

Hobbes's Radical Nominalism (Preprint version)
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“What will we now say, if indeed ratiocination is nothing other than the coupling and concatenation of names or appellations by this word ‘is’? From which [it follows that] we gather by reason absolutely nothing about the nature of things, but about the names of them, especially whether or not we couple the names of things according to agreements (which we make by our will with regard to the signification of them).”
Hobbes, 3rd Set of Objections to Descartes’ *Meditations*¹

In an early essay, Leibniz says that Hobbes’s nominalism is of an extreme variety. “Not content to reduce universals to names, as do the nominalists,” Leibniz suggests, Hobbes “says the truth of the matter itself consists in names, and, moreover, depends on human will: the truth depends on the definition of terms, but the definition of terms depends on human will.”² Leibniz thus calls attention to a relatively neglected aspect of Hobbes’s philosophy, his understanding of signification and the signifying process.³ Indeed, recent study of Hobbes and language has

¹ “Quid jam dicimus, si forte ratiocinatio nihil aliud sit quàm copulatio & concaethenatio nominum sive appellationum, per verbum hoc *est*? unde colligimus ratione nihil omnino de naturâ rerum, sed de earum appellationibus, nimirum utrum copulemus rerum nomina secundùm pacta (quae arbitrio nostro fecimus circa ipsarum significationes) vel non” (AT VII, 178; my translation; CSM II, 125-6).

Descartes references are as follows:

AT: *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964).

CSM: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. and trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: CUP, 1985).

Hobbes references are as follows:

Dco: *De Corpore*, ed. Karl Schuhmann (Paris: J. Vrin, 1999) [I retain the Molesworth pagination at OL I].

EL: *Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, rpt. as *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: OUP, 1994).

EW: *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Sir William Molesworth, (London, 1839-1845).

Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

L: *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) (Latin version as OL III).

DC: *On the Citizen*, ed. and trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverstone (Cambridge: CUP, 1998).

OL: *Opera Philosophica quae latine scripsit omnia*, ed. William Molesworth (London, 1839).

Departures from published translations are my own, and original text will be indicated in the notes.

² “Non contentus enim cum Nominalibus universalia ad nomina reducere, ipsam rerum veritatem ait in nominibus consistere, ac, quod majus est, pendere ab arbitrio humano, quia veritas pendeat a definitionibus terminorum, definitiones autem terminorum ab arbitrio humano.” G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophische Schriften*, ed. Gerhardt (Berlin: 1875-1890), IV, 158.

³ I have found the following studies particularly useful: Donald W. Hanson, “Reconsidering Hobbes’ Conventionalism,” *Review of Politics* 53 (1991), 627-651; Cees Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism: The Late Scholastic Setting of Thomas Hobbes’ Natural Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes’s System of Ideas: A Study in the Political Significance of Philosophical Theories* (London: Hutchinson

primarily focused on his conflicted attitude toward rhetoric, the art of persuasion.⁴

Independently of such “uses and abuses” of language, one may also inquire how, for Hobbes, words come to signify. It is at this level that his nominalism is important and underexplored, even as (I hope to indicate) Hobbes’s emphasis on the political function of language and rhetoric is grounded in his view of signification. One must be careful: nominalism as practiced in the seventeenth century is about signification, understood as a process at once psychological and epistemological, not about referential meaning in the twentieth-century analytic sense. From the point of view of a twentieth-century analyst, Hobbes may appear as “the crudest kind of nominalist ... blind to the ‘performative’ functions of language.”⁵ It is in order to resist this appearance that one should emphasize Hobbes’s embeddedness in a context the parameters of

University Library, 1965), 138-162; and (especially) Yves Charles Zarka: *Hobbes et la pensée politique moderne* (Paris: PUF, 1995) and Yves Charles Zarka, *La décision métaphysique de Hobbes: Conditions de la politique* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1987). Thomas A. Spragens Jr., *The Politics of Motion: The World of Thomas Hobbes* (Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 1973), frequently alludes to Hobbes’s “radical nominalism” (see, e.g., 86, 113, 132, 140) without explaining very much what that is, except as a denial of “Aristotelian realism.” Zarka summarizes the general interpretive point: for Hobbes, “man is not only a being of desire, but a being of speech,” such that Hobbes’s political philosophy is not a physics but a “semiology” (*Hobbes*, 51).

⁴ This has been the subject of several fine, recent studies, of which Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996) is the best. For a recent paper emphasizing the importance of the control of language to Hobbes, see Terence Ball, “Hobbes’s Linguistic Turn,” in *Reappraising Political Theory: Revisionist Studies in the History of Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 83-106. One might also consult David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986); and Frederick G. Whelan, “Language and its Abuses in Hobbes’s Political Philosophy,” *American Political Science Review* 75 (1981), 58-75.

⁵ As Ball, 103, puts the objection, prior to answering it. In earlier literature, Hobbes was often accused of “Humpty-Dumpty” nominalism, the view that word meaning reduces to individual will. One corrective to such theories of meaning is speech act theory; it is perhaps for this reason that more recent analytic studies of Hobbes’s views on language often cast him as a speech act theorist or as a pragmatist. See, for example, Anat Biletzki, *Talking Wolves: Thomas Hobbes on the Language of Politics and the Politics of Language* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997); Geraint Parry, “Performative Utterances and Obligation in Hobbes,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 17 (1967), 246-52; and David R. Bell, “What Hobbes Does with Words,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (1969), 155-58; Isabel C. Hungerland and George R. Vick, “Hobbes’s Theory of Signification,” *JHP* 11 (1973), 459-482, similarly emphasize the communicative and public aspects of Hobbes’s account of language. Insofar as speech act theory emphasizes the irreducibility of context and actual usage to an account of language, this is both important and correct. However, different views both of signification and of epistemic psychology are compatible with speech act theory: Biletzki, for example, is able to spend very little space on the psychological aspects of signification. It is these elements I will emphasize here.

which were originally set by William of Ockham, and by a broader notion of how the cognitive power might take words to be representative.⁶

In what follows, I will defend and develop an interpretation suggested by Leibniz's remarks. Specifically, according to Hobbes, we have no intellectual faculty in which a pre-discursive mental language could inhere; reasoning itself thereby reduces to the imagination and to the signification of material marks. In introducing the passage above, Hobbes draws a distinction between imagining, "that is, having an idea," and "conceiving in the mind, that is, using a process of reasoning to infer that something is, or exists" (AT VII, 178; CSM II, 125). Descartes expresses dismissive surprise, and retorts that reasoning is about "the things that are signified by the names," and that he is "surprised that the opposite view should occur to anyone" (AT VII, 178; CSM II, 126). In a seventeenth-century context, Descartes is correct to be surprised, and it is the anomaly of Hobbes's position which will frame the discussion here. In the first section, I will read Hobbes with and against scholastic nominalism as it is developed in William of Ockham. In the next section, I will examine Hobbes's engagement with Descartes. The final section will look at some of the consequences of the Hobbesian position for his political thought.

2. Hobbes After Ockham

The term "nominalism" does not have a precise, univocal referent, and it is consequently important to proceed carefully. Most generally, nominalism opposes realism, which is the thesis that the signification of a word is defined in relation to an extramental universal or some other sort of metaphysically existing anchor. Realist ontology thus involves a proliferation of such

⁶ Ian Hacking, "Thomas Hobbes's Mental Discourse," in *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975), 15-25, shows the incompatibility between Hobbes and standard, twentieth century theories of meaning. For another example of an early modern thinker whose views on language have perhaps been misconstrued by the

abstractions and universals. The doxic reading of Plato's "theory of forms" would be a paradigm case (though it is not at all clear that this is a correct reading of Plato). For the nominalist, the point is to frame questions about signification as questions of logic or language, but not of ontology or metaphysics. To underscore the contrast, Plato thought that realism, or at least the belief in realism, was good for political stability. Hobbes thinks that universals do not exist *extra animam*, and that their invocation risks civil war.⁷ In its adoption of a critique of universals, the Hobbesian account echoes aspects of the Christian medieval nominalist tradition as it develops from William of Ockham. However, the Hobbesian appropriation of the position is a critical one, and considerably transgresses the medieval Ockhamite version.⁸

Initially, one can say that the nominalist point is to refute the notion that our concepts come from external, universal forms. There are two primary aspects to the Ockhamite critique, both of which will be echoed, though not repeated, in Hobbes. (a) Ockham thinks that the real existence of universals would impinge on divine power. This is because they would limit God's ability to alter our experiences in the world. Hobbes, for his part, repeatedly asserts the importance of divine power, as is particularly evident in his debate on free will with Bramhall.

ahistoric projection of twentieth-century understandings of "meaning" onto his work, see E. J. Ashworth, "Locke on Language," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14 (1984), 45-73.

⁷ Attention to this detail would thus entail the reform of universities, where bad philosophy is currently taught to the detriment of the commonwealth: "I must let you see on all occasions by the way, what things would be amended in them; amongst which the frequency of insignificant Speech is one" (L 1, 14). For a reading of Plato's "theory of forms" as a mythological structure, see Claudia Barrachi, *Of Myth, Life, and War in Plato's Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002).

⁸ For Hobbes and Ockham, see Zarka, *Décision*, *passim*. For details of the development of the *via moderna*, see Janet Coleman, *Ancient and Medieval Memories: Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992). For caution against assimilating Ockham to a vaguely described "nominalist" position, see Jan P. Beckmann, "Ockham, Ockhamismus, und Nonminimalismus: Spuren der Wirkungsgeschichte des Venerabilis Inceptor," *Franciscan Studies* 56 (1998), 77-95. Here I do not make a claim of linear "influence." My purpose is to paint in fairly broad strokes and thereby to align Hobbes with and against a medieval tradition. Any claim of "influence" would need to read Hobbes against sixteenth-century scholasticism. An important question, well beyond the scope of this paper, is the extent to which medieval Judeo-Islamicate philosophers – in particular, Maimonides – tended toward the view of language here attributed to Hobbes. For a discussion of "equivocal nominalism" in the Judeo-Islamicate tradition, see Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, "Maimonidean Aspects in Spinoza's Thought," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 17:1-2 (1994), 153-174.

There, he defines piety as requiring that “we think as highly of his [God’s] power as we can;” he adds that even prayer “is not to move but to honor God” (§15, pp. 27-8). Hobbes’s position is as emphatic as it is radical. Citing *Job* – “who art thou, O man, that interrogatest God?” – he argues that “the power of God alone without other help is sufficient justification of any action he does. That which men ... call by the name of justice ... is not that by which God Almighty’s actions are to be measured or called just” (§12, p. 22). In the following paragraph, Hobbes declares to be incomprehensible a whole set of theological distinctions normally used to avoid the implications of this position, and rests on the thought that he is willing to change his mind in the (unlikely) event that such distinctions can be made comprehensible. This is certainly not Ockham’s position, but the usage of divine power to avoid theological complications induced by apparent metaphysical strictures on divine action, strictures grounded the presence of a transcendental structure of meaning for terms like “just,” has a direct antecedent in thinkers like Ockham, who worked in an environment overdetermined by the 1277 condemnations.

(b) Ockham thinks that such universals are superfluous. “Ockham’s razor” names (for us) the mechanism he developed in this critique: one can have a perfectly adequate account of human knowledge without resorting to the convenience of hypostatizing new metaphysical entities. The Hobbesian parallel is particularly clear in the *Leviathan*’s critique of separated essences. For example, Hobbes remarks of words like “Free-will,” “Whitenesse, Roundnesse, Magnitude, Quality, Corruptibility” and the like that “when men write whole volumes of such stuffe, are they not Mad, or intend to make others so” (L 8, 59)? Metaphysics has a sharply reduced agenda, and “consisteth principally, in right limiting of the significations of such Appellations, or Names, as are of all others the most Universall” (L 46, 463).⁹

⁹ Importantly, he traces his own view to Aristotle: “the Explication ... of which, and the Terms, is commonly in the Schools called *Metaphisiques*; as being a part of the Philosophy of Aristotle, which hath that for title; but it is in

Although Hobbes clearly picks up these and other aspects of the nominalist program, he nonetheless departs from the medieval version in a number of ways. Essentially, Hobbes takes and radicalizes the Ockhamite critique of universals, and then adds to it his mechanistic psychology. As a result, the intellectual faculty succumbs to Ockham's razor. Hobbes is left with the position that words and language turn out both to be thoroughly affective, and both occur in the imagination.¹⁰ This view of language contributes heavily to his political thought, as the repeated denunciations of seditious speech suggest: seditious speech moves people to embrace nonsensical ideas. Even clear speech is dangerous for those who are not able to understand. In the debate with Bramhall, for example, he gestures to arguments about exposing the vulgar to philosophy: "if we consider the greatest part of mankind not as they should be but as they are ... the dispute of this question will rather hurt than help their piety. And therefore if his Lordship had not desired this answer, I should not have written on it, nor do I write it but in hopes your Lordship will keep it private" (§14, p. 27). More theoretically, and with fewer inhibitions, Hobbes opens *Leviathan* with the statement that, "concerning the Thoughts of man *Singly*, they are every one a *Representation* or *Apparence*, of some quality, or other Accident of a body without us; which is commonly called an *Object*" (L 1, 13). The parallel passage in the Latin edition offers two clues towards its interpretation. First, "object" is "*objectum*," which suggests that the topic under consideration is the so-called "objective reality" of ideas, *i.e.*, their

another sense; for there is signifieth as much, as *Books written, or placed after his naturall Philosophy*: but the Schools take them for *Books of supernaturall Philosophy*" (*ibid.*). This is obviously a heterodox reading of Aristotle. For some recent work that suggests that Hobbes is on to something, see Claudia Barrachi, "The Nature of Reason and the Sublimity of First Philosophy: Towards a Reconfiguration of Aristotelian Interpretation," *Epoché* 7 (2003), 223-250.

¹⁰ Mathematics presents a special case. Hobbes accepts, with qualifications, the truth value of Euclidean geometry (see, *e.g.*, EW VII, 184). He rejects the symbolization of algebra, and even presents numeration as a paradigm case of thought being linguistic (L 4, 27). On Hobbesian mathematics and language, see my "Hobbes and the Premodern Geometry of Modern Political Thought," *Arts of Calculation*, ed. David Glimp and Michelle Warren (St. Martins/Palgrave, 2003), 115-135, and the citations there. The most comprehensive study of Hobbesian

presence in the soul. Second, the Latin indicates that these ideas are generated by the imagination, as the equivocal “*apparitio sive representatio*” underscores (OL III, 5). In this, Hobbes has moved both with and against Ockhamite nominalism. Like Ockham, Hobbes does not rely upon universals or separated essences *extra animam* to generate these ideas. Unlike Ockham, Hobbes does not rely on “intuition” either. A review of Ockham will indicate the distance Hobbes has traveled.

Ockham’s ontology admits only of “singular” things in the world. Predication is the product of the manipulation of our ideas of those singular things.¹¹ The primary theoretical task is thus logical, and consists in discovering how correctly to manipulate these concepts. Hence, according to Ockham, the encounter with a singular thing provides an “evident intuition [*notitia evidens*]” of that thing, *qua* singular thing. This intuition then becomes the object or term which is manipulated in logic. In place of a theory of universals, Ockham provides a treatment of signification which explains the referential logic through which putatively universal terms operate, and a theory of “supposition” which discusses the ways in which our thoughts can stand for extramental objects. Ockham assumes that this intuition generally corresponds accurately with what is in the world. The mechanism by which such a reliable intuition arises is perhaps not clear, but it is clear that the general veridicality of intuition distances Ockham from questions about psychology and our perceptive apparatus, and allows him to focus on the logic of signification. As the opening pages of *Leviathan* indicate, this separation of psychology and logic is impossible for Hobbes.

mathematics is Douglas M. Jesseph, *Squaring the Circle: The War between Hobbes and Wallis* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1999).

¹¹ For a reading of Ockham emphasizing this ontology, see Pierre Alféri, *Guillaume d’Ockham: Le Singulier* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1989). Textual references are to: William of Ockham, *Summa Logicae, Opera Philosophica et Theologica* IV (New York: St. Bonaventure) (hereafter **SL**); translation available as Michael J. Loux, *Ockham’s Theory of Terms: Part I of the Summa Logicae* (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1974). I will often depart considerably from Loux’s renderings.

In place of Ockham's "intuition," Hobbes substitutes "representation" and "appearance," which means that the Hobbesian account ultimately depends on his understanding of phenomenality. The second chapter will therefore be on imagination, and in it, Hobbes critiques an amalgam of scholastic views of the imaginative faculty. The "Schooles" teach:

Some saying, that Imaginations rise of themselves, and have no cause: Others that they rise most commonly from the Will; and that Good thoughts are blown (inspired) into a man, by God; and Evill thoughts by the Divell: or that Good thoughts are powred (infused) into a man, by God, and Evill ones by the Divell. Some say the Senses receive the Species of things, and deliver them to the Common-sense; and the Common Sense delivers them over to the Fancy, and the Fancy to the Memory, and the Memory to the Judgment, like handing of things from one to another, with many words making nothing understood (L 2, 19).

Such a caricatured list makes it difficult to say exactly what Hobbes's target is, or whether he has perhaps concocted a description designed to suggest all scholastic theories without differentiation. One target is Suárez, and somewhat later in *Leviathan*, Hobbes attacks Suárez's treatment of divine concurrence, offering an extremely literal rendering of one of Suárez's chapter headings as exemplary of a situation in which "such words, as put together, have in them no signification at all" (L 8,59).¹² One should also note that the argument is politicized from the start. In the paragraph prior to the one on school teachings, Hobbes had directly linked the nominalist critique to political obedience: it "ought to be the work of the

¹² Such tropes were, of course, not unique to Hobbes. Descartes, for example, famously refuses in *Le Monde* to translate the Aristotelian definition of motion: "*Motus est actus entis in potentia, prout in potentia est.* For me these words are so obscure that I am compelled to leave them in Latin because I cannot interpret them" (AT XI, 39; CSM I, 94-95). Montaigne earlier exclaims, "do we witness more of a jumble in the chatters of fishwives than in the public disputations of the professional logicians? I would rather have my son learn to speak in the tavern than in the schools of talk" (*The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1958), III.8, 707). Hence, "it is more of a job to interpret the interpretations than to interpret the things, and there are more books about books than about any subject: we do nothing but write glosses about each other" (III.1, 818). In the context of legal commentaries, Hobbes repeats this complaint almost verbatim: "Commentaries are commonly more subject to cavill, than the Text; and therefore need other Commentaries; and so there will be no end of such Interpretation" (L 26, 193). For complaints from Arnauld and Nicole, Gassendi, and Ramus, as well as an explanation of the

Schooles” to dispel people’s superstitious beliefs in such views; if “this superstitious fear of Spirits were taken away, and with it, Prognostiques from Dreams, false Prophecies, and many other things depending thereon, by which, crafty ambitious persons abuse the simple people, men would be much more fitted than they are for civill Obedience” (L 2, 19). The essentials of a nominalist position are all here, and it is clear that Hobbes will also be deploying the critique in the service of his political philosophy.

Whatever the exact target of Hobbes’s critique, the replacement of intuition with imagination allows him to develop it very differently.¹³ The various elements of Hobbes’s position come together in *De Homine*’s chapter on “speech and knowledge.” There, discussing the difference between animals and humans, he explicitly links imagination and intellect, and the whole complex to language use: “thus other animals also lack intellect. For intellect is in fact imagination, but which arises from the settled signification of words.”¹⁴ In order to understand this passage, it is necessary to underline that it seems directed against Christian developments of Aristotle’s faculty psychology. These psychologies generally separate imagination and intellect as faculties. Imagination is the effect of sense-perception and hence is unstable. Intellect – which is operative in the Ockhamite “intuition” – involves the acknowledgement of and understanding of universals. Since universals don’t change, intellect doesn’t either, except insofar as one might add knowledge to it. The obvious question is how one gets from bodily imagination to intellect. Aristotle is unfortunately not clear on the point:

Aristotelian definition, see Dennis Des Chene, *Physiologia: Natural Philosophy in Late Aristotelian and Cartesian Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996), 25ff.

¹³ In what follows, I depart from Hacking; Hanson; Jean Largeault, *Enquête sur le Nominalisme* (Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1971), 192; and Spragens, 144; who all ascribe some form of intellectual intuition to Hobbes. On these points, I am in substantial agreement with Leijenhorst, 89-97; and Zarka, *Décision*, 83-182 and *Hobbes*, 92-95.

¹⁴ “Itaque caetera animalia etiam intellectu carent. Est enim intellectus imaginatio quidem, sed quae oritur ex verborum significatione constituta” (OL II, 89). This reading is confirmed with reference to *Leviathan*: “The Imagination that is rayseed in man (or any other creature indued with the faculty of imagining) by words, or other

Neither are these habits [*i.e.*, principles of science and of art] present in the soul [from the start] in any determinate way, nor do they come into being from other more known habits. [They arise] from sensation, like a reversal in battle brought about when one man makes a stand, then another, then a third, till a principle is attained; and the soul is of such a nature as to be capable of being affected in this way.¹⁵

One solution is to posit the autonomous existence of universals. According to this sort of account, universals – intelligible forms – had something to do with God, as did the human intellect. It follows that, in some respect, the human intellect is separable from the body. The intellect participates in the realm of universals and in so doing achieves its divine or natural purpose. The problem then becomes how one has knowledge of existing things, since one’s cognition of them *qua* existent arises through sensation but knowledge (of essence) arises through intellect. Insofar as intellect (knowledge of essences) and imagination (images of sensible things) are separate, and to the extent that intellection is non-material, sensibilia become almost irrelevant except as a prompt: it matters that *some* images of red things prompt my knowledge of redness, but it does not matter which ones. In short: intellect trumps imagination.¹⁶

All of this underscores that when Hobbes says that intellect *is* imagination, he is rejecting an entire epistemology. What distinguishes imagination and intellect is not the presence of different faculties in the soul; it is that intellect operates through the “settled signification of words.” Of course, Ockham also rejects aspects of this problematic in that he no longer relies on universals *extra animam* as a ground of intelligibility. However, from this Ockham derives the thought that singular things are intelligible in themselves: intuitive cognition is intellective. In

voluntary signes, is what we generally call *Understanding*” (L 2, 19). In the parallel passage, the Latin text uses “*intellectus*,” the intellectual faculty (OL III, 14).

¹⁵ *Posterior Analytics*, ed. and trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1960), 100a10-15, interpellations in the original.

¹⁶ The preceding is a vulgarization of an exceedingly complex debate. For brief summaries, see John F. Boler, “Intuitive and Abstractive Cognition,” in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretmann, Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), 460-478; and Leijenhorst, 59-60.

other words, like accounts that rely on universals, Ockham's reliance on intuition also subordinates imagination to intellect.¹⁷ Intellect will thus be said to "naturally" signify; as he writes, "a conceptual term is an intention or affect of the soul somehow naturally signifying or consignifying, capable of being part of a mental proposition, and able to supposit for it."¹⁸ Language is added after this, and Ockham emphasizes that "first the concept naturally signifies something and, secondarily, voice signifies the same thing."¹⁹ The primacy accorded to natural signification is also manifest in Ockham's treatment of affect, intention and concept as equivocal terms. The effect is to separate a space for mental concepts, which then can serve as a check on the proliferation of meanings:

A concept or an affect of the soul naturally signifies whatever it signifies; however, a spoken or written term signifies nothing unless by the institution of will. From which follows another difference, namely that a spoken or written term is able to change what it signifies at will, whereas a conceptual term does not change what it signifies through any such [act of] will.²⁰

When Hobbes uses terms like "mental discourse" and "natural" signification, he means something entirely different. The English *Leviathan* is perhaps ambiguous: "by *Consequence*, or TRAYNE of Thoughts, I understand that succession of one Thought to another, which is called (to distinguish it from Discourse in words) *Mentall Discourse*" (L 3, 20). The ambiguity disappears in the Latin edition, which explicitly reduces mental discourse to imagination. As he writes, "by

¹⁷ For further discussion, see Alféri, 74ff. As he puts it, "this intellection is not the result of a process or an operation. It does not even imply the production of a mental sign. It is concomitant with sensible intuition and exactly overlays the object itself. When I perceive a rose, I think it" (87).

¹⁸ "Terminus conceptus est intentio seu passio animae aliquid naturaliter significans vel consignificans, nata esse pars propositionis mentalis, et pro eodem nata supponere" (SL I, 1, 19-21).

¹⁹ "conceptus primo naturaliter significat aliquid et secundario vox significat illud idem" (SL I, 1, 30-31).

²⁰ "Conceptus esu passio animae naturaliter significat quidquid significat, terminus autem prolatus vel scriptus nihil significat nisi secundum voluntariam institutionem. Ex quo sequitur alia differentia, videlicet quod terminus prolatus vel scriptus ad placitum potest mutare suum significatum, terminus autem conceptus non mutat suum significatum ad placitum cuiuscumque" (SL I, 1, 46-52). Ockham is thus commonly taken as developing an account

the series of imagination I understand the succession of one cogitation to another; which, to distinguish it from discourse of words, I call *mental discourse*.”²¹ In *De Corpore*, he suggests that language arises from the need to remember sense perceptions and stabilize cognitions from their natural “in flux and perishable [*fluxae et caducae*, Dco I.2.1; OL I, 11]” state. For this purpose, knowledge needs to acquire “some sensibilia as little monuments [*monimenta aliqua sensibilia, ibid.*].” These “marks [*notae*]” are “sensible things added by our will, such that, by the sense of them, they are able to recall in the mind things similar to those thought, for the sake of which they are added.”²² A “natural sign” for Hobbes, then, arises from the habit of conjoining sensibilia to one another. In this way, natural signs reduce to conventional signs insofar as both are habituated. The difference is that a natural sign *qua* material signifier is similar in some way to the image signified, whereas conventional signs are the result of the imposition of will and carry no (or at most contingent) similarity to the images they signify. The relation between signifier and signified is thus arbitrary in the precise sense that it is instituted artificially, and not by nature. As I will indicate, what emerges is thus a problem of how to reduce the impact of this arbitrariness by getting people to use the same system of signification.

Hobbes applies the point to accidents as well: accidents are what we perceive – indeed, apparition is “*alicujus qualitas vel accidentis in corpore externo*” (OL III, 5) – and on that basis, we infer the existence of objects in which such accidents inhere. None of this implies that the qualities in question are *real*: “there is in the object itself nothing more than the motion of matter,

of what we would now call an “ideal language.” The *locus classicus* of this reading is John Trentman, “Ockham on Mental,” *Mind* 79 (1970), 586-90.

²¹ “Per seriem imaginationum intelligo successionem unius cogitationis ad aliam; quam, ut distinguatur a discursu verborum, appello *discursum mentalem*” (OL III, 14).

²² “Notas; nimirum res sensibiles arbitrio nostro adhibitae, ut illarum sensu cogitationes in animum revocari possunt similes iis cogitationibus, quarum gratia sunt adhibitae” (Dco I.2.1, OL I, 12).

by means of which the object works on the sense organs in various ways.”²³ Hence, when I imagine “white,” I imagine a white thing, which serves as a mark for another white thing, based on the resemblance of the respective imaginings. There are of course indefinitely many properties in any object which I could pick out; that we focus on color is the function of habit and convention.²⁴ Accidents are singular, and become common by convention. Hence, “*white* is therefore the name of a body subsisting *per se*, not of a color.”²⁵ In consequence, “Aristotle errs, in that he did not distinguish between separate things and the separate considerations of a thing.”²⁶

Hobbes’s account is thoroughly deflationary, and Ockham’s intellective “*notitia*” becomes the graphic and material “*nota*.” Since all knowledge is affective and bodily, no extramental universal could possibly be relevant to it, and since signification will be explained with reference to imagination, such universals will also be unnecessary. Further, whereas Ockham will cryptically claim that the intuition arises “at once [*statim*],” thereby inviting (or at least not obviously precluding) accounts that rely on intelligible species as an explanation of how

²³ “Sunt in ipso objecto nihil aliud praeter materiae motum, quo objectum in organa sensuum diversimode operatus” (OL III, 6). I take this passage as evidence that Watkins is mistaken when he claims that Hobbes’s nominalism is inconsistent in that “he sometimes allowed that a common name may stand for something which is *not* individual and singular – for a characteristic property or (as he called it) an *accident* which may be shared by many individual things” (144; emphases in original). The most that one might say is that *similar* motion is shared – but that is a far cry from any sort of real accidents. For a recent article emphasizing the centrality of accidents to perception in Hobbes, see G. K. Callaghan, “Nominalism, Abstraction, and Generality in Hobbes,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 18 (2001), 37-55. Cf. EL II.10: “whatsoever accidents or qualities our senses make us think there be in the world, they are not there, but are seemings and apparitions only. The things that really are in the world without us, are those motions by which these seemings are caused. And this is the great deception of sense.”

²⁴ *Strictu sensu*, it is a function of forgetting: the dilution of a sense impression, which occurs because we turn our attention to new impressions, is memory. It is this dilution that causes me to retain some attributes and not others.

²⁵ “*Album igitur corporis per se subsistentis, non coloris*” (OL III, 528). He refers to the medieval “suppositum” on the following page as he applies this theory to the Trinity.

²⁶ “Et per consequence errare Aristotelem, eo quod no distinxerit inter separatas res, et separatas ejusdem rei considerations” (OL III, 531). Hobbes’s insistence on homogeneity in his mathematical writings also indirectly suggests the view of accidents I am attributing to him: a discursive matrix presupposes agreement on which set of real properties *are to be taken* as relevant in communication and counting. In counting red things, they are all different, both in the nature of their redness and having indefinitely many other real properties, *but* those differences do not matter. That nonetheless there is some (arbitrary) relation between the discursive field and the objects in

the signification in intellect is “natural,” Hobbes provides a physicalistic account of the emergence of *notae* in the imagination.²⁷ This is the central issue: because, for Ockham, intellect is separate from imagination, he is able to separate a discussion of signification from one of perception. Having collapsed intellect into imagination, Hobbes has to speak of both signification and perception at once. Hence, for Ockham, words are instituted at will but checked by natural signification and mental discourse, whereas Hobbes says that signification is entirely a matter of will and of the addition of a mnemonic object to the imagination.²⁸ The mark is not a concept, as its materiality in the imagination suggests. In other words, thinking in this sense *is* linguistic; language is not something added later, “*understanding* being nothing else, but conception caused by Speech” (L 4, 30).

2. Hobbes Contra Descartes

That Hobbes is targeting even the last vestiges of the intellect as a separate, non-imaginative, non-linguistic (“intuitive”) faculty is also evident in his response to Descartes’ *Meditations*. From a Hobbesian point of view, Descartes appears as a traditional Ockhamite, unable to justify the invocation of a separate *intellectus*. To the *res cogitans*, Hobbes responds:

Correct . . . But when he [Descartes] adds ‘that is, mind, soul, intellect, reason,’ doubt arises. For it does not seem to be correct argumentation to say: ‘I am thinking,’ therefore ‘I am thought’ or ‘I am understanding,’ therefore ‘I am

question is why propositions about them (= natural science) are contingently true. The absence of real moral properties is why propositions about them can be necessarily true.

²⁷ For a discussion of Hobbes’s rejection of intelligible species, emphasizing how his account of the origination of perception differs from the medievals, see Richard A. Lee, “The Play of Force versus the Reduction of Force: Hobbes and Roger Bacon on Perception,” *Hobbes Studies* 13 (2000), 34-45; and Leijenhorst, 56-100.

²⁸ A possible source for this position would be the Lullist guides to memory technique, which relied on “commonplaces:” imagined locations (*e.g.*, rooms in a house) which were to associatively bring to mind whatever one was to remember. Hobbes would thus be taking the *de facto* position that all memory is, in this sense, “artificial.” For the memory manuals, see Paolo Rossi, *Logic and the Art of Memory: The Quest for a Universal Language*, trans. Stephen Clucas (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2000).

intellection.’ For in the same way we would be able to say: ‘I am perambulating,’ therefore ‘I am perambulation.’ Descartes assumes that being a thinking thing, and intellection, which is the act of thinking, are the same; or at least that being a thinking thing is the same as intellect, which is the capacity for thinking.²⁹

In other words, Descartes is accused of reifying the act of intellection. Whether this charge is just is less important than the direction which Hobbes takes it. From the thought that we cannot conceive of an act without a subject, he suggests that “it seems to follow ... that a thinking thing is something corporeal; for the subject of any act can be understood only in terms of something corporeal or in terms of matter” (CSM II, 122; AT VII, 172). The argument is against the proliferation of substances or essences: either we reduce substance to body and essence to signification, or we end up naming as a substantial form the grammatical subject of every possible act. Against scholasticism, Hobbes was explicit: “once fallen into this Error of *Separated Essences*, they are thereby necessarily involved in many other absurdities that follow it” (L 46, 466), adding “one Inconvenience into another, without end, and without number” (L 46, 467).

The depth of the disagreement between Hobbes and Descartes emerges in Hobbes’s fourth objection, where he suggests that thinking “is nothing other than the coupling and concatenation of names or appellations by this word ‘is,’” and that therefore “we gather by reason absolutely nothing about the nature of things, but about the names of them.”³⁰ As he puts the point in *Leviathan*, reason “is nothing but *Reckoning* (that is, Adding and Subtracting) of the

²⁹ “Recte Sed ubi subjungit, *hoc est, mens, animus, intellectus, ratio*, oritur dubitatio. Non enim videtur recta argumentatio, dicere: *ego sum cogitans, ergo sum cogitatio*; neque *ego sum intelligens, ergo sum intellectus*. Nam eodem modo possem dicere: *sum ambulans, ergo sum ambulatio*. Sumit ergo D. Cartesius idem esse rem intelligentem, & intellectionem, quae est actus intelligentis; vel saltem idem esse rem intelligentem, & intellectum, qui est potentia intelligentis” (AT VII, 172; CSM II, 122; I have revised the translation along the lines suggested in McDonald Ross, *infra*, 223). On this exchange, see Zarka, *Décision, passim*; George MacDonald Ross, “Hobbes and Descartes on the Relation between Language and Consciousness,” *Synthese* 75 (1988), 217-229; and Dennis L. Sepper, “Imagination, Phantasms, and the Making of Hobbesian and Cartesian Science,” *Monist* 71 (1988), 526-42.

³⁰ AT VII, 178; CSM II, 125-6; see note 1 for full text and translation.

Consequences of generall names agreed upon, for the *marking* and *signifying* of our thoughts” (L 5, 32). Descartes treats the opposite point of view as self-evident, and responds curtly that “as for the linking together that occurs when we reason, this is not a linking of names but of the things that are signified by the names, and I am surprised that the opposite view should occur to anyone” (CSM II, 126; AT VII, 178).

The point to notice is that both Hobbes and Descartes treat the issue of whether language refers fundamentally to itself or to objects in the world as tied to the question of whether intellect can reduce to body and imagination. This point is confirmed in the fifth objection, when Hobbes denies that we can have an idea of God on the grounds that we can have no image of God. Descartes responds that “my critic wants the term ‘idea’ to be taken to refer simply to the images of material things which are depicted in the corporeal imagination.” He adds that “I am taking the word ‘idea’ to refer to whatever is immediately perceived by the mind [*immediate a mente percipitur*]” (CSM II, 127; AT VII, 181). The Cartesian position should recall Ockham’s reliance on the immediacy and self-evidence of intuition; Descartes defends himself as using “the standard philosophical term used to refer to the forms of perception belonging to the divine mind, even though we recognize that God does not possess any corporeal imagination” (*ibid.*). In other words, the separability of mind is undertaken in the service of theology as the guarantor of science, and Hobbes’s effort is to account for thinking without reliance on the stabilizing apparatus of the divine mind. Hence he will simultaneously have to develop a theology based on the unknowability of God,³¹ and an account of reason that can explain how a thinking consisting of nothing but phantasms can be sufficiently stable.

³¹ Either that, or he is moved to atheism. Now is not the place to rehearse this interpretive debate. I am inclined to take Hobbes’s religious pronouncements as sincere: see my “Against this *Empusa*: Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and the *Book of Job*,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 10 (2002), 3-29. For the interpretive debate, see A. P. Martinich, “Interpretation and Hobbes’s Political Philosophy,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 82 (2001), 309-331

Hobbes repeatedly emphasizes the absence of natural meaning. In *De Corpore*, he notes that “it is to be supposed that names arose by human will” because “new words are daily born, old ones abolished, [and] diverse words are in use by diverse peoples.” This fact precludes any natural signification or resemblance, and he asks rhetorically: “finally, who sees that there is any similarity between words and things, or is able to institute a comparison between them, or is able to conclude in his mind that the names themselves represented the very natures of the things themselves?”³² As indicated above, and unlike medievals such as Ockham, for whom political philosophy began with the fall, the important Biblical referent for Hobbes is the tower of Babel.³³ The passage above in *De Corpore* immediately refers to Babel, a reference repeated in *Leviathan*: “all this language gotten, and augmented by *Adam* and his posterity, was again lost at the tower of *Babel*, when by the hand of God, every man was stricken for his rebellion, with an oblivion of his former language” (L 4, 25). In other words, at the creation, something like Adamite naming perhaps guaranteed a linguistic realism, but after the tower of Babel, language is nominalistic.

How to settle the meaning of words, then? One way is through definitions, and this is why almost all of Hobbes’s theoretical texts begin with an extensive catalog of definitions. As he

(defending Hobbesian theism); and Edwin Curley, “Calvin and Hobbes, or, Hobbes as an Orthodox Christian” *JHP* 34 (1996) (defending Hobbesian atheism).

³² “Quod autem nomina ab arbitrio hominum orta esse supposuerim Qui verba quotidie nova nasci, vetera aboleri, diversa siversis gentibus in usu esse, denique qui inter res et verba neque similitudinem esse neque comparationem ullam institui posse videt, in animum venire potest naturas rerum sibimet ipsis nomina sua praebuisse” (Dco I.2.4; OL I, 14). Three obvious targets of these remarks are: scholastic realism, the belief in the semantic anchoring function of Biblical Hebrew, and the belief in some sort of Cabalistic or Lullist ordering schema behind language. All were prevalent in the seventeenth century. For Biblical Hebrew, see Karl A. Kottman, “Fray Luis de León and the Universality of Hebrew: An Aspect of 16th and 17th Century Language Theory,” *JHP* 13 (1975), 297-310. For the Lullism, see Rossi, *Logic*. Hanson suggests: “thoroughgoing conventionalism ... pulls the linchpin of the magical world of the renaissance” (631; see 642ff for political implications). As the following will indicate, while I am generally sympathetic to Hanson’s account, I do not think that Hobbes “assumes that there is a kind of original innocence” of signification (645-6). Rather, the state of nature allows political science to produce such innocence by fiat.

³³ See, for example, William of Ockham, *A Short Discourse on the Tyrannical Government*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade, trans. John Kilcullen (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), III.7.

explains, “in the right Definition of Names, lyes the first use of Speech; which is the Acquisition of Science: And in wrong, or no Definitions, lyes the first abuse; from which proceed all false and senslesse Tenents” (L 4, 28). He adds that there are four basic things which can be named, and thus four “generall” types of names: of matter or body; of accident or quality; of sensation; and when “we bring into account, consider, and give names, to *Names* themselves, and to *Speeches*: For, *generall*, *universall*, *speciall*, *aequivocall*, are names of Names” (L 4, 29-30). In sum:

This is all the variety of Names *Positive*; which are put to mark somewhat which is in Nature, or may be feigned by the mind of man, as Bodies that are, or may be conceived to be; or of bodies, the Properties that are, or may be feigned to be, or Words and Speech (L 4, 30).

After explaining that negatives “are notes to signifie that a word is not the name of the thing in question” (L 4, 30), Hobbes concludes that “all other Names, are but insignificant sounds; and those of two sorts.” The first is “when they are new, and yet their meaning not explained by Definition,” a common practice in the texts of “Schoolemen.” The second is when names with contradictory significations are affirmed at once, as a “round quadrangle” or the like. None of this implies any ontology or necessary structure of meaning. Rather, it implies just what Hobbes says it does, that “the manner how Speech serveth to the remembrance of the consequences of causes and effects, consisteth in the imposing of *Names*, and the *Connexion* of them” (L 4, 26). Cogitation occurs through signification, and signification is an act of imposition.

3. *Scientia civilis more definitionis*

Consideration of Hobbes’s account of signification helps us to understand why his political philosophy takes the form it does, and why it provoked such dismissive astonishment

among his readers. Examples could be multiplied; to Descartes, I want here to add two deliberately diverse instances. First, one of Hobbes's early English critics, John Eachard, "did presume ... to think his [Hobbes's] writings so fond and extravagant, as not to merit being opposed in good earnest."³⁴ Among his targets is the Hobbesian account of language, and he complains that if one reads Hobbes's "Logick," one will "find a whole *Book* full of nothing but *new words*" (18). Second, in the Port Royal *Logic*, Arnauld and Nicole take considerable pains to deny Hobbes's response to Descartes. Ultimately, they reiterate Descartes' essential claim, that reason is a "solid and practical judgment about the nature of things by considering ideas in the mind that people chose to mark by certain names." Their support of this conclusion also echoes Descartes: in addition to arguing on the basis of actual linguistic diversity, they claim that were there no ideas, the conventions on which agreement in language is based would be impossible, as there would be nothing on which they could be established, "just as it is impossible to make blind people understand what the words 'red,' 'green,' and 'blue' mean by any convention because, lacking these ideas altogether, they cannot connect them to any sounds."³⁵ From a Hobbesian point of view, this complaint misses the mark: since, for Hobbes, intellect reduces to imagination, the point is not that we will have no antecedent ideas; it is that these ideas are contingently similar products of the imagination. What we need is a replacement for the stabilizing universality of the intellectual faculty. Hobbes thus prioritizes definition in what Eachard correctly suspects involves the creation of numerous "new words."

Hobbes's account of political philosophy will thus substantially break both with any sense of a final causality derived from nature, and with efforts to derive principles from custom

³⁴ John Eachard, *Mr. Hobbs's State of Nature Considered, In a Dialogue between Philautus and Timothy*, ed. Peter Ure (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1958).

³⁵ Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, trans. Jill Vance Buroker (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), I.1

or convention. Instead, he will begin with definitions, which will serve to anchor the branch of *scientia* concerned with the “consequences from the Accidents of *Politique* Bodies” (L 9, 61 (chart)). The chapter on discourse had already declared that the scope of science, even correctly practiced by someone who begins with definitions is “conditionall Knowledge” (absolute knowledge is impossible; failure to define one’s terms properly results in “opinion,” L 7, 47-8). To know conditionally (as he had already said to Descartes) is “not the consequence of one thing to another; but of one name of a thing, to another name of the same thing” (L 7, 47). “Conditional” thus has the sense of connected propositions; whether the knowledge achieves more than formal validity is a function of the definitions. Since we are the objects of our own political philosophy, the discipline carries both the chance to achieve certainty, and the greatest risk of failure through badly constructed definitions:

Of arts, some are demonstrable, others indemonstrable; and demonstrable are those the construction of the subject whereof is in the power of the artist himself, who, in his demonstration, does no more but deduce the consequences of his own operation. The reason whereof is this, that the science of every subject is derived from a precognition of the causes, generation, and construction of the same- and consequently where the causes are known, there is place for demonstration, but not where the causes are to seek for. Geometry therefore is demonstrable, for the lines and figures from which we reason are drawn and described by ourselves; and civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth ourselves. But because of natural bodies we know not the construction, but seek it from the effects, there lies no demonstration of what the causes be we seek for, but only of what they may be (EW VII, 184).

Hobbes’s methodological point is thus that political philosophy needs to begin with careful consideration of its own terms, and the first things to avoid are therefore historically existing but speciously derived accounts of the ends of politics. For example, when he arrives at the chapter in *Leviathan* “on the difference of Manners,” which contains the text’s first presentation of “a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power,” Hobbes makes it clear that “the Felicity of

this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers” (L 11, 70).³⁶

Hobbes will thus reformulate the *scientia* of living well. Living at all involves the use of language as an expression of human desire, and living well therefore involves using language well. Indeed, language is the *sine qua non* both of politics and living well. Speech is “the most noble and profitable invention” of distant antiquity, “without which, there had been amongst men, neither Common-wealth, nor Society, nor Contract, nor Peace, no more than amongst Lyons, Bears, and Wolves” (L 4, 24). Hence, where *De Cive* claims that people are both gods and wolves to each other, *Leviathan* makes it clear that language is the variable that determines which they will be. Since Hobbes thinks that metaphysical entities and separate faculties are nonsense, and since people express their desires through language, politics is about regulation of desire, and not the imitation of universals. Indeed, to imagine people without imaginations and desires – and hence, language – is impossible. As he suggests, “nor can any man more live, whose Desires are at an end, than he, whose Senses and Imaginations are at a stand” (L 11, 70). Language, desire and politics all indicate the same set of issues for Hobbes; the effort to separate them involves one in the metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties of fetishized concepts.

One may illustrate the far-reaching consequences of Hobbes’s position with reference to one of its corollaries, namely that, for him, “good” and “evil” (and other moral words) have no non-political referents. As noted above, this view emerges in the debate with Bramhall, where he rejects on theological grounds the possibility of measuring divine justice by the human concept. It is also evident in his complaint against the Calvinists having “privately” defined good and evil.

³⁶ The Latin text tempers somewhat what might sound like an atheistic implication of this denial: “for *finis ultimus* and *summum bonum*, of which ancient ethicists speak, have no place in the present life [Finis enim ultimus et

In *De Cive*, after citing “certain Theologians in our own day” who believe that “tyrannicide is licit,” he asks:

If he holds power rightly, the divine question applies: *who told you that he was a Tyrant, unless you have eaten of the tree of which I told you not to eat?* For why do you call him a *Tyrant* whom God made a *King*, unless you, a private person, are claiming for yourself a knowledge of *good* and *evil* (DC XII.3)?

Since the Calvinist argument is, as Beza put it, that a tyrant would be “entirely manifest [*toute manifeste*]” as a matter of knowledge or perhaps by an evident intuition, the point is not just to pit a public understanding of tyranny against a personal one.³⁷ Rather, it is to indict private judgment in matters of public concern. For Hobbes, such declarations that one has “seen the light” are both dangerous and false. They are dangerous because they license any false prophet to try to overthrow the kingdom on specious religious grounds, and they are false because there is no possibility that the judgment “tyrannical” or “evil” refers to anything outside the public space of language. In other words, the word only has meaning in a public space, and since there is no extra-political standard of meaning against which to judge it, the right to define falls to the sovereign. This, of course, gives Hobbes the argument he needs: no intelligent sovereign would define himself as tyrannical, and so the judgment that a sovereign is tyrannical is always treasonous, and no appeal to an outside authority is possible.

Hobbes is absolutely clear that this is to be a general point. He writes in *Leviathan*:

Whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill*; And of his Contempt, *Vile* and *Inconsiderable*. For these words of Good, Evill, and

summum bonum, de quibus loquuntur ethici veteres, locum in praesente vita nullum habent]” (OL III, 77).

³⁷ See Théodore de Bèze, *Du Droit des Magistrats sur leurs Sujets*, intro. and ed. Robert M. Kingdon (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1970). I argue that Hobbes’s titular reference to *Job* in *Leviathan* is designed to make the same point in my “‘Against this Empusa.’”

Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of Good and Evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the Person of the man (where there is no Common-wealth;) or, (in a Commonwealth,) from the Person that representeth it; or from an Arbitrator or Judge, whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up, and make his sentence the Rule thereof (L 6, 39).

Hence, “the notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have ... no place” in the state of nature; rather, “where there is no common Power, there is no Law: where no Law, no Injustice ... Justice, and Injustice are none of the Faculties neither of the Body, nor Mind” (L 13, 90).

This was merely an elaboration of the position he had taken as early as 1640, where, in *Elements of Law*, he declared that “the question, which is the better man, is determinable only in the estate of government and policy, though it be mistaken for a question of nature” (EL 17.1). In short: moral words are political words, and are meaningless outside of politics.³⁸

Hobbes’s understanding of signification is thus an integral part of his thought as a whole. From the empiricist dictum that all of our thoughts originate in sense impressions, he draws the further conclusion that this point applies to the thoughts we use to mark and communicate our other thoughts, *i.e.*, to language. In other words, there is no need to posit an intellectual faculty to understand human use of language. Like other early moderns, he further rejects the idea that the impressions in our own minds have any necessary relation of resemblance to objects in the world. The combination of these views marks a sharp break with scholastic nominalism. Evidence of this break is found at the level of Hobbes’s constant attention to rhetoric and political speech. The absence of a stabilizing intellectual faculty – the reduction of intellection to imagination – makes it impossible for him to create a space for thought which is independent of the affects and the socio-political processes which move them. The primary task of political philosophy shifts from a derivation of terms from extra-political sources to the erection of a

sovereign apparatus which itself performs this regulatory function. All of that said, Hobbes's debt to the nominalist tradition is nonetheless considerable. His rejection of separated essences; his focus on what one might call the "grammatical" aspects of thought, the correct adding and subtracting of consequences; and his application of these points to claims about divinely ordained power all originate in writers like William of Ockham. In this sense, and also like other early moderns, Hobbes's relation to his predecessors is far more complicated than he himself would allow. Attention to this contextual complexity is important, both as a matter of "getting Hobbes right" and for the light it casts on the historical development and transmission of philosophical concepts.

³⁸ On this point, see also Watkins, 138, 150-57; and Zarka, *Décision, passim*, and *Hobbes*, especially 65-126.