

Knowledge of God in *Leviathan*

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1 Introduction

Hobbes's views about God have been much discussed, from the seventeenth century to the present day.¹ Readings of these views have varied widely. Hobbes has been called an atheist, an orthodox Christian, and many other things besides.

Ralph Cudworth is an early advocate of the view that Hobbes is an atheist. His *True Intellectual System* is supposed to be a work in which "All the REASON and PHILOSOPHY Of ATHEISM is Confuted; AND Its IMPOSSIBILITY Demonstrated". Although Cudworth often uses 'atheism' more broadly than we usually use it today, he does discuss atheism in today's narrower sense – the denial of the existence of God. In his second chapter Cudworth discusses "all the pretended Grounds of Reason for the Atheistick Hypothesis".² He attributes several of these arguments for atheism to Hobbes, who appears as an un-named, but quoted, "Modern Writer".³ Cudworth says for instance that

This is the First Argument, used especially by our modern Democriticks, against a Deity, That because they can have no *Phantastick Idea* of it, nor fully comprehend all that is included in the Notion thereof, that therefore it is but an *Incomprehensible Nothing*.⁴

Cudworth thinks that Hobbes argues that God does not exist, and attributes to Hobbes the argument, 'we can have no idea of God, so God does not exist'.

Hobbes does not endorse that argument. Still, Cudworth's attribution of it to Hobbes suggests a puzzle. Hobbes does think that we lack an idea of God (L 11.25).⁵ How, then, does Hobbes think we can believe and say that God exists?

Hobbes does deny that we have an idea of God, but does not thence conclude that God does not exist, nor even that we cannot think about God. There is, he thinks, another cognitive mechanism by means of which we can think about God, though that mechanism allows us to think only a few things about God. This grounds Hobbes's belief in a fairly strong version of the thesis that God is incomprehensible.

That Hobbes believes that God exists and is incomprehensible is – even though it has often been denied – an initially highly plausible reading of *Leviathan*. Hobbes gives a version of the cosmological argument (L 12.6).⁶ He tells us that “the nature of God is incomprehensible; that is to say, we understand nothing of *what he is*, but only *that he is*” (L 34.4).⁷ Much of the text presumes the truth of Christianity. No doubt one can suggest other motives for spending pages – and considerable time and effort – discussing such topics as the sense in which faith is necessary for salvation (L 43.19-21). The obvious explanation is that the author believes that God and heaven exist, and is engaging in the internal Christian debate about what is necessary for salvation.⁸

2 Thinking about God

Hobbes begins *Leviathan* with a brief account of his views about the mind. The early chapters discuss in turn sense, imagination, “the Consequence or Train of Imaginations”, speech, reason and science, the passions, the ends of discourse, and the intellectual virtues.

Chapter one, which discusses sense, begins with what thoughts are.

Singly, they are every one a *representation* or *appearance*, of some quality or other accident, of a body without us, which is commonly called an *object*. Which object worketh on the eyes, ears, and other parts of a man's body, and by diversity of working produceth diversity of appearances (L 1.1).

Hobbes describes a causal process by which objects affect perceivers. The object (mediately or immediately) causes pressure on the sense organs. A causal process continues, things pressing directly on other things, all the way from the object to the heart. There is an outward, resistant pressure there, which either causes, or just is, sensation.

Once there are appearances and representations in the mind, the mind can manipulate them. This is the place of imagination and memory. These, for Hobbes, are the same thing considered in two ways. The underlying phenomenon is what he calls decaying sense: that a "more obscure" image (or an equivalent item from another sense) remains after we cease to perceive an object. This remnant is itself obscured by the remnants of things we see afterward. In general, the "*decaying sense*, when we would express the thing itself (I mean *fancy* itself), we call *imagination*, as I said before; but when we would express the *decay*, and signify that the sense is fading, old, and past, it is called *memory*" (L 2.3).

Beyond this basic action of remaining but decaying sense, Hobbes also describes how the imagination can compound images. He gives the example of how, after seeing a man and seeing a horse, we can imagine a centaur.

Hobbes thinks that imagination underlies understanding:

The imagination that is raised . . . by words or other voluntary signs is that we generally call *understanding* . . . That understanding which is peculiar to man is the understanding not only his will, but his conceptions and thoughts, by the sequel and contexture of the names of things into affirmations, negations, and other forms of speech (L 2.10).

Understanding is another thing that the imagination does. Some sorts of understanding that involve words are peculiar to humans. Thus Hobbes gives us a materialist story about reasoning as well as about other things we might more readily call the works of imagination. Hobbesian ideas belong in the imagination, not in some further intellectual faculty.

Along with this focus on sense and imagination comes a certain empiricism. All ideas have their causal source in the senses: “there is no conception in a man’s mind which hath not at first, totally or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense” (L 1.2). Ideas (which Hobbes also calls appearances, representations, and phantasms) are images that come from the senses. The imagination can manipulate ideas, adding parts of one to parts of another. It cannot however make ideas that do not ultimately derive their parts from the senses. No idea of God comes from the senses, and the imagination cannot make such an idea from sensory materials. Thus God is unimaginable.

Given that story, someone might conclude that Hobbes’s psychology leaves no room for thoughts about God. All thought seems to involve ideas, but we can have no such ideas of God. That is not the whole story though. Hobbes introduces other mental

items, distinct from ideas, with which we can think about some things of which we lack ideas.

Hobbes addresses the question of how we can think about God without an idea of God by suggesting a second way of thinking about things. This process is illustrated by other thoughts, so it is not merely an *ad hoc* way to say ‘yes we can think about God’.

For as a man that is born blind, hearing men talk of warming themselves by the fire, and being brought to warm himself by the same, may easily conceive and assure himself there is somewhat there, which men call *fire* and is the cause of the heat he feels, but cannot imagine what it is like, nor have any idea of it in his mind such as they that see it; so also, by the visible things of this world and their admirable order, a man may conceive there is a cause of them, which men call God, and yet not have an idea or image of him in his mind (L 11.25).

The man born blind has an idea of the heat, an effect of the fire. He has no idea of the fire itself. He can think about the fire as the thing that causes this heat. Similarly, we have no perceptions or ideas of God, but can think about God as the thing that causes the things of the world. Such thoughts are about things, but give us no insight into the natures of the things they are about. Unlike ideas, they give us no access to intrinsic features.⁹

That view allows us to think only a limited few things about God. Thus God is largely beyond our understanding. We can think of God as the cause of the world, but in no other way, so we can know none of his intrinsic features. This psychological point supports Hobbes’s theological claim that “the nature of God is incomprehensible; that is

to say, we understand nothing of *what he is*, but only *that he is*” (L 34.4). We cannot, Hobbes says, understand the nature of God.

Hobbes continues “and therefore, the attributes we give him are not to tell one another *what he is*, nor to signify our opinion of his nature, but our desire to honour him with such names as we conceive most honourable amongst ourselves” (L 34.4). So if we say, for instance, that God is omniscient and omnipotent, we are not really describing God. We are trying to honour and praise God by attributing to him exaggerated versions of attributes we find good among ourselves. It is good to be knowledgeable, good to be powerful. We attempt to praise God by calling him all-knowing, all-powerful. We do not have insight into God’s nature that justifies these as descriptions. Indeed, we can only think of an extrinsic feature of God, his being cause of everything in the world. We can nevertheless attempt to praise God with what we say – and we do so even in cases in which we seem to be doing something else.

This view, together with the view that there is a way to think of some things of which we lack ideas, lets Hobbes account for thoughts about God without going far beyond his basic psychological framework, and without saying that we can imagine God.

3 Incomprehensibility

Hobbes believes in God, and has a story about how we can think in a certain limited way about God, even though we have no idea of him. God is, Hobbes thinks, unimaginable and incomprehensible. How strong is that incomprehensibility claim though? C1 and C2 are both initially plausible candidates for being Hobbes’s incomprehensibility claim.

C1 All we can know of God is that he exists and is the cause of the world.

C2 All we can know of God is that he exists, is the cause of the world, and is a body.

In favour of C1, we should note two things. First, Hobbes's claim that "the nature of God is incomprehensible; that is to say, we understand nothing of *what he is*, but only *that he is*" (L 34.4) seems to rule out C2: to know that God is extended would be to know something of what he is. That is not an isolated statement. Consider the following.

He that will attribute to God nothing but what is warranted by natural reason must either use such negative attributes (as *infinite*, *eternal*, *incomprehensible*) or superlatives (as *most high*, *most great*, and the like) or indefinite (as *good*, *just*, *holy*, *creator*), and in such sense as if he meant not to declare what he is (for that were to circumscribe him within the limits of our fancy,) but how much we admire him, and how ready we would be to obey him, which is a sign of humility, and of a will to honour him as much as we can (L 31.28).

To know what God is like, we would have to be able to grasp him with our fancy or imagination. That is, we would have to have an idea of him. But we have no such idea, so any claim to understand what God is like is mistaken.

Secondly, consideration of Hobbesian psychology suggests that he believes C1. If the only way in which we can think about God is as the cause of the world, how can we believe him to be a body? After all, we cannot think of him as a body. However, if we have some independent reason for thinking that God must be a body (say we discover that all substances must be bodies) that may still hold even if we cannot positively think of God as a body. So this consideration is not overwhelming.

There is, then, evidence for C1. There seems also to be evidence for C2.

However, most of it is weaker than it seems.

3.1 Is everything a body?

Douglas Jesseph cites the following passage in arguing that Hobbes says that God is a body, because it seems to say that everything is a body.¹⁰

The world (I mean not the earth only, that denominates the lovers of it *worldly men*, but the *universe*, that is, the whole mass of all things that are) is corporeal (that is to say, body) and hath the dimensions of magnitude (namely, length, breadth, and depth). Also, every part of body is likewise body, and hath the like dimensions. And consequently, every part of the universe is body, and that which is not body is no part of the universe. And because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing (and consequently, nowhere). Nor does it follow from hence that spirits are nothing. For they have dimensions, and are, therefore, really bodies (though that name in common speech be given to such bodies only as are visible or palpable, that is, that have some degree of opacity). But for spirits, they call them incorporeal, which is a name of more honour, and may therefore with more piety be attributed to God himself, in whom we consider not what attribute expresseth best his nature, which is incomprehensible, but what best expresseth our desire to honour Him (L 46.15).

Here Hobbes seems to say that everything – both “the whole mass of all things that are” and “every part” thereof – is a body. So God must be a body, or not exist at all. Given that Hobbes also believes that God exists, he must believe C2, not C1.

However, in this paragraph Hobbes says both (1) that everything is a body and (2) that you cannot know the attributes of God. He cannot mean both of these literally. To know that everything is a body is to know that God is a body, which is to know an attribute of God. Perhaps being a body is not an attribute, but extension is, and Hobbes thinks that all bodies are extended. We might well take (2) seriously and thus qualify (1), thus maintaining C1, not C2.¹¹

It seems, then, that we can read this passage as compatible with C1 or C2. Each reading requires taking some part of the passage to be misleading. The evidence for which part to take to be misleading will have to come from elsewhere though, as we consider whether C1 or C2 is the best overall reading.

3.2 Contradictory phrases

Hobbes argues that ‘incorporeal substance’ is absurd. That claim that might seem to imply that incorporeal or immaterial substances, including an immaterial God, are impossible, and thus that Hobbes believes C2. His first argument that ‘incorporeal substance’ is absurd is IS1.

IS1 ‘Substance’ signifies the same thing as ‘body’; ‘Incorporeal body’ is a contradictory phrase; So ‘incorporeal substance’ is a contradictory phrase. Those who believe that there are incorporeal substances will deny the first premise. They think that ‘some substances are not bodies’ makes sense, which it can only do if

‘substance’ signifies things other than those that ‘body’ signifies. For them ‘incorporeal substance’ and ‘incorporeal body’ are not “all one”. Still, for all that it may be unpersuasive, IS1 does seem to be something Hobbes believes.

IS1 occurs for instance in chapter 34.¹²

The word *body* . . . because bodies are subject to change (that is to say, to variety of appearance to the sense of living creatures) is called *substance* (that is to say, *subject* to various accidents) . . . And according to this acceptation of the word, *substance* and *body* signify the same thing; and therefore, *substance incorporeal* are words which, when they are joined together, destroy one another, as if a man should say an *incorporeal body* (L 34.2).

Hobbes claims here that ‘substance’ and ‘body’ signify the same thing under two different names. ‘Body’ is what we call it if we think of it as filling the universe, ‘substance’ what we call it if we think about it as the subject of change. Thus to say ‘incorporeal substance’ is just to say ‘incorporeal body’, which is obvious nonsense.¹³

Hobbes believes that ‘substance’ and ‘body’ signify the same thing. This suggests that he believes the metaphysical claim that substance and body are the same thing. That would make immaterial substances impossible. If so, God is presumably a body, and Hobbes endorses C2. Note however that ‘substance’ here means ‘subject of change’, which is itself glossed as ‘variety of appearance to the sense of living creatures’. Presumably Hobbes denies that God is a substance in this sense. God is not a thing that appears variously to the sense of living creatures, because God is not a thing that appears

at all to the sense of living creatures. Thus IS1 does not apply to God, so Hobbes may indeed endorse C1, for all that IS1 shows.

3.3 Absent thoughts

Hobbes has another argument in *Leviathan* against ‘immaterial substance’. Call it IS2.

- IS2 A significant name must be related to an appropriate mental item;
 ‘immaterial substance’ is not related to an appropriate mental item; so
 ‘immaterial substance’ is not a significant name.

The first premise is a claim that Hobbes makes in several places. Consider for instance this passage about absurd names in chapter 5.

And words whereby we conceive nothing but the sound are those we call *absurd, insignificant, and nonsense*. And therefore if a man should talk to me of a *round quadrangle*, or *accidents of bread in cheese*, or *immaterial substances*, or of a *free subject*, a *free will*, or any *free*, but free from being hindered by opposition, I should not say he were in an error, but that his words were without meaning, that is to say, absurd (L 5.5).

Here Hobbes describes insignificant words as “words whereby we conceive nothing but the sound”. We should, he thinks, be conceiving – that is, thinking about – something more. The problem with absurd words is that we use the noise while lacking an appropriate mental item.¹⁴

The second premise of IS2 is expressed in chapter 12, in a passage that seems to give both IS1 and IS2. One reason given there for ‘incorporeal spirit’ being a contradictory name is that we lack any “imagination” answering to it:

though men may put together words of contradictory signification, as *spirit* and *incorporeal*, yet they can never have the imagination of anything answering to them; and therefore, men that by their own meditation arrive to the acknowledgment of one infinite, omnipotent, and eternal God, choose rather to confess he is incomprehensible, and above their understanding, than to define his nature by *spirit incorporeal* (Hobbes 1994, 12.7).

So Hobbes believes both premises of IS2, and seems indeed to draw its conclusion in this passage. So he believes that ‘incorporeal substance’ is meaningless, for we have no way to make it significant. That does not show us, however, that he believes C2 rather than C1. It is indeed compatible with his belief in C2. However, it is also compatible with C1. It leaves open the possibility that God is something that is not a body, though we have no way to think positively about such a thing. We can still understand the claim that things other than bodies are possible, even though we can positively conceive and talk only of bodies.

3.4 Evidence from the Latin appendix

Hobbes added an Appendix to the 1668 Latin edition of *Leviathan*. The third chapter of that Appendix discusses objections to *Leviathan*. In a dialogue between two characters A and B, A raises an apparent dilemma for Hobbes: atheism or the view that God is a body. B says that Hobbes “affirms, of course, that God is a body” (L App.3.6).

If we take B as the voice of Hobbes, then Hobbes himself is saying in 1668 that the 1651 text asserts C2. Presuming that Hobbes is more likely than not to be an honest

expositor of his own views, we have evidence that the 1651 text really proposes C2. B defends the view that God is a body. He argues that Tertullian (c. 200 AD) thinks that God is a body, but is not condemned for it. Tertullian, from the passages Hobbes quotes and others, does appear to think that all things, God included, are bodies. Curley questions the strength of this defence: “in assessing the weight of having Tertullian as a predecessor, note that Hobbes has to go back before the Nicene council to find a church father who holds that God is corporeal”.¹⁵ The suggestion, I take it, is that Hobbes’s defence looks weak because he has to look so far back – and back beyond key moments in the development of Christian doctrine – to find support for his view. However, reference to Tertullian is accepted and respectable in seventeenth-century English religious debates. Tertullian is not Augustine, but still has authority. The translators of the King James Bible cite him repeatedly in their 1611 preface, ‘The Translators to the Reader’. Hobbes would have more support on his side if other, later church fathers also said this. Tertullian is nevertheless a respectable source of support for Hobbes to invoke.

Along with the reference to Tertullian comes the claim that none of the first four church councils condemns the view that God is body. The implication is that the view is perfectly orthodox, even if unusual. B further claims that “Not even the Nicene Council defined it [as an article of faith] that God is incorporeal” (L App.3.6). “Not even” because they might seem to, and because Hobbes himself thinks that several or all of the members of the council believe that God is incorporeal, without intending this to be a part of the creed. The creed uses the term *homoousios*, which Hobbes translates into Latin as *coessentialis*, having the same essence. The claim is that Christ is *homoousios* with the Father.

This raises the issue of immateriality in the dialogue. B claims that the creed uses *homoousios* because Constantine wished it used, because “it seemed to him to follow from that term that God is incorporeal” (L App.3.6). B denies that coessentiality implies incorporeality:

the incorporeity of God cannot be inferred from the term *coessential*, even though an essence is not a body. The father of David and the son of Obadiah (since he was one and the same as Jesse) were *coessential*. Does it follow that Jesse and the father of David were *incorporeal*? (L App.3.6).

Hobbes claims that two bodies can have the same essence. For instance, the father of David and the son of Obadiah are coessential. This does not show us that they are incorporeal. Hobbes’s argument is awkward, as the example does not involve two bodies with one essence, but one body described in two ways. He seems nevertheless to be correct that coessentiality does not imply incorporeality. Why should not two bodies have the same essence, if two incorporeal things may?

In summary, B’s view in this exchange, which seems to be Hobbes’s 1668 view, and which B claims is Hobbes’s 1651 view, is that God is a body.

We might try to deny that Hobbes believes C2 by arguing that, although the character B says that Hobbes thinks that God is a body, Hobbes himself need not think so. After all, the dialogue is not entirely one-sided, and it is not obvious that B is simply Hobbes.¹⁶ However, B does not just state this view that God is a body and attribute it to Hobbes, he also defends it at some length. That defence suggests that Hobbes takes God’s being a body seriously.

There are other places where Hobbes, from about 1662, is willing to say that God is a body. In replying to Wallis in 1662, he again invokes Tertullian in defence of that view.¹⁷ Later, in replying to Bramhall, Hobbes describes God as a “pure, simple, invisible spirit corporeal”.¹⁸ By 1662, it seems, Hobbes thinks that God is a body. Nevertheless, in the Latin Appendix Hobbes sticks to the claim that God is incomprehensible (L App.1.14-6). So in 1668 Hobbes endorses C2, and thinks that God’s incomprehensibility does not rule out our knowing that God is a body.

The 1668 texts also give us some evidence that Hobbes endorses C2 in 1651. B, after all, seems not just to be defending the view that God is a body, but also explaining that that view is found in the 1651 text. It is possible that Hobbes has changed his view from C1 to C2 and is just pretending not to have changed his mind. That is not the most natural reading of the Latin Appendix.

3.5 Does Hobbes identify substance and body in *De Corpore*?

Someone might argue for C2 in the following way. Hobbes wrote *De Corpore* at about the same time he wrote *Leviathan* (*De Corpore* was not published until 1655, but Hobbes took about ten years to write it, in which time he also wrote *Leviathan*). In *De Corpore*, however, Hobbes seems to identify substance with body. If Hobbes believes that, then he cannot believe that there can be substances that are not bodies.

This objection mistakenly reads principles from *De Corpore* into *Leviathan*. *De Corpore*, as Hobbes tells the reader early on, does not address everything. Hobbes excludes the study of several topics, including God and angels, from philosophy.¹⁹ Note two points about this restriction.

First, this restriction tells us that the principles of *De Corpore* are not completely general principles. They cover only those things of which philosophy talks. Although Hobbes identifies substance and body for the purpose of this study, he does not do so generally. That is, bodies are the only substances he cares about here in his work *De Corpore*, but that does not mean that bodies are the only substances.

Secondly, Hobbes's reason for excluding God, angels, etc from philosophy is that we cannot conceive of or understand composition, division, and generation in their subjects. That is, we cannot give the explanations about God that we can give about bodies. Why not? The reason concerns what we can think about and understand. We can give explanations using ideas that we cannot give when we merely conceive of something as the cause of other things. Thus we can give philosophical explanations about bodies that we cannot give about God.²⁰

Note a connection to Hobbes's earlier critique of White here. In a section in which he distinguishes *entia* of which we have ideas from *entia* of which we do not, Hobbes talks about the definitions that philosophy gives.²¹ There he says that in philosophy we define only the *entia* of which we have ideas. This is just the point of the restriction in *De Corpore*.

3.6 Incomprehensibility

So, how do we weigh up all the evidence for C1 and C2? Much of the apparent evidence is actually equivocal between C1 and C2. The best evidence for C1 comes from straightforward statements of it in the 1651 text, in chapters 31 and 34 in particular. The best evidence for C2 is Hobbes's 1668 claim that the 1651 text proposes C2.

Perhaps the statements of C1 are the result of rhetorical excess, or even of a desire to hide a controversial materialism about God. Or perhaps Hobbes wanted his views to look more consistent over time than they had in fact been. All of those stories sound somewhat plausible, but none of them is evidence for either C1 or C2. They are just ways to explain away difficulties with one interpretation or the other.

When we weigh the evidence itself, we should on balance read Hobbes as endorsing C1 in 1651. The best evidence for the content of the 1651 text is the 1651 text itself, not some later interpretation of it, even if that interpretation of it is Hobbes's. And the stated position of the 1651 text is that our knowledge of God is very limited indeed: we can know only that he exists and is the cause of the world. To claim more knowledge of him would be to "circumscribe him within the limits of our fancy" (L 31.28) – something that Hobbes, despite Cudworth's accusations, avoids, at least in 1651.

4 Can we take Hobbes's religious talk seriously?

Some believe that Hobbes's religious talk is massively deceptive, designed to conceal his true atheism (Curley 1992, 498).²² Now, there are at least two distinct things someone might mean by saying that Hobbes seems to be a Christian but is really an atheist.

- (i) Hobbes's books profess Christianity, but his actual views differ: he is an atheist.
- (ii) Hobbes's books seem to profess Christianity. However, the real doctrine of those books is atheism.

These differ in that (ii) involves the atheism being coded into the texts, whereas (i) only involves the atheism being in Hobbes's mind. If the question is whether (i) is true, then it is almost impossible to answer. Absent a revealing letter or manuscript, evidence will be thin at best. Such remarkable evidence aside, any useful debate has to be about (ii). The idea of (ii) is that there is a hidden message in Hobbes's writings, of which Hobbes gives us signs.

There are two obvious questions about that approach. First, how can one know that a writer suggests a hidden message? Secondly, even if one can know that there is such a message, how can one know what it is? David Wootton suggests six pieces of evidence one would want to find to justify such a reading: an "ideal body of evidence [that] might justify an unshakable 'reading between the lines'".²³ They are

- (1) a text in which conventional sentiments seem to be at odds with unconventional ones;
- (2) contemporary readings of the text that see it as suspect;
- (3) a declared interest in 'writing between the lines';
- (4) statements by the author . . . that seem to be intended to confirm suspicions about his own literary procedures or his own private convictions;
- (5) independent contemporary evidence that the author was believed to be irreligious or at least moved in irreligious circles; and
- (6) manuscript evidence that shows that the author has more radical views that he dared to publish.²⁴

The danger with reading between the lines is seeing things between the lines that are not there. These criteria try to diminish that possibility as much as possible. One might quarrel with one or other of the six: perhaps (2) puts too much weight on contemporary readings, which might just miss a truly present hidden message. On the whole, these six criteria are a good guide when evaluating such readings. How do such readings of Hobbes fare with respect to them?

Start with (1). Does Hobbes give us “a text in which conventional sentiments seem to be at odds with unconventional ones”? There are conventional parts of Hobbes’s approach. For instance, he repeatedly suggests versions of the cosmological argument. As to unconventional aspects, even Martinich, arguing that Hobbes is an orthodox Christian, does not dispute that parts of what Hobbes says are not standard views in mid-seventeenth-century England and France.²⁵ Even though England in Hobbes’s time is full of varied religious views, Hobbes’s stands out.

Hobbes has, for instance, a relatively new and unconventional attitude to reading the Bible. Roughly speaking, he uses the same techniques to try to understand the Bible that he would use with any other ancient book. Clarendon’s complaint about this approach is illustrative. He says that he is “not willing now, or at any time, to accompany him [Hobbes] in his sallies which he makes into the Scripture, and which he alwaies handles, as if his Sovereign power had not yet declared it to be the word of God”.²⁶ Never mind Hobbes’s beliefs. His very method for forming those beliefs is unacceptable. That is just one way in which Hobbes’s work is not conventional for its time and place, even though it has perfectly standard Christian aspects. So Hobbes does satisfy (1).

Look now at criteria (2) and (6), which invoke contemporary readings of the text. Are there “contemporary readings of [Hobbes’s] text that see it as suspect”? Is there “independent contemporary evidence that the author was believed to be irreligious or at least moved in irreligious circles”?

The short answer is ‘yes’. Many of Hobbes’s contemporaries find his religion to be suspect. It is relevant why they think this. Their reason is neither that Hobbes is lying about his religious views nor that Hobbes does not believe that God exists. They see problems with Hobbes’s views, taking what he says literally, not finding some secret message. These problems with Hobbes’s views are evident even though Hobbes believes that God exists. He says several other things that critics think undermine Christianity.²⁷

Thus when Mintz summarizes the reasons Hobbes’s critics gave for calling him an atheist, he lists the views

that the universe is body, that God is part of the world and therefore body, that the Pentateuch and many other books of Scripture are redactions or compilations from earlier sources, that the members of the Trinity are Moses, Jesus, and the Apostles, that few if any miracles can be credited after the Testamental period, that no persons deserve the name of ‘martyr’ except those who *witnessed* the ascension of Christ, that witchcraft is a myth and heaven a delusion, that religion is in fact so muddled with superstition as to be in many vital places indistinguishable from it, [and] that the Church, both in its government and its doctrine, must submit to the dictates of Leviathan, the supreme civil authority.²⁸

To be called an atheist in seventeenth-century England requires far less than denying the existence of God. A main way to attack Hobbes is to treat him as a mistaken, heretical believer.²⁹

Consider for instance Clarendon's comments on Hobbes's story about the authorship of the books of Moses. Hobbes thinks that only certain parts of those books were written by Moses: the parts said in the text to have been written by Moses. Clarendon disagrees with the conclusion, and finds the very inquiry unpleasant and unnecessary:

What his design was to make so unnecessary an enquiry into the Authors of the several parts of Scripture, and the time when they were written, and his more unnecessary inference, that *Moses* was not the Author of the five Books which the Christian World generally believe to be written by him, tho the time of his death might be added afterwards very warrantably, and the like presumption upon the other Books, he best knows.³⁰

Those remarks show us one reason why Clarendon thinks that Hobbes has bad religious views, even though he does not seriously doubt that Hobbes believes in God's existence. Clarendon dislikes Hobbes's critical approach. This approach leads Hobbes away from Christianity as Clarendon understands it.

Turn now to Wootton's criteria (3) and (5). Does Hobbes have "a declared interest in 'writing between the lines' "? Can we find "statements by the author . . . that seem to be intended to confirm suspicions about his own literary procedures or his own private convictions"? The closest thing to such evidence is a line from Aubrey's life of Hobbes. Aubrey reports that Hobbes said of Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, "he durst

not write so boldly”.³¹ Curley suggests on the basis of this line that Hobbes finds some idea in Spinoza’s work with which he agrees, but which he dares not express.³² Taken this way, the line may give evidence for Hobbes’s hidden private convictions. Even Curley concedes that this line is actually of little use as evidence of Hobbes’s secret intentions. Even if this really is Hobbes’s comment, it is too brief and obscure to be good evidence. Curley ends up saying that this statement, read as he wants to read it, fits with the rest of his reading, but shows nothing by itself.³³ We cannot use it to say that Hobbes meets Wootton’s criteria (3) and (5).

Look now at the last of Wootton’s six criteria. Is there “manuscript evidence that shows that the author has more radical views that he dared to publish”? There are at least two works by Hobbes, unpublished in his lifetime, that touch on the relevant topics: his reply to Bramhall’s criticism of *Leviathan* (first published in 1682) and his critique of Thomas White’s *De Mundo* (first published in 1973).

Hobbes does, in the reply to Bramhall, say that God is a body.³⁴ However, this is not the first appearance of that view in Hobbes’s work. He suggests it in a 1662 reply to Wallis and the 1668 Latin Appendix to *Leviathan*. This is an unusual and provocative view. It is not, however, a view hidden by Hobbes during his life, but a published and defended view. Thus this comment in the reply to Bramhall, despite its apparently shocking content, does not add significantly to Hobbes’s religious views. Moreover, even the statement that God is a body is not a sign that Hobbes denies that God exists. It says, literally and provocatively, that God exists and is a body.

The critique of White’s *De Mundo* comes from much earlier in Hobbes’s career. There is some reason to think that its view differs from the view in the roughly

contemporary *De Cive*. However, even Curley, strong advocate for Hobbes's atheism, acknowledges that, though Hobbes's view in this work may be more fideistic than his view in the published work, it gives us no sign that Hobbes does not believe in God. Curley suggests that this fideism is part of "an experiment with a certain kind of position, an attempt to work out what sort of position on natural religion it would be best for him to take when he decided to discuss these issues in public".³⁵ Even granting that, we do not see an atheist Hobbes here, but a Hobbes trying to work out the best philosophical grounding for his religious belief.

In summary then, if we judge using Wootton's six criteria, the case for Hobbes's atheism looks weak. Hobbes clearly meets the first criterion, but does not meet (3), (4), and (5). And although he meets (2) and (6), that is, although contemporaries find his religious views suspect, they do not find them suspect because they think he is dissembling about them, or because they think he denies God's existence. So there is weakness in the case that Hobbes's religious language is a deceptive cover for atheism. Absent some further consideration, we should conclude that Hobbes does not give us a secret message about his religious views, and that Hobbes is not an atheist.³⁶

¹ S. Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962) and N. Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 457-545 discuss early reactions to Hobbes's views about God. Recent discussions of these views include E. Curley, "'I durst not write so boldly' or, How to read Hobbes's Theological-Political Treatise", in *Hobbes e Spinoza*, ed. D. Bostrenghi (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1992), pp. 497-593; E. Curley, "Hobbes versus Descartes", in *Descartes and his Contemporaries*, ed. R. Ariew and M. Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

1995), pp. 97–109; E. Curley, “Calvin and Hobbes, or, Hobbes as an Orthodox Christian”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34 (1996), pp. 257–71; E. Curley, “Reply to Professor Martinich”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34 (1996), pp. 285–7; E. Curley, “Religion and Morality in Hobbes”, in *Rational Commitment and Social Justice: Essays for Gregory Kavka*, ed. J. L. Coleman and C. W. Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 90–121; D. Jesseph, “Hobbes’s Atheism”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 26 (2002), pp. 140–66; A.P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and A.P. Martinich, “On the Proper Interpretation of Hobbes’s Philosophy”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34 (1996), pp. 273–83.

² R. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678), p. 57.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵ I refer to *Leviathan* using the abbreviation ‘L’ followed by chapter and paragraph numbers. The text and paragraph numbering are those of T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. E. Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

⁶ Hobbes has there just considered the view that people believe in God, even invent gods, because of their fear. However, he says, God’s existence “may be more easily derived from the desire men have to know the causes of natural bodies”. That desire for causal explanation leads to the discovery of “a first and eternal cause of all things” (L 12.6).

⁷ See also L 12.7.

⁸ Hobbes is also trying there to end disputes that lead to sedition and civil war. But he is trying to do that by getting the right answer to the question.

⁹ Hobbes also allows for this second way of thinking about things in several earlier works, *De Cive*, the *AntiWhite*, and the Third Objections to Descartes's *Meditations*.

¹⁰ Jesseph, p. 142.

¹¹ Someone might suggest that Hobbes wants to leave open the possibility that extension is part of the essence of God, but not an attribute of God. Other passages rule this out though. See L 31.14-28 and L 34.4, which I discuss above.

¹² See also L 4.20-1 and L 12.7.

¹³ This passage from chapter 34 comes in the context of Hobbes's explaining different things that are meant by 'body' and 'spirit'. So someone might doubt that Hobbes is endorsing the use of 'body' described here.

¹⁴ This connects to Hobbes's view that the "general use of speech is to transfer our mental discourse into verbal" (Hobbes 1994, 4.3). Speech that is not backed up by any thoughts is just a series of sounds that resembles speech, not really speech at all. Hobbes does allow for special uses of speech in addition to the general. Only one of these, however, allows for the absence of supporting thoughts: the use of speech "to please and delight ourselves, and others, by playing with our words, for pleasure or ornament, innocently" (L 4.3). This is not usually what people aim to do when they talk about immaterial substances.

¹⁵ *Leviathan*, p. 540, n. 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xlvii.

¹⁷ T. Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes* (London: Bohn, 1839), v. 4, p. 429.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, v. 4, p. 313.

¹⁹ T. Hobbes, *De Corpore* (Paris: Vrin, 1999), 1.8. Translated in T. Hobbes, *Part I of De Corpore* (New York: Abaris Books, 1981).

²⁰ Note a related objection here. We know of God as a cause, the cause of the whole world. However, does not Hobbes think that all causes are bodies in motion, thus implying that God is a body?

He does not. Hobbes does think that all the causal explanations in physics involve bodies in motion. There are two reasons for that, neither of which is that a cause must be a body in motion.

The first is that the natural world just happens to be such that we can explain what happens in it by talking only about bodies in motion. The second is that such explanations, explanations that involve moving bodies, are the only full causal explanations that Hobbes thinks we can give. We can have ideas of bodies, and thus pick out their features, and thus describe the accidents as well as the substances involved in corporeal causal interactions. This gives us a full description of the states that stand in the relation of causation. When saying that God is the cause of the world, we have a different sort of explanation. We can pick out only the thing and one relation in which it stands, not any further features, because we have no idea of God. So we can tell a functional story – which Hobbes thinks is inferior – not a full causal one, about God's causal relationship to the world.

²¹ T. Hobbes, *Thomas White's De Mundo Examined* (London: Bradford University Press, 1976), p. 310.

²² This section deals only with the view that the religious language is massively deceptive – deceptive on even the most basic issue, whether God exists. It does not consider

whether there are smaller ‘deceptions’ – whether for instance Hobbes sometimes gives a misleading emphasis to his views. That said, what is often remarkable about *Leviathan* is not that it is terribly elusive and esoteric, but that it is remarkably forthright.

²³ D. Wootton, “New Histories of Atheism”, in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. M. Hunter and D. Wootton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 36.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 36-7.

²⁵ Martinich, *Two Gods of Leviathan*, pp. 2-5.

²⁶ E. Clarendon, *A Brief View and Survey of the Dangerous and pernicious Errors to Church and State in Mr Hobbes’s Book, Entitled Leviathan* (Oxford, 1676), p. 117.

²⁷ Cudworth is a notable exception to this critical consensus.

²⁸ Mintz, p. 45.

²⁹ Malcolm (p. 478-80) notes the reaction of those who criticize Hobbes as an indifferentist, one who declares Christian faith but is not a member of any particular Christian group.

³⁰ Clarendon, p. 197.

³¹ *Leviathan*, p. lxviii.

³² Curley, “‘I durst not ...’”, p. 497-8.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 510-1.

³⁴ Hobbes, *English Works*, 4.313.

³⁵ Curley, “‘I durst not ...’”, p. 581.

³⁶ I’d like to thank those with whom I discussed earlier versions of this paper, in particular Martha Bolton, Doug Jesseph, and Antonia LoLordo.
