NOMINALISM AND CONCEPTUALISM IN

HOBBES'S POLITICAL THEORY

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Hobbes developed two theories of language, each with peculiar implications for his views on reason and truth, and each applied throughout his political philosophy. As a nominalist, Hobbes argues that individuals subsume particular things under general names by an act of will. Nominalism supports his view of the moral anarchy of the state of nature, and helps justify an arbitrary sovereign. Conceptualism allows Hobbes to picture the sovereign as a rational rule-creator and his subjects as rule-followers. Either theory, however, taken alone, contradicts important parts of Hobbes's political project. The contradictions between the two theories result from difficulties inherent in the attempt to reconcile reason and passion in politics.

Hannah Arendt once remarked that flagrant and fundamental contradictions, while rare in the works of second-rate writers, lead into the very center of the work of "the great authors" (Arendt, 1959, p. 90). By this standard, Thomas Hobbes was very great indeed. The routes into the center of his work are numerous. He contradicted himself, some interpreters charge, when he tried to combine a value-free science with a prescriptive theory of political right (Strauss, 1936, p. ix; 1934, p. 235). Others notice contradictions in his theory of obligation. Hobbes describes the state of nature as a condition in which men have no moral obligations (Raphael, 1962, p. 347). Nonetheless, Hobbes seems to presuppose that men are obligated to obey laws of nature which are in fact commands of God (Warrender, 1957, pp. 101-102). Yet another "flagrant contradiction" arises in his metaphysics of language, and it is on this that I propose to focus in this article.

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Hobbes tries to hold simultaneously two incompatible theories of the relationship between speech and reality. As a nominalist, he believes that only particular things exist. General, collective entities like "mankind" or "church" are only verbal representations of individual entities that people have grouped together arbitrarily. Nothing objective justifies the inclusion or exclusion of any given particulars in a general category. As a conceptualist, he acknowledges that generality is inherent in experience; observed resemblance relations among individual objects give rise to general mental entities called concepts. Those objective relations and their concomitant concepts justify grouping certain particulars in certain categories.[1]

I make two arguments with regard to Hobbes's metaphysics of language. First, I demonstrate that those two contrary tendencies are irreducibly present in his remarks on speech. Interpretations which acknowledge only Hobbes's nominalism are incomplete (Wolin, 1960; Oakeshott, 1975; Krook, 1956), while those that argue he was really a conceptualist understate the radicalism of much of what he says about language (Danford, 1980, pp. 116-120; Watkins, 1973, pp. 108-109; Woozley, 1969, pp. 87-90; Hubener, 1977, pp. 77-100). Hobbes was, in fact, both a nominalist and a conceptualist. Second, I show that nominalism and conceptualism, although contradictory as philosophical positions, are for Hobbes complementary in political function. Each is necessary to support important aspects of his political theory.

HOBBES'S NOMINALISM

It is a measure of the importance of language to Hobbes's political argument that he states his position on universals in the opening arguments of *Leviathan*.

> Some (names) are common to many things, Man, Horse, Tree; every of which though but one name is nevertheless the name of divers particular things; in respect of all which together, it is called an universal there being nothing in the world universal but names,

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for the things named are, everyone of them individual
and singular (*Leviathan*, Ch. 4, p. 21).

Only particular things exist. Universals are purely
phenomena of language. Since universal *things do not exist*,
the reality behind a universal name is no more than the group
of particular existents that that name denotes. Like Ockham
more than three centuries earlier, Hobbes explicitly adopts a
nominalist account of universals (Largeault, 1971, pp. 170-175).

Hobbes seems to be denying that our use of universal
terms is imposed on us by the real world. There are no
common existents, he is saying, to warrant such usage. Why
then do people categorize certain objects in one group and
others in different groups? Aware of the importance that this
issue has for his entire theory, Hobbes discusses the *process of
attaching* names to things in numerous passages. In his earliest
*systematic political work, he speaks of names as "arbitrary," as
voiced marks* that "man erecteth voluntarily" (*Human Nature*
V.2). People stipulate the meaning of words by an act of will.
In *De Corpore*, Hobbes reconfirms the stipulative theory of
meaning by asserting that a name is a word "taken at pleasure,"
that "the origin of names (is) arbitrary," and that "names have
their constitution not from the species of things, but from the
will and consent of men" (*De Corpore* I.2.4 and I.5.1). Names
have no intrinsic connection with "the species of things." The
origin of common names is not in the external world; it is in
us, in our decision to use common names to refer to groups of
particular objects.

Hobbes's characterization of that decision as "arbitrary" or
"voluntary" points to the will as the human attribute that
assures the disconnection between words and things. He
defines "will" as "the last appetite or aversion, immediately
adhering to action, or to the omission thereof" (*Leviathan*, Ch.
6, p. 48; cf. *De Corpore* IV. 25.13). Hobbes does not mean,
however, that the will is a regulatory power of the personality
that decides in favor of some actions and against others. He
excludes that possibility when he admits that a process of
"deliberation" precedes the "last" passion, but then defines
deliberation as an "alternate succession of appetites, aversions,
hopes and fears" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 6, p. 48). The words

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"alternate succession" signal a process of apparently random fluctuation, not of rational evaluation. The conclusion of the deliberative process is defined temporally rather than logically. The will is the "last" passion to move the body in the sense that it is the voluntary motion that occurs just prior to the moment when action intervenes. In the nominalist terms, the will is simply a general name for a passion which happens immediately to precede an action. It implies no rational structure, no necessary consistency, no subordination of appetite to long-term goals. It is true that for Hobbes, "will is precedent to reason" (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 60), but it should be understood that in the passages under discussion, such precedence implies more than Hume's view that reason is slave to the passions. The shifting passions of Hobbesian man escape entirely the ordering discipline of reason.[2]

Can a nominalist who denies any necessary connection between words and the world make any sense of man's persistent aspiration to distinguish the "true" from the "false?" Can he claim that his own theory is in any sense true? Hobbes believes these questions pose no unique problems for his theory of language. "True" and "false" are "attributes of speech, not of things" (Leviathan, Ch. 4, p. 23). They have, like all other general terms, an arbitrary, stipulative sense. For a proposition to be "true," it suffices that all particulars denoted (arbitrarily) by the grammatical subject be comprehended by all the particulars denoted by the predicate (De Corpore, I.3.7). "Man is a living creature" is true, for example, because "living creature" signifies at least all the particulars that "man" does. If two or more people disagree about the particulars included in the subject or predicate, a practical solution must prevail: they must submit their controversy to "some arbitrator or judge, to whose sentence they will both stand" (Leviathan, Ch. 5, p.31).

The arbitrator's sentence is not just the conclusion required to avoid conflict; it is the true conclusion. Where "the will and consent of men" decide the particular referents of words and where wills clash, there is no objective way of settling a dispute; it can only be handed on to another will. The arbitrator's decision then yields universal agreement as to the meaning of terms. For the nominalist, the arbitrator's decision is "true" because it is universally accepted, not universally

accepted because it is true. Hobbes unflinchingly acknowledges that he means that truth originates in the "arbitrary" imposition of names (*De Corpore*, I.3.8). Leibniz was right when he observed that Hobbes is an "ultranominalist," "for not content, like the nominalists to reduce universals to names, he says that the truth of things itself consists in names, and what is more, that it depends on the human will" (quoted in Watkins, 1973, p. 104).

NOMINALIST POLITICS

Nominalism is the foundation of many of the most distinctive aspects of Hobbes's political theory. Most importantly perhaps, it explains why there can be no "natural" agreement about the meaning of moral names. Moral universals like "good," "bad," and "just," since they cannot correlate to the nature of objects, must have their origin in another type of mental conception. They originate, Hobbes says, in the passions (*Leviathan*, Ch. 6, p. 41). Those who invoke moral universals describe not the object of their discourse, but instead their subjective appetites or aversions with respect to that object (Watkins, 1955, p. 140; Mintz, 1969, pp. 25-26). Moral reasoning cannot take the form of an Aristotelian practical syllogism; the "alternate succession" of the passions that shapes all deliberation characterizes moral choices also. Opinions of good and evil result when "you break off the chain of man's discourse" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 7, p. 52). Because moral deliberation is only a mechanical "interruption" in the flow of the passions rather than a process of rational evaluation, it is completely predictable that the objects called "good" and "evil" will differ from person to person, and even that an individual's own assessments may differ from time to time (*Leviathan*, Ch. 15, p. 146). Moral terms lack a consistent referent in the world that might stabilize their meaning and induce the assent of others.

The consequence of acting according to our passions is that our behavior conforms to no rules. Since the referents of our terms are intrinsically subjective, there can be no common agreement about the meaning of the rules. Even when we appear to set up external standards in the form of moral rules, those are only the expression of our appetites, and we dispense

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with them when it suits our interests. Without common rules, we fail to direct our behavior in ways consistent with our own goals, and we fail to coexist peacefully with other similarly motivated beings.

This set of nominalist assumptions underlies the description of the state of nature. By nominalist analysis, individuals are ontologically prior to any society. Hobbes avoids any assumption that individuals strive for association or find fulfillment in community with others (*De Cive* I.2). That is an Aristotelian metaphysical error; it assumes that community in a sense pre-exists the individuals who compose it and structures their behavior to promote its own realization. Hobbes does believe that people are language-users, but their language describes their idiosyncratic passions rather than the regularities of the world. Their talk of "mine" and "thine," "just" and "unjust," "good" and "evil" conforms society to their wills, that is, to their appetites and aversions. Because passion prescribes conduct, rules are foreign to them. Passion, by definition, pursues the objects of desire, and the language of good and evil is an instrument of this pursuit. In the event of interpersonal conflict over the objects of desire, there can be only the dissatisfaction of each disputant's desires going unfulfilled, or the mortal danger of the disputants coming to blows. There is no rational way to adjudicate conflicting claims, for a rational decision presupposes mutually agreed-upon standards of adjudication and such standards are precisely what is contested in the state of nature. The state of nature is an "anarchy of meanings" (Wolin, 1960, p. 257). That anarchy represents not some unfortunate deterioration of order, but a metaphysical condition. The prospects of peaceful community must be assessed *within* these limits.

The social contract answers to the political problem of ultranominalism by specifying the sense in which existing particulars (a multitude of inherently separate, egocentric individuals) can be collected into a universal (a "common power" consisting of a sovereign who represents them all) by an act of will (a covenant wherein all "submit their wills, every one to his will") (*Leviathan*, Ch. 17, p. 158). The contractarian solution requires, however, that there be at least one point of agreement even among egotistic individuals. That point,

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Hobbes argues, is the overwhelming fear of violent death. Because the danger of violent death is so great in the state of nature, each individual wills--still separately and egocentrically, to be sure, but in accord for once with all others--to put and end to anarchy by erecting a common sovereign power to settle all their disputes.

The sovereign answers to the political problems of nominalism only be staying within the bounds of its assumptions. Sovereigns are individuals (either one person, or some group united by a single decision rule). The sovereign need have no special qualifications. The diversity and inconstancy of the multitude's passions precludes any agreement on the desirable attributes of a sovereign. The only attribute required of the sovereign is one had by all parties to the contract; the unity of a single will. No superior education, virtue, genealogy, foresight or even rhetorical skill is required. At least in the original contract, the commonwealth is an equal opportunity employer.

It is not, however, simply the creation of a sovereign that ends the violence of the state of nature. The sovereign ends anarchy by issuing rules to resolve disputes. Hobbes's unqualified assertion that "the skill of making and maintaining commonwealths, consisteth in certain rules" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 20, p. 195) reveals how dependent he believes political order to be on rule-following. Peace requires the voluntary obedience of most citizens to established law. From the citizens' point of view, the burden of Hobbes's argument is that, in the interest of civil peace, subjects ought never to challenge the commands of the constituted authority; they should subject their wills to his laws.[3] The sovereign who had to depend wholly on direct force to regulate the motion of his subjects would be faced with an undoubtedly futile task. Peace requires subjects who *learn* to carry on their affairs within the universe of meaning that the sovereign's commands establish. Rules provide the general direction that personal behavior lacks in the state of nature. Or to highlight better the metaphysical basis of the solution: the sovereign stipulates meaning by establishing general rules denoting what particular forms of behavior will be called "right" and "wrong." These rules serve as the moral universals absent from mankind's natural condition.

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The sovereign's rules, it must be emphasized, issue from will (*Leviathan*, Ch. 25, p. 241). Because the sovereign is only human and human will suffers the inconstancy described in *Hobbes's* nominalist theory of the will, it follows that the sovereign's rule can be inconsistent without being illegitimate. His government is entirely "arbitrary" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 46, p. 683). This means, first, that since the sovereign's will *is* civil law, no law can bind him. He issues or retracts any general law according to his pleasure. Second, even though he issues general rules, he is the ultimate judge of what particulars fall under his rules, so he may rightfully intervene in specific legal controversies (*Leviathan*, Ch. 18, p. 165). Thus the sovereign might punish a subject who could not have known that the general law proscribed his particular type of conduct. The sovereign compels and punishes "by his own discretion" (*De Cive* V.6). Not even the moral duty to act for the public good really constrains sovereigns, for they "may ordain the doing of many things in pursuit of their passions" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 24, p.235). The logical conclusion of the ultranominalist theory of the will would be an assertion that the wildly fluctuating commands of an insane monarch retain the character of valid law—and *Hobbes accepted* even this conclusion. A recently *discovered manuscript reveals that* he defended the right of a *sovereign to impose on his subjects* an heir who suffered from a "want of natural reason" (Okin, 1982, p. 59). The subjects can demand not even the most minimal standards of rationality of the sovereign's conduct, and may be obliged to tolerate the laws of a mad monarch. Hobbes believes that allowing one will to govern in a way absolutely unconstrained by rules *is* a necessary condition for having a system of rules under which others can live in peace.

PROBLEMS WITH ULTRANOMINALISM

Ultranominalism seems to furnish an admirably solid foundation for the sovereign's unrestricted authority by making any questioning of his commands seem inconsistent in principle with civil peace. Closer examination, however, reveals several serious defects in the structure Hobbes has erected.

The first problem is that ultranominalism makes the concept of obedience to rules incoherent. Of course Hobbes would not easily agree. He seems to believe that the natural anarchy stems from an absence of known, clearly interpreted, and enforced rules, not from man's inherent inability to follow rules. His descriptions of rule-following behavior suggest how direct and unproblematic he considers such behavior to be in principle: laws are like chains extending from the sovereign's lips to the subjects' ears (*Leviathan*, Ch. 21, p. 198). A simple tug, one supposes, keeps errant subjects in line. Hobbes adopts a refrain of "simple obedience" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 20, p. 193). But just how simple is obedience for a nominalist subject? If the previous analysis of the will is correct, then people in the state of nature are not rule-followers at all. Each person is directed by will, and from the point of view of the will, it does not matter that now the subject is inclined to one thing and now another. Nothing in the concept of will requires that the objects of appetite have any essential similarities among them. Volition is private and possibly patternless.

Yet, creating patterns in behavior and insuring that persons subject their behavior to consistent rules in similar circumstances is the very purpose of law. Rule-following requires that the subject see relevant similarities in legally regulated circumstances in at least two ways (Hart, 1961, p. 21). The subject must understand that he is or is not a member of the general group to which the rule applies (e.g., head of family, preacher, baker, taxpayer), and that the law applies to a general type of conduct (e.g., educating, preaching, paying for goods). If there is not to be a separate rule for every citizen and for every particular situation of importance to civil peace, then subjects must be able to generalize, to perceive similarities between situations. The very concept of a rule is interwoven with an ability to discern such similarities (Winch, 1958, pp. 27-28). People who can regulate their conduct by rules must be, in other words, native rule-followers--a possibility that Hobbes's ultranominalism precludes.

This problem can be given a yet more radical formulation. The previous example assumes that, at the very least, when a sovereign makes an ostensive connection between a type of conduct and a rule, the nominalist subject understands him.

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But that is to presuppose that the sovereign's words are not singular data, like any other data accessible to the senses. If people are beings who stamp arbitrary meanings onto sense data, then they will do so as much with the sovereign's words as with any other perception. The sovereign's commands will mean to them not what the sovereign intended them to mean-- subjects have no access to the sovereign's mind--but whatever meaning their interests dictate. The consequence would necessarily be the failure of any attempt to govern people by the use of rules.

The second problem with ultranominalism is that it cannot prescribe the conditions under which a legal system becomes operative. It is a point of agreement among both legal positivists and philosophers in the natural law tradition that the very enterprise of subjecting human conduct to the governance of rules puts some formal constraints on the types of commands that can form a legal system. What H.L.A. Hart calls "principles of legality" and the rules Lon Fuller regards as the "inner morality of law" express the minimal standards for legal rules; among other things, they must be general, intelligible, prospective, and internally consistent (Hart, 1961, p. 202; Fuller, 1969, pp. 46-81). When these conditions are frequently violated, governing by law breaks down. A different method of social control, perhaps rule by terror, is then in effect. A "legal system" can no longer be said to exist where laws are so obscure or inconsistent that citizens cannot know how to obey them.

What is important in the present context is that the ultranominalist sovereign may well violate even these standards and fail to create a legal system. If his commands are no more than the expression of his most recent appetites, law may lack even a minimum of structure. He may one day grant property and the next confiscate it. He may decree a law that applies to one subject and not to another. He may promulgate retrospective laws. Hobbes cannot proscribe these actions, although he may counsel against them. Still, it is unclear even what wise counsel can accomplish, for if law is nothing but the command of the sovereign's will, then whatever course his will may take, there the law follows. What Hobbes needs is an argument for the rationality of the sovereign. The sovereign

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must consider to what degree the laws he authorizes are consistent with his goal of guiding his subjects' conduct by rules. But such an argument does not accord with Hobbes's untranominalist metaphysic.

The allusion to wise counsel suggests the third inadequacy of nominalism: Hobbes's reasoning calls into question the status of his own philosophical truths. His assertion that the sovereign has the right to censor his subjects' intellectual endeavors is grounded in something other than the tyrant's concern to control the circulation of troublesome ideas. In the ultranominalist universe, the sovereign's will actually determines the truth of doctrine. It is conceivable then that the sovereign might find the teachings of *Leviathan* incompatible with civil peace, and ban them. Hobbes can plead that his work not be censored (*Leviathan*, Epistle Dedicatory); he can hope that the sovereign will adopt his views (*Leviathan*, Ch. 31, p. 358). But he cannot claim that his views are "right" or "true." If the sovereign objected to his work, Hobbes would find himself in an uncomfortable intellectual dilemma. Either he could claim that his work was true in spite of the sovereign's will (and thereby contradict his nominalist principles) or he could agree with the sovereign and be obliged to repudiate his work. That would be a curious repudiation, however, because the grounds for considering the work untrue must be derived from the repudiated work itself. The work must be seen as at once true and untrue.

HOBBES'S CONCEPTUALISM

Given ultranominalist premises, Hobbes could hardly avoid these peculiar contradictions and deficiencies. He does avoid them--or thinks he does--only by tacitly shifting his metaphysical premises. Intertwined with nominalism is a pattern of conceptualist assertions. His numerous remarks on similitudes, evidence, understanding, and reason appear to throw him in a different metaphysical camp and allow him to draw some different political conclusions.

An alternative reading of Hobbes's position on universals begins to take shape from his confident assertion that sensation

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originates in a natural order. On the very first page of *Leviathan*, Hobbes announces his empiricist credo: "There is no conception in a man's mind, which hath not at first...been begotten upon the organs of sense" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 1, p. 1). This entails no contradiction with nominalism as long as conceptions represent only particular bodies and qualities. There are no general conceptions, no Platonic forms to apprehend. In a crucial passage, however, Hobbes explains how universal terms apply to these conceptions, and he does so in a way that leads away from his theory of arbitrary naming. "One universal name," he says, "is imposed on many things for their similitude in some quality or other accident" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 4, p. 21; cf. *De Corpore* 1.2.7; *Human Nature* V.5). "Similitude" refers to some quality of the objects themselves, or at least of our conceptions of them. Objective resemblances justify applying the same name to a variety of unique objects. The similitudes are "natural" in the traditional sense; they exist independently of human will.

"Similitudes" are universal conceptions and universals are actually central to Hobbes's scientific project. His famous "resolutive-compositive" method entails breaking observed, complex wholes down into their simplest component parts in order to explain how causal relations among the parts generate the complex whole. Understanding a square, for example, requires resolving it into lines, planes, straightness, terminated angles, and so forth. Hobbes speaks of these simplest parts as "universals" because they are components not just of the unique, complex whole with which the analysis started, but of all entities of its type.[4] Definitions, in turn, are "nothing but the explication of our simple conceptions" (*De Corpore* I.6.6). Language is then tied to the natural order in a way not conveyed by ultranominalism. When Hobbes writes of "the visible things of this world, and their admirable order," he implies that there is a structure of conceptions and categories that pre-exists the structure of language. A truly scientific language would simply reflect this order.

His discussions of the "evidence" of truth and of communication confirm this conceptualist reading. Evidence, in Hobbes's theory, mediates conception and word. It explains the condition of the meaningful use of language for the

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subject. Hobbes grants that a person could conceivably use a word correctly (that is, accurately denoting the similitude with which that name was conventionally associated), and yet not understand it. Knowledge requires more than a contingent association of word and thing; it requires "evidence of truth," "the concomitance of (a man's) conception with his words" (*Human Nature* VI.4). If there is to be "evidence" one must identify a conception. One must recognize its similarity to a conception one has had before, and *because of* that similarity, understand that it demands the same label as before. The doctrine of evidence implies that the connection between words and mental images that make up their meaning is not arbitrary. The very notion of meaning requires that the individual be supposed to use terms at least self-consistently.[5]

Conceptualism also explains how Hobbes can believe that communication between individuals is possible. "Understanding mediates the conceptions of one speaker with those of another. Understanding occurs when one person, upon encountering another's words, has those conceptions that the words were "ordained and constituted to signify" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 4, p. 28). Such understanding is possible only if people's passions do not necessarily attach arbitrary meanings to every word they hear. At least if words are well-defined, speech can play an important role in unifying people's conceptions of the world by calling to mind in the listener or reader the conceptions that the language-user intended.

The ultranominalist model of deliberation is contradicted by a conceptualist theory of reason. Reason, in Hobbes's most famous definition, "is nothing but reckoning (that is, adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon, for the marking and signifying of our thoughts" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 5, p. 30). Successful reasoning presupposes settling upon certain definitions, employing these definitions without equivocation, joining terms according to rules of grammar, and making deductions according to the rules of logic. Ultranominalism predicts that the passions will disrupt this process. Appetites will cause words to adopt new referents, aversions will prevent men from reaching painful conclusions. Conceptualism asserts that inferences can derive from the logical structure of the analysis, not from the

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momentary status of the reasoner's passions. Reason must be able to fend off the passions and to guide the use of language by consistent, logical criteria. Hobbes even argues that "all men by nature reason alike, and well when they have good principles," (*Leviathan*, Ch. 5, p. 35; *Elements of Law* II.1). Reason is a universal human potential.

The conceptualist believes it possible to measure language against a natural order and grants that rational processes of thought can govern the use of language. He cannot therefore be satisfied with the nominalist's stipulative theory of truth. Ultranominalism does not make sufficiently clear that, whatever the chosen symbols, names denote groups united by genuine similitudes. Hobbes's call for the *"apt imposing of names"* (*Leviathan*, Ch. 5, p. 35, emphasis added) shows that he believed that standards of correctness apply even to the "arbitrary" act of naming. Apt names put all instances of a single concept under the same rubric. Hobbes's seeming restriction of "true" to its analytical sense then conceals a rather ordinary correspondence theory of truth. "Man is a living creature" is true because in the world (or in man's conceptual mirror of it), the natural group "living creature" comprehends the natural group "man." Hobbes's truths have an empirical content that no individual's will can alter. An analytical definition of truth only seems satisfactory to Hobbes because he assumes that the human senses and even language can connect unproblematically to an ordered world.

What emerges from this collection of arguments about sensation, language and truth is a metaphysics parallel to, but quite different from, ultranominalism. The conceptualist Hobbes believes that a real world presents itself to us in sensation. These sensations, ordered in similitudes, become the basis for linguistic distinctions. Someone who applies a name to a thing that is objectively dissimilar to other things called by that name can be criticized as mistaken; the conceptualist asserts our capacity to verify consistent usage. On the foundation of language is built a human capacity for consistent reasoning. Reason implies using names properly, following standards and engaging in logical analysis of propositions. Analytically true propositions predict empirical consequences because the terms of the propositions reflect actual structures

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of the world. It is this conceptualism that salvages Hobbes's political theory from the absurdities of his nominalism.

CONCEPTUALIST POLITICS

Conceptualism explains how Hobbes can expect the promulgation of laws by a sovereign to end the anarchy of the state of nature. Conceptualist subjects can understand and follow rules. In fact, Hobbes describes the linguistic foundation of rule-following quite well when he recounts how the first pupil learned to apply names. "The first author of speech was God himself, that instructed Adam how to name such creatures as he presented to his sight... This was sufficient to direct him to add more names, as experience and use of the creatures should give him occasion" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 4, p. 18). God's ostensive definitions could be sufficient to teach Adam only if he could understand the relevant similarities in groups of creatures that justified applying a common name to them. Even as God taught Adam simple names, Adam was following rules, for using a word correctly implies picking up on a rule that specifies features common to an extended series of its possible uses (Pitkin, 1972, pp. 45-46). Insofar as he is a being capable of using language at all, he is a rule-follower.

Hobbes's assumption that people are rule-followers explains the prominence of education in a theory that supposedly regards man as moved by passions inherent in his biological constitution. For all his insistence on the place of fear in the human psyche and on the importance of force in backing up the laws, Hobbes knows that civil peace cannot depend on the constant intervention of arms. The jab of the sovereign's sword can redirect the motion of the errant subject only briefly. Mute terror teaches no rules. Peace depends on the subjects' learning the sovereign's rights and understanding "what doctrines are conformable, or contrary to the defense, peace and good of the people" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 30, p. 323). If people are "made fit for society not by nature, but by education" (*De Cive* I.2fn.), Hobbes must be supposing that subjects can understand concepts in a consistent way. They are able to subsume their particular conduct under general rules and to regulate their actions accordingly. Conceptualists can be

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rule-followers; rule-followers properly instructed can be obedient subjects; and obedient subjects obviate the need for the sovereign to maintain a climate of pervasive fear.

Moreover, a sovereign who can be presumed to reason can be counted upon to do what is necessary to establish a system of laws. At times, Hobbes even talks of law as the command of the sovereign's reason, not his will (*Leviathan*, Ch. 26, p. 256). Certain that he is dealing with a rational person, Hobbes points out the logic in observing certain limits in the formulation of law. The limits he proposes in Chapter 26 of *Leviathan* are strikingly similar to Hart's principles of legality. Laws must be "signified by certain signs," preferably written. They must be prospective and general. Law should be administered equitably (*Leviathan*, Ch. 30, p. 332) and should avoid the punishment of innocent subjects (*Leviathan*, Ch. 28, p. 304). A rational sovereign would observe these limitations simply in order to insure the effectiveness of his own rule.

Finally, conceptualism retrieves the special theoretical status of Hobbes's counsel. In the only sense Hobbes believes possible in the context of political controversy, the *Leviathan* is true. True statements hold universally, without exception. Now, the political problem as Hobbes sees it is that people's conflicting passions, and the language they use to express them, lead to a Babel of claims on the public authority. No one claim about the "right" political order, it seems, can distinguish itself as true. Conceptualism, however, allows Hobbes to devise an argument with universal appeal. It begins when he discerns a common structure of passions in all persons. "Whosoever looketh into himself and considereth what he doth, when he does think, opine, reason, hope, fear, etc. ...shall thereby read and know what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon the like occasions" (*Leviathan*, Introduction, p. xi)[6]. While the objects of passions differ from person to person, the passions themselves do not. Appetites and aversions are universals of human behavior (Danford, 1980, p. 119; Spragens, 1973, p. 151).

The universal structure of the passions would support a universal judgment if there happened to be one object that affected all people with the greatest urgency and in a uniform

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way. The object, Hobbes argues is death, especially violent death. It is the "chiefest of natural evils" because it represents the negation of every good, every appetite, every pleasure (*De Cive* I.7). Fear of it should impel rational people to do whatever is necessary avoid it. Every person should consider peace the primary good. By deduction, Hobbes then leads the rational subject to the conclusion that the institution of the absolute sovereign is the necessary condition of the attainment of peace. Assuming his logic is sound, the truth of his conclusion derives from the truth of his premises, and his premises are true because they accurately reflect a fact about the human passions. This conclusion is "true" in the conceptualist sense; it corresponds to a world that exists independently of the sovereign's judgment. The truth of *Leviathan* is not simply stipulative.

Why then did Hobbes not ground his theory exclusively in conceptualism? After all, the rationality of conceptualism permits him to explain how it is possible to avoid anarchy, and conceptualism does not compromise his ability to describe conflict. Conceptualist subjects can use words consistently but may not. They can reason but may make errors. They can follow rules but may ignore them. Surely "the inconstant use of names" that Hobbes so deplores results only from the contingent misuse of language (because of ignorance, custom, or self-interest), not from the inherent relationship between human will and nature.[7]

PROBLEMS WITH CONCEPTUALISM

To understand what ultranominalism depicts that conceptualism cannot is to penetrate to the very heart of Hobbes's work. Ultranominalism expresses, first, Hobbes's sense that human reason is never secure from the dominance of passion. Conceptualism implies that reason can partially tame the passions. It can control them at least to the extent that it can rank them and keep the less urgent passions from displacing the most urgent one. That view is not entirely satisfactory to Hobbes because he is aware that "self-love" often upsets the neatly ordered schemes of reason (*Leviathan*, Ch. 26, p. 262). Especially in politics, where the material stakes are

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high and the potential tributes to vanity great, the most rational decisions are all too often set aside by passionate impulses. The "alternate succession" of passion in the ultranominalist theory of the will expresses well the irrationality endemic in political decision-making. It is a sign of Hobbes's recognition of this problem that he does not simply present his countrymen with an ideally reasoned doctrine of political obligation. Few are the subjects whose reason is strong enough to subordinate all their actions to the necessities of avoiding violent death. Hobbes relies on a new education to redirect men's passions themselves so that they conform to what perfect reason would dictate--even if their own reason is weak.

Second, ultranominalism explains why citizens may contest absolutely no pronouncements of their sovereign. Conceptualism suggests that individuals can legitimately judge at least some such pronouncements. The correspondence theory of truth which conceptualism implicitly adopts could lay the groundwork for the citizens' right to question the sovereign's statements if they did not accord with the facts. If, for instance, people believed that the authorities had used trumped up charges to jail an innocent citizen, conceptualist citizens could ascertain what really happened, describe the facts in commonly understood terms, and compare the facts with the established laws. Yet when citizen and sovereign disagree, there are two conflicting assertions of right. Who is to judge which is applying the law correctly? It is insufficient to say that reason decides, for reason is always the reason of some individual. If that individual is just an ordinary citizen, other citizens with different judgments have equal standing and are likely to challenge the first. The danger of anarchy looms ominously over any solution that does not accord to a single will the sole right to make decisions on all matters it deems important to public order. If that person is the sovereign, order is preserved, but the sovereign will is left as the sole judge of its own rightness.

From a conceptualist perspective, this solution seems irrational to the point of madness; it compels us to abandon truths established by our own senses and reason. Ultranominalism, on the other hand, shows why there is no alternative to the sovereign's arbitrary judgment. Where there

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are no natural universals, where will establishes the meaning of words, where deliberation follows the flux of the passions, there is no certainty of a natural convergence of judgments toward objective truths. The very words people use to testify to what they have seen and believe are likely to have different meanings unless the sovereign defines them uniformly. Hobbes cannot be certain of solving the problem of political disorder unless he can persuade citizens that, paradoxically, the only rational way to avoid anarchy is for each to forfeit the right to employ the standards of his own reason in judging the commands of the public authorities. Ultimately it can only seem rational to suspend one's rationality if the very premises of rationality are questioned. Ultranominalism--but not conceptualism--casts doubt on the assumptions that people have similar sense experiences under similar conditions, that language can express objective universals, that deliberation is guided by logic rather than by passion. Only ultranominalism gives metaphysical support to Hobbes's practical conclusion that disagreements must be settled by an arbiter who cannot himself be held to rational standards of judgment.

The third reason for adopting ultranominalism is that it accounts for a residual arbitrariness inherent in the categories of language. When Hobbes explains why he asserts that "the original of names (is) arbitrary," it is not to appetite, aversion or partisan interest that he points, but rather to human invention in creating new words and to the diversity of linguistic practices among nations (*De Corpore* II,4). Empirically, he finds it impossible to "make any comparison betwixt a name and a thing;" silent objects cannot dictate the categories in which we speak of them. Whatever meanings different cultural processes generate, those are the meanings to which people will adhere in their deliberations. There will consequently be a variety of conventions governing the meaning of words, and no way of stepping outside of language to criticize alternative conventions.

Hobbes builds this cultural notion of arbitrariness into his ultranominalist theory of the passions. "The diversity of our reception of (the nature of things)," he observes, "in respect of different constitutions of body and prejudices of opinion, gives everything a tincture of our different passions" (*Leviathan*, Ch.

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4, p. 28). "Passion" here refers not just to the particular interests, but also to differences of perception and ingrained differences of judgment. "Differences of customs, and education" form differences of language and judgment in different men (*Leviathan*, Ch. 8, p. 61). Conceptualism implies that careful observation and the use of a consistent descriptive language could overcome such differences. Ultranominalism expresses Hobbes's belief that language always retains a *residuum* of arbitrary categorization. *No educational process* can attune us directly to reality because our sense of reality is mediated by language. Different educations simply school the passions in different ways. Controversy is the intractable problem that Hobbes knows it to be because differences over the referents of general terms are deeply rooted in human experience, desire, and learning.

CONCLUSION

The flagrant contradiction between ultranominalism and conceptualism does--as Arendt suggested--lead to the center of Hobbes's work. Ultranominalism accounts for the utter discord that rends the state of nature, and helps justify the rule of a sovereign whose commands can be questioned on no rational basis whatsoever. At the same time, ultranominalism would preclude the possibility of obedience under a sovereign, would prevent the sovereign from constructing a system of followable rules, and could force a repudiation of Hobbes's entire work on logical grounds. Conceptualism accounts better for the obedience of subjects, the creation of a working legal system and the philosophical power of Hobbes's own theory. Yet it also implies the possibility that disputes can be settled by rational procedures and thereby potentially *legitimates* disobedience to authorities who fail to adhere to such procedures.

Hobbes's contradictions are profound not only in the sense that they are firmly rooted in his views on human nature and science, but more importantly in the sense that they represent some of the deeper complexities of political life. Conceptualism reflects our hopes that reason can guide our politics. It anticipates the aspiration of modern liberalism to

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use empirical evidence, rational self-interest and settled procedures to regulate social conflict. Ultranominalism mirrors our fears that irrationalities entrenched in our judgments will disrupt even our most carefully considered cooperative ventures. It also represents Hobbes's recognition that politics is practical. In an arena where the greatest values are at stake, we demand results. And yet reason is often unable to quiet the prejudices, passions, and absurd beliefs that motivate real citizens to provoke disorder. Practical politics requires arbitration, compromise, and consent--procedures that appear absurd from the perspective of reason because they settle for opinion instead of demanding truth. It was the attempt to encompass all the complexity of political life--its reason as well as its unreason--in a single theory that drove Hobbes to contradiction. That is to say that his contradictions are truly a mark of his greatness.

NOTES

[1]The labels that scholars use to distinguish the variety of positions philosophers have held with respect to universals are notoriously varied and even inconsistent. (Hobbes might smile ironically at this.) The difference between nominalism and conceptualism has been explored by A.D. Woozley (1967, 199-204); Armstrong (1978, pp. 12-17) examines five varieties of nominalism, including "Concept Nominalism." While most interpreters agree that Hobbes was some sort of "nominalist," there is no consensus on what to call the other tendency in his theory of language. I have chosen to follow the usage (but not always the interpretive conclusions) of Krook (1956, pp. 9-13) and Laird (1968, pp. 148-149).

[2]Goldsmith (1966, p. 58) and Laird (1968, pp. 166 & 194) elaborate on Hobbes's concept of will and on its implications for his theory of deliberation.

[3]See Quentin Skinner's argument that Hobbes was a defender of "de facto" sovereign authority, in Aylmer (1972, pp. 95-97).

[4]Lucid explanations of the role of universals in Hobbesian science can be found in Spragens (1973, pp. 146-151) and Danford (1980, pp. 116-120).

[5]For further discussion of Hobbes's conception of "evidence," see Frithiof Brandt (1928, pp. 225-226); Peters (1956, p. 62), and Krook (1953, p. 10).

[6]Missner (1977) subjects this important passage to exciting interpretive analysis.

[7]A particularly useful review of all the sources of political disorder that Hobbes associates with the abuse of language can be found in Whelan (1981).

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