

**The Section on Hobbes in Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*:
The Meaning of Hobbes's Claim to be the Founder of Political Philosophy**

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I. Introduction

The chapter in *Natural Right and History* on “modern natural right” consists of a brief introduction, a section on Hobbes, and a section on Locke. The section on Hobbes is itself divided into two parts (166-77, 177-202),¹ the first of which may provisionally be said to deal both with Hobbes’s “theoretical philosophy” and with his “practical philosophy,” and the second with his “practical philosophy” alone (cf. 201). In the introduction to the chapter, Strauss observes that, beginning with Hobbes, there was a break in the natural right tradition. Strauss traces the break to the emergence of modern, nonteleological, natural science, which destroyed “the basis of traditional natural right,” and he credits Hobbes with being the first to “draw the consequences for natural right from this momentous change” (166). What’s more, Strauss indicates that Hobbes, with his almost boyish and imprudent straightforwardness, makes the extent of his deviation from the natural right tradition much clearer than does Locke, the most famous and influential teacher of modern natural right (165-6; cf. however WIPP 172, 173-4, 176-7, 196). And so it is to Hobbes, Strauss concludes, that “we must turn if we desire to understand the specific character of modern natural right.”

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¹ Parenthetical page references within the text are to Strauss's *Natural Right and History*. Other references to writings of Strauss will be by the abbreviations that follow:

CM=*The City and Man*

NRH=*Natural Right and History*

OT=*On Tyranny*

PAL=*Philosophy And Law* (Baumann translation)

RCPR=*The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*

SCR=*Spinoza's Critique of Religion*

TOM=*Thoughts On Machiavelli*

WIPP=*What is Political Philosophy?*

WL=*Walgreen Lectures*

Now on the basis of this introduction, it would not be unreasonable to expect that the Hobbes section will begin with a discussion of how his doctrine of natural right follows from the new natural science. But this is not what we find. In fact, in the first part of the Hobbes section, natural right is barely mentioned (cf. 166-7). And even in the second part, where it is treated at length, no such discussion is provided. On the contrary, we are reminded that Epicurus, who *also* had a nonteleological natural science, *rejected* natural right (189-90; cf. 111 n. 44). What's more, we learn—or learn more fully—that Hobbes's doctrine of natural right is not really scientific according to his own understanding of science (196, 201, and 173 n. 9; cf. WIPP 177, 180-1, 190). And while Strauss does not deny that Hobbes's doctrine is influenced by and even in some ways modeled on modern natural science (e.g. 179), he calls the extent of this influence into question by showing that many of its scientific-seeming features—e.g. its emphasis on beginnings or efficient causes and the importance it assigns to “the extreme case”—can be traced to the influence of Machiavelli, a thinker who *precedes* the new science by about a hundred years (cf. 179 with 180, 184-5 n. 23, 196; WIPP 180).

The implicit promise of the introduction thus becomes a *puzzle*: in just what way, we're forced to wonder, is Hobbes' doctrine of natural right, or more broadly, his political philosophy, a consequence of the new natural science? In NRH Strauss gives no explicit answer to this question (cf. WIPP 190). And this failure may tempt us to dismiss his initial statement as a false lead, as the expression of an almost conventional view that he tacitly retracts in the course of his argument (cf. 167). But although his statement in the introduction is not, I think, adequate as it stands, it nevertheless points the reader in the right direction: understanding the sense in which Hobbes' political philosophy is a consequence of modern natural science is, in Strauss's view, the key to understanding the *character* of his political philosophy—and perhaps even the character of modern political philosophy as such (cf. 175-6, 190).

Moreover, this subject is of the utmost importance for the book as a whole. In the introduction to NRH, Strauss says that “the victory of modern natural science” has “caused” the “fundamental dilemma, in whose grip” we now find ourselves: is the “nonteleological conception of the universe” to be “followed up by a nonteleological conception of human life”? Or are we “forced to accept a fundamental, typically modern, dualism of a nonteleological natural science and a teleological science of man” (8)? Hobbes tried to do the former, and offered a doctrine of natural right and natural law that is divorced from “the idea of man's perfection” (180). But this approach—or at least the form of this approach adopted by Hobbes and his followers—does not, Strauss implies, offer a genuine escape from the dilemma (cf. 8 with 177). Partly for this reason, Hobbes's doctrine of natural right eventually led to a “crisis of modern natural right,” the “ultimate

outcome of which” is “historicism,” i.e. “a crisis of philosophy as such” (34). In examining the relation between Hobbes’s political philosophy and modern natural science, then, we will be examining the roots of this crisis of philosophy. And understanding this crisis and whether there is any way out of it is, I think, the deepest theme of NRH as a whole.

II. Political Idealism, Political Hedonism, and Political Atheism

In an effort to grasp the connection, as Strauss sees it, between modern natural science and Hobbes’s political philosophy, I will try to follow the twists and turns of a portion of Strauss’s extremely intricate argument, paying special attention, on the one hand, to problems that he raises or points to but apparently leaves unsolved, and, on the other, to what he says or indicates about Hobbes’ motive or guiding concern. Tedious as this procedure may sometimes be, it is, I think, the best way to bring to light Strauss’s understanding of Hobbes, which he never makes fully explicit. Let me set the stage for this effort by saying a word about Thomas Aquinas, whose doctrine of natural right or natural law was the reigning doctrine in Hobbes’s day (cf. 166, 144-5). In the last two pages of chapter four, on classic natural right, Strauss explains that the teleological understanding of man was interpreted by Thomas as an argument favoring the existence of a life beyond this one. Strauss writes: “Thomas...virtually contend[s] that, according to natural reason, the natural end of man is insufficient, or points beyond itself or, more precisely, that the end of man cannot consist in philosophic investigation, to say nothing of political activity. Thus natural reason itself creates a presumption in favor of the divine law...” (164). The “ultimate consequence” of the Thomistic view is that natural law becomes “practically inseparable” from “revealed theology.” “Modern natural law,” says Strauss—meaning in the first place the natural law of Hobbes—“was partly a reaction to this absorption of natural law by theology.”

To return now to the chapter on modern natural right, the theme of the first part of the Hobbes section is Hobbes’s claim to be the founder of political philosophy or political science. Near the beginning of this part Strauss says that Hobbes “was indebted to tradition for a single, but momentous idea: he accepted on trust the view that political philosophy or political science is possible or necessary” (167). On the basis of the argument earlier in the book, I take this to mean, in part, that he accepted on trust that the Bible’s teaching is untrue; i.e., he accepted on trust that there is no divine revelation to guide us and, indeed, no God capable of working miracles (cf. 31, 35, 74-5, 80, 81, 85, 89-90). In accordance with this, when Strauss lists “representatives of the tradition” as “Hobbes saw it,” Thomas Aquinas and other Christian thinkers are conspicuously absent. The absence of Thomas is especially conspicuous because just two pages before—in the introduction to this chapter—

Strauss himself called attention to Thomas's influence on the natural right "tradition" as it *might* be understood (165, cf. 144-5). But if the meaning of Strauss's statement is reasonably clear, what's unclear is how Hobbes, the philosopher, could have accepted something so fundamental simply on trust. Although Strauss does not address this question immediately, he indicates that his statement is not adequate and says that he will let it stand only "for a while."

In order to explain Hobbes's "astonishing claim" to have founded political philosophy, Strauss takes up the question of the extent to which Hobbes agrees with the tradition of political philosophy on the one hand, and the extent to which he rejects it on the other. The tradition of political philosophy, as Hobbes sees it, is the "idealistic" or "public-spirited" tradition that includes Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Hobbes agrees with this tradition in its *goal*: he too wants to find "the best regime or...the simply just social order" (168). But he *rejects* the tradition because it pursued this goal "in a wholly inadequate manner" (168). It seems for a moment, then, that Hobbes is at core a political idealist, a public-spirited philosopher (cf. 177-8), whose guiding concern is to do *competently* what all of his predecessors did *incompetently*.

But this turns out not to be the case. For as Strauss explains, Hobbes "traces the failure of the idealistic tradition to one fundamental mistake: traditional political philosophy assumed that man is by nature a political or social animal." By rejecting this assumption, says Strauss, Hobbes "joins the Epicurean tradition. He accepts its view that man is by nature or originally an a-political and even an a-social animal, as well as its premise that the good is fundamentally identical with the pleasant. But he uses that a-political view for a political purpose. He gives that a-political view a political meaning. He tries to instill the spirit of political idealism into the hedonistic tradition. He thus became the creator of political hedonism, a doctrine which has revolutionized human life everywhere on a scale never yet approached by any other teaching" (169). Hobbes, then, is not primarily a political idealist, but a hedonist who identifies the good with pleasure, meaning one's *own* pleasure (109). And as Strauss told us in an earlier chapter and partially reminded us on the previous page of this one, while philosophic and non-philosophic hedonists disagreed about whether one should live "the retired life" on the "fringes of civil society" or should attempt to rule society for the sake of one's own glory, they at least agreed on this: hedonism is incompatible with public-spiritedness (108, 112-5, 168, 264). Yet for some unexplained reason, Hobbes wants to change this; he wants the hedonistic tradition to take on an idealistic, or at any rate, an idealistic-seeming, political project.

And just when we might be expecting the explanation, Strauss instead deepens the problem. Not only "political hedonism," he tells us, but its kin, "political atheism," originated with Hobbes (169). By "political atheism" Strauss means two related but

distinct things (just as he does by “political hedonism”): (1) the conviction, not shared by any pre-modern atheist, that society can dispense with “belief in, and worship of, God or gods,” and (2) the tendency of modern atheists “as such” to have a political project. As Strauss indicates with the help of a quotation from Burke, political atheism—meaning the tendency I just mentioned—is more fundamental than political hedonism: i.e., although they “belong together,” the political hedonism should be understood in the light of the political atheism, and not vice versa. But why should modern, unlike premodern, atheists have turned political, or more precisely, have developed an idealistic or idealistic-seeming political project? This, it seems to me, is the central question that Strauss expects his readers to have on their minds at this stage in the argument.²

III. Natural Philosophy and Political Philosophy

The first sentence of the next paragraph—which begins, somewhat oddly, with the word “for”—seems to promise that we will receive an answer...but not right away. Strauss writes: “For in trying to understand Hobbes’s political philosophy we must not lose sight of his natural philosophy” (169). And so it is to Hobbes’s natural philosophy—which apparently holds the key to the origin of his political atheism and associated political hedonism—that Strauss now turns. Strauss describes this natural philosophy as a synthesis of Platonic physics and Epicurean physics: it takes its mathematical character from Plato and its “materialistic-mechanistic” character from Epicurus. And Hobbes’s philosophy as a whole, says Strauss, may be described as a synthesis “of political idealism with a materialistic and atheistic view of the whole” (170). Strauss makes two comments here that, it seems to me, are linked, and that he leaves unexplained for now. First, he says that “[w]hatever may have been Hobbes’s private thoughts, his natural philosophy is as atheistic as Epicurean physics” (170), which seems to imply that Hobbes himself may not have thought that his natural philosophy was sufficient to settle the question of God’s existence. Second, Strauss says that Hobbes’s thought “presupposed...the abandonment of the plane on which ‘Platonism’ and ‘Epicureanism’ had carried on their secular struggle,” and involved a “transition...to an entirely different plane”—but what these two planes are he does not immediately tell us (170; cf. 177 n. 11, 179, 182).

Instead, Strauss offers a general statement about Hobbes that provides the context for the discussion that follows. Hobbes and his “most illustrious contemporaries,” says Strauss, were convinced that traditional philosophy—and not just traditional *political*

² Although Strauss does not spell it out, it is not hard to see how, on the level of doctrine, political hedonism and political atheism go together: if the political community demands of us only what is compatible with our own pleasure, there would seem to be no need for a God to back up these demands with promises of reward or threats of punishment.

philosophy—was a “complete failure,” that “philosophy, or the quest for wisdom, had not succeeded in transforming itself into wisdom. This overdue transformation was now to be effected” (170-171). Whether “now” means in Hobbes’s own lifetime or sometime in the near future, Strauss does not say. In any case, back in chapter two, Strauss explained what it would mean for “philosophy, or the quest for wisdom” to be “transformed into wisdom”: in the primary sense, it would mean that “the fundamental riddles [had] been fully solved” (29). And in chapter three he discussed the philosopher’s desire to solve the “riddle of being” in such a way as to imply that *this* riddle—which surely has the question of a miraculous God’s existence at its core—is the most fundamental of all (75). From this I tentatively infer that when Strauss says that this “overdue transformation was now to be effected,” he means, above all, that Hobbes and his “most illustrious contemporaries” intended to settle the question of God—as traditional philosophy, so far as they were aware,³ had failed to do. (For if they thought that traditional philosophy *had* settled this question, how could they have regarded its failure as “complete”?) And to this end, they turned their thoughts to the question of how “to guarantee the actualization of wisdom,” a phrase that Strauss uses here for the first time and will use repeatedly in the pages that follow (169). It seems, then, that Hobbes did not accept the nonexistence of God on trust after all: Strauss’s first statement on the subject was, it appears, misleading (cf. 167). However this may be, it now becomes clear that actualizing wisdom or guaranteeing the actualization of wisdom is the chief or guiding concern of Hobbes’s philosophy as a whole, and as far as I can see, Strauss nowhere takes this back. Two things, however, are puzzling here. First, Strauss sometimes seems to speak as if guaranteeing the actualization of wisdom would be sufficient for Hobbes; i.e., he speaks as if the actualization itself were relatively unimportant or, perhaps, as if guaranteeing the actualization of wisdom and actualizing it were somehow the same. Second, we cannot help but wonder: where in all this is the promised explanation of the origin of Hobbes’s political atheism? To this we have as yet hardly a clue.

Strauss now turns back to Hobbes’s natural science—or rather, to its foundation—and offers the following account. “It is probable,” he says, “that what was foremost in Hobbes’s mind was the vision, not of a new type of philosophy or science, but of a universe that is nothing but bodies and their aimless motions.” In other words, he had a Democritean-Epicurean vision of the universe, a materialistic vision. But unlike Democritus and Epicurus, Hobbes “had learned from Plato or Aristotle” that “consistent materialism necessarily culminates in skepticism,” apparently because it is impossible to reconcile a mind governed by “the flux of mechanical causation” with the possession of genuine knowledge. In order to make materialism “scientific,” then, Hobbes had to find a

³ Consider 170-1: “A *glance* at present and past controversies sufficed to convince them...” (emphasis added).

way of overcoming this skepticism—a skepticism that leaves the door open for Biblical religion (cf. SCR 108-9). Taking his cue from a specific interpretation of mathematics, he arrived at the following solution: we can have absolutely certain or scientific knowledge only of what we ourselves make, or of our conscious constructions, including, in the first place, our “intellectual tools” or “principles of understanding” or “concepts” (173 n. 9, 175; WL 6.12-13; WIPP 182; CM 43). But this solution comes at a very great cost: if science provides knowledge only of what we ourselves make, it can tell us nothing about the *given* world or “the true character of reality” (cf. WIPP 174 with NRH 198). As Strauss puts it, “Hobbes had the earnest desire to be a ‘metaphysical’ materialist. But he was forced to rest satisfied with a ‘methodical’ [sc. methodological] materialism” (174). It is in this sense that he abandoned the “plane” on which Platonic physics and Epicurean physics struggled (170). And it is for this reason, I think, that his atheism cannot with certainty be inferred from the atheism of his natural philosophy or science.

But what *about* his atheism? Hobbes, Strauss told us, had a “materialistic and atheistic view of the whole” (170; cf. 169, 198-9 n. 43, WIPP 182-4). Strauss has now explained the basis, such as it is, of his materialism. It seems that the basis of his *atheism* should be discussed next. But Strauss apparently fails to provide such a discussion. Should we assume, then, that Hobbes was forced to rest satisfied with *methodological* atheism just as he was with methodological *materialism*? But if so, what remains of his intention to transform the quest for wisdom into wisdom, i.e., to solve at least the most fundamental of all riddles?

In fact, however, Strauss makes clear that Hobbes could *not* have rested satisfied with methodological atheism. He comments that “the discovery or invention [sc. of the world of constructs, free from the flux of mechanical causation,] eventually permitted an attitude of neutrality or indifference toward the *secular* conflict between materialism and spiritualism” (174, emphasis added). Among those Strauss has in mind here are some of Hobbes’s philosophic descendants who adapted themselves to his teaching about the intrinsic limits of science more fully than he himself did (see 265-6 and Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 2.27.17). But even they, Strauss implies, would have ceased to be indifferent if the spiritualists had turned their arguments into a case for the existence of God.⁴ And with good reason, for as Strauss says on the next page: “wisdom cannot be free construction [—as Hobbes holds it to be—] if the universe is intelligible” (175). It would, for example, be ridiculous to consider our free constructions wisdom if there were a God who had given things a meaning or had assigned them a place in his plan.

⁴ Strauss’s implication is somewhat concealed by the ambiguity of the word “secular,” which can mean either “worldly” or “age-old” (cf. 61 n. 22 [“purely secular development”] with 75 [“secular struggle between philosophy and theology”] and 170 [“the plane on which ‘Platonism’ and ‘Epicureanism’ had carried on their secular struggle”]).

But this implies that the *whole* of wisdom *cannot* in fact be free construction: at the very least, free construction must be supplemented with knowledge of the universe's unintelligibility, which means—in part—knowledge that the universe was not created by, and is not governed by, an intelligent God (cf. 170). And to go a step further, for exactly the same reason that ruling out the existence of such a God is a necessary part of the actualization of wisdom, as Hobbes understands it, it is also a necessary part of the *guaranty* of the actualization of wisdom. And it is this fact above all, I think, that explains why Strauss sometimes speaks as if guaranteeing the actualization of wisdom would be sufficient for Hobbes: a genuine guaranty would include a solution to the most fundamental riddle of all, or to say it another way, it would include the actualization of wisdom in the most important respect.

Having discussed Hobbes's notion of science in the strict sense—i.e. “absolutely certain” knowledge of our own “constructs”—Strauss now takes up Hobbes's natural science, which uses constructs to provide a hypothetical account of nature that is sufficient, not indeed for understanding nature, but for manipulating or controlling it. This science is “all we need,” says Strauss, apparently reproducing Hobbes's view, “to make ourselves masters and owners of nature” (174). And Strauss goes on to present this conquest of nature as part of a larger project—that also and even primarily includes Hobbes's political philosophy—the goal of which is “the City of Man to be erected on the ruins of the City of God” (175-7, 189, 194). Strauss's description and criticism here of what he calls Hobbes's “vision” is so engrossing that it helps obscure the fact that Strauss says nothing about Hobbes's *motive* for seeking the actualization of this vision. After all, Hobbes apparently accepted the Epicurean view that everyone seeks only his own good (cf. 169 and 109), and whatever benefits the City of Man might provide its inhabitants, there is no sign that Hobbes expected to be alive to enjoy them.⁵ Nor is he said to take pleasure in the thought that he will be remembered and honored as a founder of this City. On the contrary, Strauss later says that Hobbes shared Epicurus' view that “the desire for honor and glory is utterly vain” (189).

But the reason that Strauss does not say anything (i.e. anything *new*) about Hobbes's motive is, I think, very simple: his motive remains what Strauss has already indicated it was: the desire to guarantee the actualization of wisdom—which requires that the question of God be settled, a question that Hobbes is *unable* to settle either “metaphysically” or through his merely “hypothetical” natural science. In an effort to explain this suggestion, let me say a bit more about “the City of Man.” As Strauss presents it, Hobbes envisioned a human world, created by natural and political science, in which men felt sufficiently satisfied—sufficiently much “at home”—that they became “oblivious of the whole or of

⁵ See the passage in *Leviathan*, chap. 31, referred to at 166 n. 1.

eternity,” meaning in part, I think, that they ceased to believe in, or to long for, or, what is perhaps most important, to claim to have *experience* of, a God who promised to provide what they needed but were unable to provide for themselves, including justice and eternal life (176; cf. 15; 164; WIPP 185 on the “inner testimony of the holy ghost”). Accordingly, Hobbes teaches that the right kind of human government is a sufficient guarantor of justice (cf. 191 with 151). And as for eternal life, he maintains that men can be content without it (cf. 180-1 with 189).⁶ From this we can see why the construction of the City of Man would also be the destruction of the City of God—the City whose citizens live in the belief that the “cessation of evil, or Redemption” can be brought about only “by God’s supernatural action” (144).⁷ And with the disappearance or withering away of belief in and testimony to the existence of God—combined with proof that men can live contentedly *without* God—what reason would remain for taking seriously claims like those made in the Bible (cf. 209, PAL 12-3, SCR 28-9)?

We are now, I think, in a position to understand what Strauss was pointing to when he said that Hobbes was “the first to draw the consequences for natural right” from the “emergence of modern [nonteleological] natural science.” He did not mean that Hobbes’s doctrine of natural right could be *deduced* from this new natural science. Rather, he was laying the groundwork for the suggestion that as a consequence of the intrinsic *limitations* of this science, Hobbes turned to a political project—with a new doctrine of natural right at its core—as a supplement. It is also in this way that I interpret Strauss’s suggestion that we should understand Hobbes’s political philosophy—and in particular, his invention of political atheism—in the light of his natural philosophy: because Hobbes could not refute revelation with his theoretical science, he tried, with his practical science, to create a world in which claims of revelation, belief in revelation, and need for revelation had been “outlived” (PAL 13). It is of political philosophy in this sense that Hobbes is the founder (177; cf. 155).

Let me offer another piece of evidence that settling the question of God (and thus actualizing wisdom in the most important respect) is, according to Strauss, the guiding concern of Hobbes’ political philosophy. In the preface to the 7th impression of NRH,

⁶ Consider 189: Hobbes “could not accept the implication of Epicurus’ distinction between natural desires which are necessary and natural desires which are not necessary; *for* that distinction implied that happiness requires an ‘ascetic’ style of life and that happiness consists in a state of repose. Epicurus’ high demands on self-restraint were bound to be utopian as far as most men are concerned; they had *therefore* to be discarded by a ‘realistic’ political teaching” (emphasis added). I.e., what is called happiness in the City of Man may not, in Hobbes’s view, be the genuine article—although it may be enough to leave men feeling contented. In the same passage, Strauss explains why Hobbes “*had* to reject” Epicurus’ implicit denial of natural right (emphasis added).

⁷ In chapter one Strauss spoke of “the tension between the concern with the history of the human race and the concern with life after death” and directed the reader to a passage where Kant says that “despair of ever

Strauss directs us to a later article in which he indicates that, according to Hobbes's own argument, healthy politics does not in fact require the disappearance of religion (vii). The reinterpretation of the Bible combined with the toleration of all non-seditious Christian sects would be sufficient for all practical purposes (WIPP 186). Nevertheless, in NRH Strauss insists, and insists that it is "unmistakable," that Hobbes's "whole scheme"—meaning the scheme of his political philosophy, broadly understood—"requires...[an] a-religious or atheistic society" (198). In other words, the goal of Hobbes's political philosophy cannot be understood on strictly political grounds.

IV. Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Socrates

This general understanding of the origin and "function" of Hobbes's political philosophy is both supported and modified by Strauss's detailed discussion of this philosophy in the second part of the Hobbes section (197).⁸ In the space remaining, I will comment on what seem to me to be two of the most important features of this discussion.

First, for reasons that part one helps us to understand, the theme of "actualizing wisdom" is now replaced by "actualizing the right social order," meaning the social order that is contentedly a-religious or atheistic. And as in the first part, the emphasis is on a *guaranty* for this actualization rather than on the actualization *itself* (179, 182, 186, 191, 194, 196; cf. 198). Now in one way this emphasis makes perfect sense: from the standpoint of Hobbes's concern, a guaranty would be altogether sufficient; witnessing the actualization of the right social order would not be necessary. Nor, of course, could Hobbes reasonably expect to live long enough to do so. What's more, even the actualization of the right social order might not erase the *need* for such a guaranty. On the contrary, widespread or universal belief in this guaranty—to be achieved through "popular enlightenment"—would, I think, be *part* of the actualization. For unless men believed that the right social order had been humanly guaranteed—or was "certain," or did not depend on "chance"—even those who lived in what would *otherwise* be the right social order might be inclined to "pray" for its perpetuation, i.e., they might seek a guaranty from God (200; cf. 112-3). And if they believed in a "human guaranty," but their belief was false—or was not known to be true—the actualization of a contentedly a-religious society might be taken to show not that men have no need for God, but only that they may come to believe that they have no need for God when they are deluded about their situation.

encountering [in the history of mankind] a completed rational end causes us to expect such perfection only in another world" (15 n. 6; Friedrich, *The Philosophy of Kant*, 130).

⁸ NRH 177: "One cannot leave it, then, at saying that Hobbes agrees with the idealistic tradition in regard to the function and scope of political philosophy." See TOM 297: In the "new philosophy...[p]hilosophy is to fulfill the function of both philosophy and religion."

But if Hobbes's "concern with a human guaranty for the actualization of the right social order" is in a way understandable, what is deeply puzzling is how he could have thought—as Strauss implies he did—that he had one, or even that one was possible (182, 194). To mention only the chief difficulty: it is impossible to guarantee the actualization of an a-religious or atheistic society without first knowing that God does not exist. For if he *does* exist, he could, of course, prevent such a society from coming into being. Hobbes, however, lacked such knowledge; on the contrary, the nonexistence of God is precisely what his "guaranty" was meant to establish. His "guaranty," then, was not a *genuine* guaranty, and it could *look* like one only to someone who presupposed the very thing that was in question. In other words, as Strauss presents it, Hobbes's thinking was circular on this decisive point.

Strauss calls attention to this shortcoming in Hobbes's position in the following way. Towards the end of the first part of the Hobbes section, he speaks of the City of Man as a "hope" and even an "unsupported hope" (175). Towards the end of the second part, however, he tells us that Hobbes was "*certain*" that chance "can"—nay, "*will*"—be conquered by philosophy issuing in popular enlightenment (200, emphasis added). In other words, Hobbes's "hope" somehow became—if it wasn't from the outset—a "certainty," a *baseless* certainty.⁹ Perhaps he grew so intoxicated with his vision that there came a point when he could no longer conceive of failure. In any case, his belief that he had solved the deepest part of the "riddle of being" was a *delusion*. Or to put it another way, it turns out that despite all of his efforts to grapple with the theological problem, Hobbes, according to Strauss, ultimately *did* accept the nonexistence of God "on trust"—just as Strauss implied towards the beginning of the chapter (167).¹⁰

But let us leave aside the question of a guaranty and briefly consider Hobbes's teaching as the origin of what Strauss in chapter two called "the modern this-worldly irreligious *experiment*"—an experiment whose results Hobbes himself would not live to see (74, emphasis added). How has this experiment fared? Strauss plainly does not think that

⁹ Cf. TOM: "The new philosophy lives from the outset in *the hope which approaches or equals certainty*, of future conquest or of conquest of the future..." (297, emphasis added). There was an indication of the deeper part of the problem already on NRH 175, where Strauss attributed to Hobbes the view that it is "certain...that man's natural state is misery," for as Strauss says elsewhere, "Hobbes's unbelief is the necessary premise of his teaching about the state of nature" (WIPP 189-90). As for the other part of the problem, in WIPP Strauss shows that a close analysis of Hobbes's own argument leads to the conclusion that "[t]he actualization of Hobbes's reasonable state is almost as little necessary as the actualization of Plato's reasonable state (*Leviathan*, Chapter 31 end)" (194). Cf. NRH 166 n. 1 and context.

¹⁰ In the last paragraph of the section, Strauss says that "Hobbes's rationalism...rests ultimately on the *conviction* that, thanks to nature's kindness, the strongest passion [sc. the fear of violent death or the fear of violent death at the hands of others] is the only passion which can be the 'origin of large and lasting societies' or that the strongest passion is the most rational passion" (201). For what Strauss means by "rationalism" here, consider 209: "Let us assume for a moment that Locke was a thorough-going rationalist, i.e., that he

it has produced the results that Hobbes envisioned. Nevertheless, he observes that despite “a long series of disappointments,” the “hope” that Hobbes, “together with his most illustrious contemporaries, kindled” has not yet been extinguished (175). And perhaps just as Hobbes had insufficient grounds for his certainty that the experiment would succeed, so we have insufficient grounds for the certainty that it will ultimately fail. I am not sure, for example, that we can rule out the possibility of the coming of Nietzsche’s “last man” (but consider OT 208-9). And however repugnant he may be to us, his arrival would, I think, mean that Hobbes’s experiment had met with a measure of success. Oddly enough, if the arrival of the last man means the disappearance of the very possibility of philosophy, success would come only when there was no one left who could fully appreciate it.¹¹

To turn now to the second point: in part two of the Hobbes section, Strauss indicates that “our purpose” or what “we are trying to understand” is not so much Hobbes’s doctrine of natural right, or even his political philosophy as a whole, as “that radical change of orientation” of modern political philosophy which is already present in Machiavelli (cf. 190 with 166). It is “on the plane of Machiavelli’s ‘realism’” that Hobbes could “erect his structure” (177, 179, and 182). And although Hobbes’s political teaching and Machiavelli’s are in many ways opposed, they are nevertheless, says Strauss, “motivated by fundamentally the same spirit” (190-1). I take this to mean that Machiavelli too sought to solve the theological problem through a political project (cf. 61 n. 22 with 179-80; see TOM 19).¹² But Machiavelli precedes the “emergence of modern natural science” by about a hundred years (WIPP 180). It turns out, then, that the new orientation towards politics does not in fact depend on a recognition of the limits of distinctively modern natural science. While reflecting on these limits may help one to recognize the problem that Hobbes’s political philosophy tries to solve, doing so is not necessary. But in the context of NRH this makes us wonder: why didn’t Socrates—who also doubted that “the roots” of the whole could be adequately known through physics or metaphysics—turn to a political project like that of the early moderns? If I understand him correctly, Strauss touches on this question in the Hobbes section in the following way.

In explaining Hobbes’s constructionism, Strauss says that Hobbes took his cue from mathematics, for “[o]f all *known* scientific pursuits, mathematics alone had been

regarded unassisted reason not only as man’s ‘only star and compass’ but as sufficient for leading man to happiness, and hence rejected revelation as superfluous and therefore as impossible.”

¹¹ Strauss points to one or two reasons that he expects the experiment to fail with his allusions to Pascal (the believer) and Lucretius (the philosopher) towards the end of the first part of the Hobbes section (175). See WIPP 181, where Strauss again alludes to Pascal, and compare WIPP 191 [“Hobbes apparently presupposes that the human race, and hence the visible universe, is eternal”] with NRH 176 n. 10 and 112-3.

¹² On 198, when Strauss again speaks of a “radical change of orientation,” he says that “Hobbes’s is the first doctrine that necessarily and unmistakably points to a thoroughly ‘enlightened,’ i.e., a-religious or atheistic society as the solution of the social or political problem.” Does he mean to imply that Machiavelli’s doctrine also necessarily points to such a society, though not unmistakably so?

successful” in resisting “skeptical attack” (171, 172, emphasis added). By speaking of “known” scientific pursuits, Strauss seems to imply that there was a scientific pursuit *unknown* to Hobbes and his most illustrious contemporaries—and perhaps to Machiavelli as well—that had *also* proved capable of resisting skepticism. As far as I can see, the only candidate for this unknown scientific pursuit in NRH is Socrates’ dialectical inquiry into the human things, the noble and good things, or the virtues (122; cf. 145-6). Now Hobbes himself—apparently unlike Machiavelli—recognizes the need for a moral component in his political project. And so he offers a doctrine of natural law that he “*presents*” as “truly scientific” (168, emphasis added; 179-80). In fact, however, his analysis “takes for granted the generally accepted view of justice” (180 n. 16). Socrates, on the other hand, seems to have begun “from the *conflict* between the *two* most common opinions regarding justice” (146, emphasis added), and by thinking this conflict through—and by talking it through with others—he ascended to an understanding of what Strauss calls “the problem of justice,” an understanding that Strauss, in the Hobbes section, implies is capable of resisting skeptical attack (150 n. 24; cf. WL 2.4-5). And as for why Socrates did not turn to something like Machiavelli’s or Hobbes’s political project, one reason may be that he did not have the same need, for like Machiavelli and Hobbes he too, according to Strauss, thought that “the political things, or the human things”—which he understood through his dialectical inquiries—“are the key to the understanding of all things,” including the divine things (cf. TOM 19 with NRH 122).¹³ It seems that Hobbes was at once too sophisticated and too naive to recognize the importance of raising with patience the simple Socratic question: what is justice? In conclusion, I raise a question of my own to which I do not have an adequate answer. If my interpretation of the unknown scientific pursuit is correct, how did the Socratic approach to the question of the gods come to be forgotten?

¹³ Cf. CM 20: “In its original [i.e. Socratic] form political philosophy broadly understood is the core of philosophy, or rather ‘the first philosophy.’” SAA 314: “the true knowledge of the souls, and hence of the soul, is the core of cosmology (of the knowledge of the things aloft).”