Calvin, Hobbes, and the Theological-Political Problem

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Philosophy, University of Michigan

Some dozen years ago Professor Martinich and I engaged in a debate[1] about the extent to which Hobbes might properly be described as a Calvinist, or even as a tolerably orthodox Christian. I have no great desire to rehash that old controversy here, though I'm perfectly willing to defend what I said, if anyone wishes to continue that conversation. But what I would prefer to do today is to explore aspects of the relation between Calvin and Hobbes which I haven't previously written about. In particular I want to discuss what I take to be their contrasting views about the relation between religion and politics. The earlier debate did not persuade me that I was wrong in my interpretation of Hobbes' religious views. So I will operate on the assumption that Hobbes was the religious radical I've described in previous work: perhaps an atheist; at most, I think, a deist, who rejected the authority of the Christian scriptures, but who, like any radical thinker writing under the threat of persecution, had to convey his ideas discreetly, with what we have come to call in English plausible deniability: that is, if they say you did it, you can deny it, and it will be hard for them to prove otherwise. I will not attempt to argue for this Straussian approach any further than I have before, except insofar as the contrast I shall draw between our two philosophers' views of the theological-political problem may add further support for the claim that Hobbes was no Calvinist.

[1] The article which touched this off was my "'I Durst Not Write So Boldly,' or How to Read Hobbes' *Theological-Political Treatise*," in *Hobbes e Spinoza*, ed. by Daniela Bostrenghi, intr. by Emilia Giancotti, Naples: Bibliopolis, 1992: 497-593. Also available on my website: http://sitemaker.umich.edu/emcurley/hobbes. Martinich's response to this article appeared in the same year, in an appendix to his *Two Gods of LEVIATHAN*, Cambridge UP, 1992. I replied to Martinich's appendix in "Calvin and Hobbes, or, Hobbes as an Orthodox Christian," in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 34 (April 1996): 257-271. Martinich replied in "On the Proper Interpretation of Hobbes's Philosophy," ibid, pp. 272-283. My "Reply to Professor Martinich" was in the same number, pp. 285-287. Other papers of mine which I take to support this reading are: "Hobbes and the cause of toleration," in the *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes' LEVIATHAN*, edited by Patricia Springborg, from Cambridge UP, 2007; "The Covenant with God in Hobbes' *Leviathan*," in *Leviathan After 350 Years*, ed. by Tom Sorell and Luc Foisneau, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004; and "Religion and Morality in Hobbes," in *Rational Commitment and Social Justice: Essays for Gregory Kavka*, ed. by Jules Coleman and Christopher Morris, Cambridge UP, 1998.

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The theological-political problem of my title is in fact a cluster of problems: first, what is the basis for our obligation to obey the civil sovereign? Does it depend on a divine command, and a prior obligation to obey divine commands? If so, what is the basis for our obligation to obey divine commands? Is that obligation fundamental? or can we provide some further justification for it? If so, what might that further justification look like? If our obligation to obey the sovereign does not depend on a divine command, what does it depend on? Is it possible to give a wholly secular justification for obedience to the civil sovereign? What are the duties of the civil sovereign? Is he responsible for seeing to it that we obey all of God's laws, including those which prescribe specifically religious obligations? And most crucially: if we receive a command from our sovereign which contradicts what we have reason to believe is a command from God, how should we resolve this conflict? I propose to outline Calvin's answers to these questions in his *Institution of the Christian Religion*,[2] and then to consider what I shall argue is the very different position of Hobbes, mainly in *Leviathan*, but also in his earlier works as well.

Calvin maintains that men are subject to two governments, one spiritual, the other political (or temporal, or civil) . The spiritual government is said to "reside in the soul or inner man,"[3] to be concerned with "the life of the soul" (III, xix, 15) and to look toward eternal life. What governs us here, I take it, is our conscience, conceived as the voice of God within us, which pronounces a judgment against us when we do wrong, but gives us peace when we act from a sincere inclination to serve God and to live a pious and holy life.[4] This law prescribes both internal and external actions – for example, it prescribes that we not have unclean

[2] I adopt this title for Calvin's work, accepting the argument of Harro Höpfl that *Institution of the Christian Religion* is to be preferred to the rendering which has been more common in English, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Höpfl takes the title to involve "an elegant play on words, the point of which was to indicate that the contents of the work were not only 'instruction' in the commonplaces of the Christian religion, but also an account of that religion as 'instituted' or founded by Christ, as opposed to its current, man-made deformations." (see *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, Cambridge UP, 1982, p. 20) Unless otherwise noted, I follow the Battles translation (as given in *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill and tr. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). Where I depart from this, it is usually to follow the translation of *Institution* IV, xx, by Harro Höpfl, in Luther and Calvin, *On Secular Authority*, Cambridge UP, 1991. I will make my references to the *Institution* by book, chapter and section.

[3] IV, xx, 1; cf. III, xix, 15.

[4] III, xix, 15-16, citing Romans 2:15-16, and 1 Timothy 1:5, 18-19.

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thoughts, and "bids us keep our minds pure and undefiled from all lust"[5] – and that we practice appropriate external conduct – for example, it "forbids all obscenity of speech and outward licentiousness." (III, xix, 16) We would be subject to this law, even if no other men lived on earth.

Political government, by contrast, is concerned exclusively with "the establishment of civil justice and outward morality." (IV, xx, 1) It

> has to do with the concerns of the present life – not only with food and clothing, but with laying down laws whereby a man may live his life among other men in a holy, honorable, and temperate manner.[6]

Calvin is most anxious to insist that the priority of spiritual government does not mean that the laws of human societies are not genuinely binding on us. He repeatedly sets himself apart from any interpretation of the gospel which would free Christians from their duty to obey the civil authorities, presenting himself as steering a middle course between the "madmen and savages" who are trying to overturn the order established by God, and the "flatterers of princes, who vaunt the might of princes, without acknowledging any bounds to it, and do not hesitate to oppose it to the overlordship of God himself." (IV, xx, 1) The 'madmen and savages' here are evidently the Anabaptists, who are accused of thinking that Christian liberty frees them from recognizing any king or master among men.[7]

Though Calvin distinguishes between these two forms of government, he insists that they are not incompatible, and in fact ascribes to the civil authorities responsibilities which we might find extraordinary. So not only are they appointed to

> adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote the general peace and tranquillity... (IV, xx, 2),

[5] III, xix, 16, perhaps thinking of Matt. 5:27-28.
[6] III, xix, 15, slightly modified.
[7] As one might be encouraged to think by certain passages in Luther's *Treatise on Christian Liberty*: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none" or "our faith, which... makes the law and works unnecessary for any man's righteousness and salvation." in John Dillenberger (ed.), *Martin Luther, Selections from his writings*, Anchor, 1961, pp. 53, 58-59. I do not claim that this would be a correct reading of Luther's doctrine of Christian liberty, just that certain passages, taken out of context, might be considered antinomian.

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> men breathe, eat, drink, and are kept warm... [and provide] that each man may keep his property safe and sound; that men may carry on blameless intercourse among themselves, that honesty and modesty may be preserved among men... (IV, xx, 3),

not only do they

> defend good men from the wrongs of the wicked, and give aid and protection to the oppressed... (IV, xx, 9)

but they are also charged with securing obedience to those provisions of the Decalogue which specify our duties to God. So among the ends of civil government are

> [cherishing and protecting] the outward worship of God, [defending] sound doctrine and the position of the church... (IV, xx, 2)
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> [preventing] idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people... [and providing] that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians. (IV, xx, 3)

In introducing this catalogue of the responsibilities of civil government, I said that we might find it "extraordinary." Calvin seems to think it is quite normal. "If Scripture did not teach that [the office of the magistrates] extends to both Tables of the Law, we could learn this from secular writers." (IV, xx, 9) For no one, he writes, has discussed the responsibility of magistrates "without beginning at religion and divine worship." McNeill's annotation suggests that Calvin is thinking of Cicero when he says this, and the passage McNeill cites from Cicero's *Laws* is an apt one, provided we're prepared to interpret piety broadly, as including the worship of many gods. But one example is hardly sufficient to support a generalization as universal as the one Calvin makes, particularly when Machiavelli provides such a prominent counterexample.

Calvin's central justification for our duty to obey our earthly sovereign's power is that well-known passage in Paul's epistle to the Romans, which prescribes submission to the powers that be:

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> 1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore, whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; 4 for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.[8]

This passage is strangely optimistic about the moral character of rulers. Paul writes as if he knew only of rulers who are disposed to govern well. He says that those who do what is good can expect approval from the authorities; that only those who do what is wrong have reason to fear their rulers. The sword is appointed to execute God's wrath on wrongdoers, and that, it seems, is how it is generally used. Paul must have known, of course, that there were bad rulers, who did not use their power only to punish wrongdoers. After all, his Christian faith is founded on the death of an innocent man at the hands of a Roman governor. But he says very explicitly that *every* authority is instituted by God, and that those who resist the authorities instituted by God will incur judgment. So his prescription of non-resistance to authority will apply both to those rulers who use their power as you might have hoped God would wish, and to those who don't.

Calvin is less sanguine about the character of rulers, but no less insistent on the necessity of obedience. He focuses on the providential character of political power, interpreting the ruler's possession and exercise of power – *every* ruler's possession and exercise of power – as part of a divine plan. The purpose of the ruler's exercise of force – God's purpose in allowing the ruler to use his power – may not always be the punishment of wrong-doers. In the case of the death of Jesus, presumably it was to redeem mankind from sin. In other cases, God's purpose may be beyond our ken. But whatever God's purposes may be, the first duty of

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subjects towards their magistrates is to recognize them as having a commission from God, and to revere them as his ministers. (IV, xx, 22)

And Calvin is quite insistent that subjects have a moral obligation to obey their rulers, no matter how badly their rulers treat them. He acknowledges that unconditional obedience does not come naturally to us. Men have always had an innate hatred and abhorrence of tyrants, just as they have always loved and venerated legitimate kings. (IV, xx, 24) But if we look to the word of God, it will teach us to overcome our natural feelings:

> we are to be subject not only to the authority of those princes who do their duty towards us as they should, and uprightly, but to all of them, however they came by their throne, even if the very last thing they do is to act like [true] princes... even the worst of them, and those entirely undeserving of any honor, provided they have public authority, are invested with that splendid and sacred authority which God's Word bestows on the ministers of his justice and judgment. And hence, as far as public obedience is concerned, they are to be held in the same honour and reverence as would be accorded an excellent king, if they had such a one.[9]

Calvin knows the darkness of the human heart well enough to know that men often do not have an excellent ruler. And he doesn't think it matters. You obey the rulers you have, whether you are fortunate in your rulers or not.

There is one notable exception, though, to this general recommendation of civil obedience. We must not obey our civil ruler when such obedience would lead us away from obedience to God, the King of Kings, "to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject." (IV, xx, 32) When there is a conflict between the command of the civil ruler and the command of God, we must follow Peter's dictum and "obey God rather than man." (Acts 5:29)

It's not clear to me how far Calvin intended us to take this exception. All the examples he uses in that final section of Bk. IV, Ch. xx, involve commands to violate our duties to God. So Daniel was a model of how we should behave when he disobeyed Darius's edict prohibiting his subjects to petition any god or man other than himself. (Daniel 6:12) Daniel had regularly

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offered worship to the God of Israel, and was cast into the lions' den for his violation of that edict. And the people of Israel showed how we should not behave, when they embraced the worship of the golden calves commanded by Jeroboam. (1 Kings 12: 25ff.) Both these cases involve sovereign commands to disobey the injunctions of the first table of the Decalogue. Whether Calvin would have been equally approving of resistance to commands to disobey the injunctions of the second table, I don't know. Suppose the case were one where Nero had commanded one of his subjects to commit adultery with him. It's possible that in such a case Calvin would not have thought that raised quite the same issues of principle. But he does say that Darius

> had transgressed the bounds set to him [by God] and had not only wronged men, but had raised his horns against God, thereby abrogating his own power.[10]

Höpfl has commented that this passage implies that "any ruler who sets himself against God, *ipso facto* ceases to be a ruler. This is not what Calvin intended… It is, however, precisely what some of his successors meant."[11]

However that may be, it does seem to me that Calvin has opened up what we in the United States would call "a can of worms." I apologize for the colloquialism, which may not translate easily into French, but the point is that the commands of the Decalogue are *all* commands *of God*, whether they concern our duties to God or our duties to our fellow human beings. So though Calvin himself might have thought that offenses against the first table were more serious than those against the second, his followers may well have thought that *any* violation of a divine command, whether the commandment was on the first table or the second, was a serious matter, and that in *any* clear case of a conflict between a divine commandment and the command of a merely human sovereign, the divine commandment was the one to be obeyed.

That, at any rate, was what worried Hobbes, who on my reading saw the Christian tradition, at least as interpreted by Calvin and his followers, as posing a serious threat to civil society. Like Calvin, Hobbes believed that he had to show that we have a genuine obligation to

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[11] Höpfl, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, p. 84n.

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However that may be, it does seem to me that Calvin has opened up what we in the

United States would call "a can of worms." I apologize for the colloquialism, which may not

translate easily into French, but the point is that the commands of the Decalogue are all

commands of God, whether they concern our duties to God or our duties to our fellow human

beings. So though Calvin himself might have thought that offenses against the first table were

more serious than those against the second, his followers may well have thought that

any

violation of a divine command, whether the commandment was on the first table or the second, was a serious matter, and that in any clear case of a conflict between a divine commandment and the command of a merely human sovereign, the divine commandment was

the one to be obeyed.

That, at any rate, was what worried Hobbes, who on my reading saw the Christian tradition, at least as interpreted by Calvin and his followers, as posing a serious threat to civil

society. Like Calvin, Hobbes believed that he had to show that we have a genuine obligation to

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Institution IV, xx, 32, following Höpfl's translation. 11

Höpfl, Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority, p. 84n.

obey our human sovereign. But the threat to the civil order for Hobbes was not Anabaptist anarchism. It was Calvinist anarchism. Unlike Calvin, Hobbes was not content to rest the obligation to obey the civil sovereign on God's institution of the sovereign, and on a biblical injunction to obey the powers that be. I believe he thought that the biblical injunction was too weak a reed to support a robust doctrine of civil obedience, too apt to be overturned by the equally biblical injunction that, in cases of conflict, we must obey God rather than man. It is too easy to be persuaded – too easy for mischiefmakers to persuade you – that you are subject to a divine command which conflicts with your human sovereign's command.

This is not to say that Hobbes was not sometimes willing to appeal to Paul's letter to the Romans to support that obligation. Like a good lawyer, he is willing to appeal to the prejudices of his audience to make his case. In his first published work of political philosophy, *De cive*, he cited Romans 13 – but as providing 'scriptural confirmation' of the absolute power of human sovereigns, not, even there, as his principal argument. In *Leviathan* – where there is on the whole a great deal more discussion of Christianity in general, and of the Bible in particular – the appeal to Romans 13 almost vanishes, being deferred until late in Part III. What takes center stage in *Leviathan* is a thoroughly secular argument. We must give simple (unconditional) obedience to our civil sovereign because the only alternative is anarchy, and anarchy is intolerable. In a state of nature – that is, in the absence of a civil sovereign – a person or collective body empowered to make and enforce laws regulating human conduct — the life of man would be a war of all against all, and consequently, in the famous phrase, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

Hobbes is able to support this claim without, I think, being unduly pessimistic about human nature.[12] He believes that we have a natural and necessary desire to survive. He does not think that this desire is so strong as to consistently override all other desires we may have. Sometimes the desire for honor is stronger, and we sacrifice our life for the sake of a cause or

[12] Here I summarize the interpretation of Hobbes' account of human nature offered in the introduction to my edition of *Leviathan*, Hackett, 1994, pp. xv-xxi. Readers of Greg Kavka's *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory* (Princeton, 1986) and Bernard Gert's introduction to his edition of Hobbes' *Man and Citizen* (Hackett, 1991) will recognize my indebtedness to those authors. Generally I will make my references to *Leviathan* to the chapter and paragraph numbers given in my edition.

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of our reputation. And sometimes – not often, but sometimes – there are other people whom we care about enough to risk, or even sacrifice our lives. But these are exceptions. As a rule, we desire our own survival strongly enough that that desire dominates. And most of us also strongly desire what Hobbes calls 'commodious living,' what I would call a decent standard of comfort in our lives. For this we are prepared to take risks regarding the other things we value. Some of us desire the pleasure of feeling superior to others, and if possible, of having them acknowledge our superiority. All of us desire power, understood in the most general sense, as the means to achieve our other desires. This may be harmless enough in itself. But because no individual who has to depend only on his own physical and mental power has a reliable advantage over others, most of us also seek power over others, knowing that the ability to get others to do our bidding is the most significant 'force multiplier' available to us. Many of us seek this merely as a means to an end. Some of us find the taste of power over others sweet, and seek it as an end in itself.

It is impossible that men so constituted would not find themselves frequently in conflict. Often there will be shortages of resources which encourage men who are, in Kavka's phrase, "predominantly egoistic," and no great lovers of their fellow men, to eliminate the competition. And sometimes the cause of conflict will be a prudent calculation that in a battle between approximately equal forces the one who strikes first has an advantage. This prompts preemptive attacks. Hobbes exaggerates for rhetorical effect when he writes of a "war of every man against every man." When he is making his case that even the strongest will be in danger in the state of nature, he points out that the weaker may join in a 'confederacy' to overpower them. So it's clear that he envisaged some cooperation in the state of nature. The point about the war of all against all is just that in the state of nature there will be enough actual conflict, and enough well-founded fear of conflict, that no one will be able to rest secure in the possession of any good for any long period of time.

Hobbes' emphasis on human egoism and on the potential for conflict in the state of nature makes a strong case that no rational person would want to live in such a state, but it has understandably raised questions about the ability of men so constituted to escape from it. How

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nature makes a strong case that no rational person would want to live in such a state, but it has

understandably raised questions about the ability of men so constituted to escape from it. How

can men so egoistic and bellicose ever agree to form a civil society? But Hobbes has a plausible explanation of how this might come about. First, as I noted above, Hobbes does not really think there is no cooperation in the state of nature. He imagines that weaker people might band together to protect themselves against those who are stronger, achieving a temporary security from competition and attack. Following Greg Kavka, we can call such a band a non-state self-defense cooperative – non-state because in the case we're imagining that the members of the group have not agreed to designate one of their number to be their leader, with the power to enforce his commands. Forming such a group may be risky, particularly if the members contemplate initiating a pre-emptive attack. But it may not be much riskier than the alternative of running and hiding. And there may be other incentives to take the risk. Hobbes acknowledges that affection for our kin is natural, and this may motivate us to do things which a cool calculation of self-interest would never endorse. Probably the first such groups would have been based on the family. Hobbes doesn't mention, but must surely have been aware, that men often have a strong desire to impress women. This too may help with the formation of these cooperatives. Hobbes does acknowledge that "the passions of men are commonly more potent than their reason." (xix, 4) But what we do out of passion is not necessarily harmful. It can be part of the cunning of reason.

Whatever the initial motive for the creation on non-state self-defense cooperatives, Hobbes is clear that they will occur, and that they will have a natural tendency to evolve into states. A small, non-state self-defense cooperative, based perhaps on familial affection, may provide some measure of security in the state of nature, but it cannot provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of security, so long as it is vulnerable to the attacks of a slightly larger group. When the numbers of both groups are small, and approximately equal, a small addition to the size of one group can give it a great advantage. So there will be an incentive to increase the size of your group. As the size of one group increases, the threat to other groups will give them an incentive to increase their size, perhaps by forming alliances with other. There will be a race to see which group can form the largest non-state cooperative. But there will also be a natural limit to this process. Because the larger a group gets, the harder it will be to coordinate

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