. For instance, in a discussion of Hobbes on miracles, Martel quotes a passage about what happens when a “Miracle seemeth done by Enchantment” (100) and goes straight on to say “A miracle, then, is...” (100), moving without comment from seeming to actual miracles. Indeed, if we turn to the text of *Leviathan*, we find that the discussion concludes about the examples in question “that all the miracle consisteth in this: that the enchanter has deceived a man, which is no miracle, but a very easy matter to do” (Hobbes 37.11). That is, Hobbes appears explicitly to deny that the seeming miracles are miracles.

*Subverting the Leviathan* deals with genuinely interesting topics, such as Hobbes' theory of reading. But my worries about Martel's handling of the details of argument and text mean that I cannot recommend the book as anything more than a provocative take on those interesting topics.

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