

There has been a growing tendency to take Hobbes's religious professions at their face value, while dismissing allegedly esoteric statements of irreligion.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I shall oppose this tendency on a small scale by arguing for an exoteric/esoteric reading of a key passage in Hobbes's *Answer to Bramhall*. If accepted, my reading throws light not only on Hobbes's attitude to atheism but also on one of his lost works, namely, the essay on Daniel Scargill's 1669 *Recantation*.

Hobbes felt obliged to answer Bramhall's atheistic accusations "because [as he says] the words *Atheism*, *Impiety* and the like, are words of the greatest defamation possible".<sup>2</sup> His discussion concerns two kinds of atheism: speculative atheism, and at least one sort of non-speculative atheism – namely, where a "man that thinks there is a God, dares deliberately deny it". It is this 'malicious' atheism that Hobbes definitely rejects. His reason is: "... upon what confidence dares any man, deliberately I say, oppose the Omnipotent?" (p. 15).

Did Hobbes also deny, as many of his contemporaries did, the existence of speculative atheism?<sup>3</sup> I do not think so; for he allows that some persons do reason, or misreason, themselves into atheism. He says that atheism "proceedeth from opinion of reason without fear". He also asks: "is not Atheism Boldness grounded on false reasoning, such as is this, *the wicked prosper, therefore there is no God*?" (p. 13). Hobbes's formula is that "Atheism is a sin of ignorance": "denying God is a sin of ignorance proceeding from misreasoning". But the difficulty comes in the following crucial passage, which follows immediately upon Hobbes's denial of 'malicious' atheism:

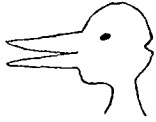
*David saith of himself, My feet were ready to slip when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Therefore it is likely the feet of men less holy slip oftener. But I think no man living is so daring, being out of passion, as to hold it as his opinion. Those wicked men that for a long time proceeded so successfully in the late horrid Rebellion, may perhaps make some think they were constant and resolved Atheists, but I think rather that they forgot God, than*

*believed there was none. He that believes there is such an Atheist, comes a little too near that opinion himself. Nevertheless, if words spoken in passion signifie a denial of God, no punishment preordained by Law, can be too great for such an insolence; because there is no living in a Commonwealth with men, to whose oaths we cannot reasonably give credit.* (p. 15)

This passage contains not a few ambiguities. The most striking instances are in the fourth sentence, where there are three pronouns: 'some' and 'they' (used twice) – which I have here italicized. Now on one reading, the two 'they's could refer to "those wicked men", the Puritan fanatics; thus the sustained and successful wickedness of the Puritans made some people think that the Puritans were "constant and resolved atheists". This is the most plausible interpretation if we read the sentence as a single unit. The interpretation is also helped by the balance between the wickedness lasting a "long time" and the atheism being "constant and resolved".

But that is not the only possible interpretation: for the pronouns might refer not to the Puritans, but to the Royalists who became, or thought they had become, atheists by observing the sustained success of the wicked Puritans. This interpretation is enforced by the first two sentences quoted above: it was his seeing the prosperity of the wicked that momentarily inclined King David to atheism; hence, says Hobbes, the same thing is likely to occur even more often to those – the Royalists – less holy than David. But which of the two interpretations should we prefer? Neither interpretation perfectly fits the text. For why – to take the first – should the wicked and successful Puritans make some think that the Puritans were "constant and resolved atheists"? Yet why – to consider the alternative interpretation – should the wicked and successful Puritans make some Royalists *now* think that they themselves were "constant and resolved atheists"? The first interpretation transforms the crucial sentence into a *non sequitur*; the second interpretation is at odds with its tense. In short, the two interpretations

are equally plausible or implausible. We are presented with something like the well-known duck/rabbit: depending on how one looks at the figure, one may see either a duck or a rabbit:



Our perplexity is not alleviated by the context. Indeed Hobbes's next sentence only aggravates it. For leaving aside the question of whether he is referring to malicious or speculative atheism, we must enquire what he could mean by saying that he who believes there are constant and resolved atheists comes very close to such atheism himself. And what are we to make of the strongly worded condemnation of atheism?

These ambiguities would be puzzling in nearly any writer, but they are particularly so in Hobbes. For as one commentator has noted: his "style seems to be the very perfection of didactic language. Short, clear, precise, pithy, *his language never has more than one meaning*, which never requires a second thought to find".<sup>4</sup> I believe that our striking ambiguities are explicable if they are put in the context of Daniel Scargill's sensational *Recantation publicly made before the University of Cambridge... 25 July 1669* (Cambridge, 1669). Here Scargill confesses that he has "lately vented and publicly asserted in the said University [of Cambridge], divers, wicked, blasphemous and Atheistic positions... (p. 1); he says that he has found "by the grace of that God whom I had deny'd, that they [the so-called five 'positions'] are... of dangerous and malicious consequence, inconsistent with the Being of God..." (p. 2). One of these positions is "That there is a desirable glory in being, and being reputed, an Atheist; which I implied when I expressly affirmed that I gloried to be an *Hobbist* and an Atheist" (p. 4). Scargill speaks of

the accursed Atheism of this age, acknowledging myself to be highly guilty of the growth and spreading thereof... I do profess [he goes on to say]... that the openly professed atheism of some, and the secret atheism of others, is the accursed root of all the abounding wickedness... in the present age (p. 4).

When Hobbes mentions those who mistakenly thought they were constant and resolved atheists, he is alluding, I believe, to Scargill and those like him. He is

saying something like this: You may think (or may have thought), that you were atheists; but you are mistaken. You were either temporarily misled by some passion or forgot God amidst the wickedness of the Puritan regime. Your atheism was not based on my philosophy. And if you, or those who are encouraging you, say that there is such a thing as constant and resolved atheism – and that I hold such a position – then beware! Hobbes might then say (what he is supposed to have said when someone asked him his opinion of Spinoza's *Tractatus*) "Judge not that ye be not judged!"<sup>5</sup>

In the crucial passage Hobbes is trying not only to protect himself against the accusation that he is an atheist and a spreader of atheism; he is also trying to discourage avowed atheism. His denial points to the existence of atheists. He is against anyone "so daring... as to hold it as his opinion"; he is even opposed to the verbal "denial of God". Scargill, as we have seen, makes much of his two-fold profession: his having "expressly affirmed that I gloried to be an *Hobbist* and an Atheist". Hence, according to my interpretation, Hobbes is saying to Scargill *et al*: (1) you are really not full-blooded atheists; (2) your atheism, such as it is, or was, can be excused on account of the bad effects of the late horrid rebellion; (3) you really only forgot God. This is the kindly part of his message. He then begins to threaten: (4) if you accuse me of atheism, or claim that atheism is feasible, beware! for that indicates that *you* may indeed be full-blooded atheists. (5) But if anyone had denied God – as you Daniel Scargill have apparently done – then 'no punishment preordained by law can be too great for such an insolence'.

Hobbes's justification for this severity – that "there is no living in a commonwealth with men, to whose oaths we cannot reasonably give credit" – is not altogether consistent with his position on oaths in *De Corpore Politico*; for in pt. 1, chap. 2, sect. 17 he maintains that an oath does not oblige any more than a covenant, and that a covenant is sanctioned naturally and not supernaturally. An oath he writes, "addeth not a greater Obligation to perform the Covenant sworn, than the Covenant carrieth in itself, but it putteth a Man into greater Danger, and of greater Punishment [i.e. from God]".<sup>6</sup> Thus Hobbes is exaggerating when he says, in the *Answer to Bramhall*, that there is "no living in a commonwealth" with someone who can not swear oaths; and such exaggeration con-

firms my construing his words as a threat.

Two bits of external evidence should be mentioned. One bit goes against, the other supports, my interpretation. Against it is the date generally assigned by scholars to Hobbes's *Answer to Bramhall*. He is supposed to have written it in 1668.<sup>7</sup> For in the preface 'To the Reader', Hobbes mentions that Bramhall's *The Catching of Leviathan* (London, 1658), to which he is replying, was published "ten years since"; whereas Scargill's *Recantation* took place on 25 July 1669. In favour of my interpretation is the fact that Hobbes wrote an essay concerning Scargill's *Recantation*. Hobbes, according to Aubrey, gave this work to Sir John Birkenhead "to be licensed, which he refused to do (to ... flatter the bishops), and would not return it nor give a copie. Mr. Hobbes kept no copie, for which he was sorry. He told me he liked it well himself."<sup>8</sup> Considering the weight of evidence for my interpretation, I think the chronological difficulty can be overcome. These suggestions seem plausible: (1) that Hobbes wrote the *Answer* in late 1669; (ten years, after all, is a round number); (2) that he revised it in 1669 – or later – and inserted the passage I have quoted; (3) that he knew about the Scargill affair in 1668 or earlier, and wrote with the intention of preventing a scandal.

However the problem of dating is to be resolved, it should not be allowed to obscure the import of Hobbes's *double entendre*. The first, exoteric, message was: there are no malicious atheists; some may think the Puritan fanatics were constant and resolved (malicious) atheists, but this is unlikely. The second, esoteric, message was addressed to Scargill, Scargill's old atheistic associates, and his new orthodox acquaintances who were encouraging him to denounce Hobbesian atheism. This message pointed to what Hobbes considered the real cause of Scargill's mild (and excusable) atheism: the prosperity of the wicked Puritans.<sup>9</sup> As with the duck/rabbit, we can see one thing or the other. Having failed to publish his open defence (against Scargill's *Recantation*), Hobbes attempted to slip a more subtle message into print. If I am right, in this esoteric message we have the main points of Hobbes's lost apologia.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For recent examples, see Peter Geach, 'The religion of Thomas Hobbes', *Religious Studies* 17 (1981), esp. p. 552, and W. Von Leyden, *Hobbes and Locke* (London, 1982); according to Von Leyden: "Neither can there be any doubt that he himself was not an atheist, or even an insincere theist". (p. 70).

<sup>2</sup> The *Answer* was published posthumously in *Tracts of... Hobbes... containing I. Behemoth... II. An Answer to Arch-Bishop Bramhall's book, called the Catching of the Leviathan...* (London, 1682); 'To the reader'.

<sup>3</sup> See my 'Repressive denials of the existence of atheism in the 17th and 18th centuries', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 82 (1982), 211–245 and 'David Hume and the Suppression of "Atheism"', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* xxi (1983), 375–387.

<sup>4</sup> Sir James Mackintosh, *On the Progress of Ethical Philosophy* (4th ed. Edinburgh, 1872) p. 58; my italics.

<sup>5</sup> The story is reported by Aubrey: "When Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* first came out (1670), Mr Edmund Waller sent it to my Lord Devonshire and desired him to send him word what Mr. Hobbes said of it. Mr. H. told his lordship: – *Ne judicate ne judicemini*"; *Brief Lives*, edited by Andrew Clark (Oxford, 1898), Vol. 1, p. 357. Hobbes's reply may itself contain a double meaning; for it was said at the time that Spinoza had taken some of his ideas from Hobbes.

<sup>6</sup> *Hobbes's Tripos in Three Discourses* (London, 1684), pp. 112–3.

<sup>7</sup> G. M. Robertson, in his *Hobbes* (Edinburgh, 1886), says that the *Answer* "can be definitely referred to the year 1668" (p. 197).

<sup>8</sup> John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, Vol. 1, pp. 360–1; see also S. I. Mintz, *Hunting of the Leviathan* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 152.

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting that Hobbes's own (alleged) atheism was accounted for in a similar way in a note in D'Holbach's *System of Nature*: "... the horrors produced in England by fanaticism, which cost Charles I his head, pushed Hobbes on to atheism..."; (H. D. Robinson translation, 1868, p. 314, Vol. 2, note to Chapter 10).

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Dr Timothy Williamson for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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