

**A Kinder, Gentler Hobbes**  
Dissertation Proposal  
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I want to present a new interpretation of Hobbes, in particular of what he was up to when he wrote *Leviathan*. In order to do this I will examine how he viewed the problem of social disorder and how he intended for that problem to be solved. I will argue that although he held that maintaining a credible threat of punishment for wrongdoing is necessary for social order, to Hobbes it is not sufficient; unless the subjects are properly educated the commonwealth is doomed. I maintain that this need to ensure proper education illuminates *Leviathan*'s intent and its structure. Further, I'll argue that when education is given its proper place in Hobbes' scheme, the result is an account of disorder and a solution to it which are truer to Hobbes' text and more plausible than those of certain competing views.

In what follows, I will give an overview of the line I propose to take, then discuss how it contrasts with other views of Hobbes in the literature.

**The problem of disorder.** A great deal of Hobbes scholarship focuses on the account he gives in the first half of *Leviathan* of how people in a state of nature could create a commonwealth. Fruitful and important as it is, however, this focus tends to leave the second half of the book a mystery: if what's important about *Leviathan* is its presentation of a social contract theory, it's not obvious why Hobbes devotes half of his treatise to theological matters. I will argue that once we have a clearer understanding of the problem Hobbes was addressing, *Leviathan*'s second half can be seen as an important component of Hobbes' intended solution.

While modern theoreticians are often most interested in Hobbes' account of how people prior to society could make one from scratch, Hobbes himself was most concerned with how to prevent disorder from destroying an existing government. Hobbes wrote a good deal about the causes of disorder—whole chapters and many

scattered remarks in *The Elements of Law*, *De Cive*, and *Leviathan*, plus much of *Behemoth*—and I propose examining these writings closely in order to clarify how Hobbes conceived the problem he was addressing.

The first thing I note about Hobbes' account of disorder is its complexity.

Consider the following example from his history of the English Civil War,

*Behemoth*:

Truly, I think, if the King had had money, he might have had soldiers enough in England [to keep down the rebellion]. For there were very few of the common people that cared much for either of the causes, but would have taken any side for pay or plunder. But the King's treasury was very low, and his enemies, that pretended the people's ease from taxes, and other specious things, had the command of the purses of the city of London, and of most cities and corporate towns in England, and of many particular persons besides. (B 2)<sup>1</sup>

... the people in general were so ignorant of their duty, as that not one perhaps of ten thousand knew what right any man had to command him, or what necessity there was of King or Commonwealth, for which he was to part with his money against his will; but thought himself to be so much master of whatsoever he possessed, that it could not be taken from him upon any pretence of common safety without his own consent. (B 4; cf. L 29.10)

Stability could have been maintained if the king could have mustered enough soldiers, which he should have been able to do if the general populace had been mindful of its duty, which it might have been if the king had made it so; but since the people were ignorant, the only way to gain their loyalty was to buy it—which the king lacked the money for while his opponents did not. And as Hobbes goes on to explain, there was sedition spread by diverse groups of people who were motivated by desires for wealth, glory, and power as well as by religious beliefs. This sort of complex account is what I think we should expect given that in *Leviathan* Hobbes identifies sixteen causes of disorder, eleven of which are described as “of the

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<sup>1</sup> References to B are to the Holmes/Tönnies edition of Hobbes' *Behemoth*. References to EL, DCv, L, and DH are to *The Elements of Law*, *De Cive*, *Leviathan* and *De Homine* respectively and are of the form x.y, where x = chapter number (or the Introduction, Preface, etc.) and y = paragraph number.

greatest, and most present danger.” (L 29.18). Since his view of the source of disorder is complex, I think we should expect that his solution to it be complex also—so much so that we should give up any attempt to identify “the” cause of disorder or “the” solution to it.

**The role of beliefs.** Amongst these causes Hobbes identifies several political and religious doctrines as of central importance, but gives particular emphasis to religious belief.<sup>2</sup> In *Leviathan*’s second half, which is devoted to Christianity, he writes that

The most frequent praetext of sedition and civil war, in Christian commonwealths hath a long time proceeded from a difficulty, not yet sufficiently resolved, of obeying at once both God, and Man, then when their commandments are one contrary to the other. (L 43.1)

There is a parallel text earlier in *Leviathan* on this topic, which gives us more detail:

When [spiritual and civil authorities] oppose one another, the Commonwealth cannot but be in great danger of Civill warre, and Dissolution. For the *Civill* Authority being more visible, and standing in the cleerer light of naturall reason cannot choose but draw to it in all times a very considerable part of the people: And the *Spirituell*, though it stand in the darknesse of Schoole distinctions, and hard words; yet because the fear of Darknesse, and Ghosts, is greater than other fears, cannot want a party sufficient to Trouble, and sometimes to Destroy a Common-wealth. (L 29.15)

The problem Hobbes describes here echoes the account of the English Civil War described above: it is the fact that preachers of various religious doctrines can gather a large following that generates a threat to the commonwealth. This reading is consistent with what Hobbes has to say about sedition generally: that those who would undermine the government must, among other things, hope they can succeed; and to hope to succeed they must, among other things, be numerous enough (EL 27.1, 27.11; DCv 12.11). It is the fact that these doctrines could be used—

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<sup>2</sup> For Hobbes’ discussion of the danger of doctrines generally see, e.g., EL 27.4, DCv 12.1–7, L 29.6–10, 12, 14. For discussion of religious doctrines see esp. L chapters 44–46.

whether by sincere believers or cynical manipulators—to attract a large following, coupled with their content (which held that the king could or should be defied) that made them so dangerous. And although they receive the most emphasis, it is not only spiritual doctrines which had these properties. Hobbes also was pretty worried, e.g., about the belief that the greatness of ancient Greece and Rome was due to their popular forms of government (L 29.14). But if the spread of the wrong sort of doctrines among an ignorant populace can lead to so much trouble, we should expect Hobbes to be quite concerned that such doctrines not be spread, and that the right sort of doctrines take their place—not only among those who might lead rebellions, but among the general populace as well.

An examination of Hobbes' work in *Leviathan* and elsewhere shows ample evidence of this concern. Large passages of *Behemoth*, for example, discuss the danger of bad doctrines and the need to stamp them out. A particularly good example is the following, in which one of the two participants in a dialogue laments the disruption traceable to a particular view:

B. ... The seditious doctrine of the Presbyterians has been stuck so hard in the people's heads and memories, (I cannot say into their hearts; for they understand nothing in it, but that they may lawfully rebel), that I fear the commonwealth will never be cured.

A. The two great virtues, that were severally in Henry VII and Henry VIII, when they shall be jointly in one King, will easily cure it. That of Henry VII was, without much noise of the people to fill his coffers; that of Henry VIII was an early severity; but this without the former cannot be exercised.

B. This that you say looks, methinks, like an advice to the King, to let them alone till he have gotten ready money enough to levy and maintain a sufficient army, and then to fall upon them and destroy them.

A. God forbid that so horrible, unchristian, and inhuman a design should ever enter into the King's heart. I would have him have money enough readily to raise an army able to suppress any rebellion, and to take from his enemies all hope of success, that they may not dare to trouble him in the reformation of the Universities; but to put none to death without the actual committing such crimes as are already made capital by the laws. The core of rebellion, as you have seen by this, and read of other rebellions, are the Universities; which nevertheless are not to be cast away, but to be better disciplined: that is to say, that the politics there taught be made to be, as true

politics should be, such as are fit to make men know, that it is their duty to obey all laws whatsoever that shall by the authority of the King be enacted, till by the same authority they shall be repealed; such as are fit to make men understand, that the civil laws are God's laws, as they that make them are by God appointed to make them... (B 57–8)

There's a lot going on here; several things need pointing out. First of course is the implied severity of the problem presented by false doctrines: the first paragraph suggests Hobbes believed that the peace cannot be maintained for long unless this problem is effectively solved. Second, note that Hobbes (who is represented by "A" in the dialogue) explicitly denies that the problem was to be solved by the direct application of force. Rather, force enables the king to stop the problem at its source: the universities where the troublesome doctrines are taught. Third, Hobbes specifies certain preconditions to be fulfilled before the king can reform the universities: he must convincingly establish his authority with a show of severity, but in order to do so he must first gather enough money from taxation without having the subjects grumble too much (this underscores the complexity mentioned above). Fourth, it should be noted that Hobbes expresses much the same ideas elsewhere in his work, even in books written many years apart (cf. EL Epistle Dedicatory, 28.8; DCv Preface.2; L 29.14, 30.3–14). Given Hobbes' tendency to say apparently inconsistent things in different places, the repeated expression of a set of ideas deserves mention.

***Leviathan's function.*** Lastly we should look at the details of his proposed solution. Hobbes gives specifics about the *sorts* of doctrine the universities must teach; indeed the quote goes on for some time after where I cut it off, and in *Leviathan* the parallel text takes up a good chunk of chapter 30. But notice that even as detailed as it is, what Hobbes says here is merely an overview of some major points the universities must get across. Hobbes needs a great deal more than this: he claims that the spread of bad doctrines via the universities is a menace to the commonwealth; that claim of course presupposes that the universities don't know

what to teach (L 30.14). He believes that force alone cannot solve the problem; indeed, it would be counterproductive to try and force people to change their minds (B 62, L 30.4). Instead he wants the king to reform the university curriculum so that the right doctrines are taught to people while they are still open to persuasion. But surely he doesn't assume that the king will be able to provide all the material himself: underlying these main points there must be detailed arguments and explanations drawn from political science and theology and other branches of knowledge, which Hobbes gives himself credit for having been the first to lay out properly.

So: given the urgency and nature of the problem it seems incumbent on Hobbes first to persuade the sovereign of the need to reform the universities, and second to provide the basis for that reform—the new curriculum. I think it's plausible to suppose that this is at least a significant part of what Hobbes intended *Leviathan* to be: first, an instrument for educating the sovereign in the proper use of power—with special emphasis on the proper use of educational institutions—as well as in the “science” of politics generally, and second, the material necessary for reforming, not the entire university curriculum, but the dangerous parts of it.

As evidence of the first intention I would point to Hobbes' Introduction to *Leviathan* where, after claiming that one may come to know others through examining oneself, he writes:

But let one man read another by his actions never so perfectly, it serves him only with his acquaintance, which are but few. *He that is to govern a whole nation, must read in himself, not this or that particular man; but mankind:* which though it be hard to do, harder than to learn any language or science; yet when I shall have set down my own reading orderly, and perspicuously, the pains left another, will be only to consider, if he also find not the same in himself. (L I.4, my emphasis)

This, coming immediately before thirteen chapters collected under the heading “Of Man,” gives a none-too-subtle indication of the audience he hoped to reach, as does his having presented a copy of *Leviathan* to Charles II.<sup>3</sup>

As evidence of the second intention I find two sorts of corroboration. One is Hobbes’ repeated mention throughout *Leviathan* itself—beginning in the fifth paragraph of chapter 1, and continuing all the way to the Review and Conclusion—of how what he says differs from erroneous doctrines taught by others, and how what the universities teach should be amended. The second sort of evidence is Hobbes’ professed hope that what he says in *Leviathan* will be implemented. At the end of Part II of *Leviathan* Hobbes presents several chapters of specific advice in matters of governance. Among these, his advice on reforming the universities and educating the people receives strong emphasis, so I find it significant that just afterwards he writes:

...considering how different this doctrine is, from the practice of the greatest part of the world, especially of these western parts, that have received their moral learning from Rome, and Athens; and how much depth of moral philosophy is required, in them that have the administration of the sovereign power; I am at the point of believing this my labour, as useless, as the commonwealth of Plato; For he also is of opinion that it is impossible for the disorders of state, and change of governments by civil war, ever to be taken away, till sovereigns be philosophers. But when I consider again, that the science of natural justice, is the only science necessary for sovereigns, and their principal ministers...and that neither Plato, nor any other philosopher hitherto, hath put into order, and sufficiently or probably proved all the theorems of moral doctrine, that men may learn thereby, both how to govern, and how to obey; I recover some hope, that one time or other, this writing of mine, may fall into the hands of a sovereign, who will consider it himself, (for it is short, and I think clear,) without the help of any interested, or envious interpreter; and by the exercise of entire sovereignty, in protecting the public teaching of it, convert this truth of speculation, into the utility of practice. (L 31.41)

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<sup>3</sup> See Malcolm’s biographical note on Charles II in Hobbes 1994, p. 818f.

If I'm right, *Leviathan* as a whole is to be regarded as a king's manual. And its second half is there at least in part because the universities trained the ministers who spread the theological doctrines which made up a large portion of the doctrines that worried Hobbes. Hobbes needed *Leviathan* to include an extensive, detailed theological portion because he had a whole bunch of religious ideas he had to counter and because he was well aware that those ideas were both popular and firmly entrenched, with generations of theologians standing behind some of them; and also because Hobbes wanted very much to criticize the existing batch of preachers at some length. I suggest that the latter project was intended (again, at least in part) to help make way for Hobbes' theology by discrediting his opponents.

Of course it is not only the clergy which Hobbes seeks to influence. He says of *Leviathan* that

I think it may be profitably printed, and more profitably taught in the Universities.... For seeing the Universities are the fountains of civil, and moral doctrine, from whence the preachers, and the gentry, drawing such water as they find, use to sprinkle the same (both from the pulpit, and in their conversation) upon the people, there ought certainly to be great care taken, to have it pure, both from the venom of heathen politicians, and from the incantation of deceiving spirits. (L R&C.16; cf. L 43.8; B 39–40, 54)

Hobbes hoped, via institutional reform, to sway persons of influence generally and, through them, everyone else. The importance of this latter can be seen by looking again at *Behemoth*. The various unruly groups Hobbes describes there fall into two main categories: on one hand we have religious and political leaders spreading doctrines which tell people it is right to rebel, and on the other hand we have a large audience of people who are discontented with their lot and ignorant of why they should obey the king in the first place. This combination of discontent and ignorance made them a receptive audience; Hobbes wanted to make them less receptive. That he believed his proposed educational reforms and their resulting trickle-down effect would provide important benefits is clear from what he goes on to say:



And by that means the most men, knowing their duties, will be the less subject to serve the ambition of a few discontented persons, in their purposes against the state; and be the less grieved with the contributions necessary for their peace, and defence; and the governors themselves have the less cause, to maintain at the common charge any greater army, than is necessary to make good the public liberty, against the invasions and encroachments of foreign enemies.

Despite such glowing statements about the power of educational reform, I am not suggesting that Hobbes believed it was the only or even the most important means of maintaining civil order. As noted above, Hobbes recommends a number of other measures as well—as indeed he must, given the variety of causes he identifies as contributing to disorder, and given the dictates of his political theory. But although I plan to devote attention to the other measures, I want to pay special attention what Hobbes has to say about education for two reasons. First, Hobbes himself emphasizes the importance of education by devoting a good deal of text to it and by repeatedly claiming that it is crucial to stability; moreover he saw it is a particularly efficient means of solving the problem of disorder: given that faulty education contributes to many troubles, proper education is the source of many benefits. Second, examining Hobbes' views on education brings to light other aspects of Hobbes' thought which, I will argue, improve his image in important ways. This will be made clearer after comparing my line on Hobbes with others'.

Of course I'm not the first to examine Hobbes' views on disorder, nor the first to notice Hobbes' remarks about doctrines and education.<sup>4</sup> Complex accounts of disorder are attributed to Hobbes by, e.g., Baumgold, Holmes, and Lund; indeed I find it difficult to see how one could believe otherwise after reading *Behemoth*. But I will argue that each of their accounts is flawed to some extent. For example,

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<sup>4</sup> For other examples of complex accounts of disorder see, e.g., Baumgold 1990 pp. 81–6; Holmes 1990 pp. 130–43; Lund 1992 pp. 66–72. Re doctrines and education see, e.g., Holmes *op cit.*; Johnston 1986 ch. 3–4 *passim*; Lloyd 1992 throughout; Lund 1992 p. 70; Warrender 1961 p. 318f; Watkins 1965 pp. 2–4.

Baumgold thinks that Hobbes' worry was over the ambition of elite groups; I believe this underemphasizes the extent to which Hobbes was worried about the common people. Holmes' reading of Hobbes, on the other hand, paints humanity as so irrational that it is hard to see how Hobbes could have had any hope of there being a lasting civil order. And while Lund is correct to see that Hobbes believes private opinion (and hence the problem of doctrines) cannot be eliminated altogether, I think his account of why this is so is mistaken.<sup>5</sup>

Of those who take notice of Hobbes' remarks about doctrines and education, some do so only in passing and almost none explore the relationship between education and force as means for maintaining order, or consider the ramifications of this for explaining *Leviathan's* structure. The main exception is Lloyd, who like me holds that for Hobbes education is crucial for political stability and that the need for it is key to understanding why Hobbes devotes so much of the book to religion. She believes that to Hobbes education is vital because threats of force are in principle ineffective at keeping order; and they are ineffective because many people are motivated by beliefs for which they are willing to sacrifice their lives. Since these beliefs, or "transcendent interests," are chiefly religious, *Leviathan's* religious second half was necessary to reconcile obedience to the sovereign with obedience to God. Against this I will argue that in fact transcendent interests at best play a minor role in Hobbes' thinking, and hence that *Leviathan's* second half cannot plausibly be attributed to worry about them. Hobbes' text indicates that education is indeed vital but for different reasons: it is needed because there were a number of doctrines—both religious and secular—in wide circulation whose power to attract large followings undermined the government's ability to muster any threat of force, and because their attractiveness was increased by general ignorance and discontent. But

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<sup>5</sup> Baumgold 1990, pp. 79–80; Holmes 1990 p. 123; Lund 1992 pp. 54–5.

still I would argue Hobbes could not have held that education was sufficient to maintain the peace; a credible threat of punishment for disobedience is necessary also.

**The kinder, gentler Hobbes.** My view thus contrasts with those who focus exclusively on the role of fear in maintaining order. There is strong consensus among scholars that, for Hobbes, order is to be maintained by threatening punishment for those who disobey the law, and Hobbes provides ample textual support for this view.<sup>6</sup> Typical of the “punishment is the solution” line is the game-theoretic approach of writers like Gauthier, Hampton, and Kavka, which sees Hobbes as addressing the problem of how people prior to society could institute a commonwealth. They see the threat of punishment as the means for making coöperation rational. Since, prior to society, faulty education is not a problem (since there would be no educational apparatus without social coöperation), I think this approach is okay as far as it goes, but that it does not go far enough as an account of Hobbes’ views as a whole. It does not account for *Leviathan*’s second half or for Hobbes’ emphatic remarks about the danger of doctrines and the need to control the educational system; nor does it account for how Hobbes thinks the threat of punishment is to be maintained.

When we fill out our view of Hobbes, I will argue that we find an account of disorder and a solution to it that is both more sophisticated and more plausible than they are generally taken to be. More sophisticated, because among other things according to me Hobbes believed that force is not the sole source of order and that to endure, a government needs to appeal to our intellects as well as to our fears. More plausible, because a society in which the government has the willing support

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<sup>6</sup> Cf., to name a few, Curley 1994 p. xxxv; Gauthier 1969 pp. 76, 83f; Johnston 1986 p. 92; Kavka 1986 pp. 139, 245; Warrender 1961 p. 144–5; Watkins 1965 p. 120. In Hobbes, see esp. L 17.1-2; also L14.18, 14.31, 18.4, 26.8, 46.36; EL 19.7; DCv 6.4.

of the governed will be more stable than one in which fear of punishment provides the only means of ensuring cooperation among its members. Attempting to coerce the unwilling generates dangerous resistance, whereas when people are no longer deceived by seditious opinions there is a greater tendency for them to willingly obey the law. According to Hobbes, an important reason why faulty education is so dangerous is that once inculcated, beliefs are very difficult to eradicate and those who hold them act upon them habitually (EL 10.8, 28.8; L 18.9). If, however, people are properly brought up, they will have the same stable disposition but it will be directed toward upholding the state rather than toward sedition.

Filling out our view of Hobbes as I propose will also put his view of human nature in a better light. It seems to me that Hobbes' belief in the importance of education implicitly expresses more faith in our ability to control ourselves than is standardly attributed to Hobbesian agents: it suggests he thought that the appeal to reason (as opposed to fear) could work, and that if properly brought up we can, under the appropriate circumstances, willingly control ourselves within the bounds required for a commonwealth to function rather than having those boundaries set entirely for us by the sovereign's big stick. On the "punishment is the solution" view, the most prominent aspect of human nature is our fear: our fear of death or other punishment is the means by which the sovereign gains our obedience and we, in turn, gain the many fruits of society. The apparent presumption is that our obedience to law cannot be brought about any other way. This presumption is apt to be reinforced by the many passages in which Hobbes describes us as superstitious, ambitious, foolish, intractable, and so on. But when we examine his views more carefully we find that Hobbes believes we are only contingently so—that our bad traits are, to a large extent, due to our failing to use capacities we have and/or due to the influence of false, absurd, or seditious beliefs. They can therefore be altered, prevented, or neutralized by proper upbringing and by the sovereign's exercising his

power in such a way as to influence our attitudes and channel our ambitions (EL 1.10; DCv Dedicatory, 13.12; L 2.8, 4.13, R&C.16, DH ch. 13). Such a view of human nature is both more generous and more plausible than the view one is apt to get from some of Hobbes' interpreters, and redeems Hobbes from some harsh criticism he has received. For example, Gauthier thinks Hobbes' argument for absolute sovereignty fails in part because Hobbesian agents are too intractable for social order among them to exist.<sup>7</sup> But although Hobbes does say we are not born tractable, he believes we can be made so; our natures are malleable, and it is the sovereign's duty to exploit this fact lest the commonwealth suffer the consequences (L 18.9, 30.2, 42.67, 47.18). I propose we take seriously his remark that "man is made fit for society not by nature, but by education." (DCv 1.2n1)

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<sup>7</sup> Gauthier 1969, pp. 168–9.

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