

Article

The Unity of Hobbes's Philosophy: Science, Politics, and God?

Zachary Vereb 

Department of Public Policy Leadership, The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS 38677, USA;
ztvereb@olemiss.edu

Abstract: This paper re-examines the dispute concerning Hobbes's religious beliefs in light of his natural philosophy. First, I argue that atheistic readings of Hobbes can be more plausibly defended provided interpreters make use of a methodological unity thesis. Second, I suggest that theistic readers of Hobbes have good reason to favor the autonomy thesis. I conclude by highlighting how a re-examination of the theism dispute motivates reconsideration of the role of Hobbes's natural philosophy and scientific methodology vis à vis politics. Maintaining the unity thesis as a methodological device can shed important light on the politics and methods of *Leviathan*. More importantly, this analysis motivates consideration of *De Corpore* in any serious study of Hobbes.

Keywords: Hobbes; atheism; *De Corpore*; methodology

1. Introduction

Hobbes's religious beliefs and their role in his philosophy have been the subject of much debate. Though many see Hobbes as a secular philosopher, commentators are split. Some read Hobbes as a dissembling atheist, others, an unorthodox theist (see also [1–8]).¹ Commentators lean more heavily toward the theist reading, though this is changing.² This paper re-examines the case for Hobbes's atheism in light of his natural philosophy and general methodological approach. I suggest that this outcome has significant implications for how we should approach Hobbes's works. Taking Hobbes's claims about method, causation, and body in natural philosophy, for instance, may have serious implications on how we understand Hobbes's views on God in political philosophy. To do so, I consider arguments relying on the often-underappreciated epistemology of *De Corpore* [9–11].³ Atheistic readings will generally appear more plausible when viewed through the lens of a methodological unity thesis [12–15].⁴ According to the unity thesis, we should take seriously Hobbes's intention for the unity of his system in his works (and so attempt where possible to charitably interpret apparent philosophical inconsistencies), with Hobbes's materialist view on causation and explanation as its foundation. On this reading, we are encouraged to take a holistic approach to interpreting Hobbes's texts with consideration to their convergence, while also problematizing elements that prima facie deviate from the system. The autonomy thesis, in contrast, takes aspects of Hobbes's work to be separable from his metaphysics and natural philosophy, though both theses can be understood as lying on a continuum.

Proponents of the autonomy thesis concerned with Hobbes's politics often read texts such as *Leviathan* as self-standing. As I will show, without invoking at least a moderate version of the unity thesis, the atheistic reading of Hobbes will appear less plausible. And, if the unity thesis is rejected in favor of autonomy (with certain Hobbesian "scientific" works being deprioritized), highly theistic readings will become most readily defensible.⁵ Consequently, our endorsement or rejection of the unity thesis has implications for how we interpret the relation between Hobbes's natural philosophy and politics.

This paper is divided into five parts. Part 1 discusses two prominent approaches to interpreting Hobbes's philosophy to set the stage for the substantive question of Hobbes's



Citation: Vereb, Z. The Unity of Hobbes's Philosophy: Science, Politics, and God? *Philosophies* **2022**, *7*, 89. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies7040089>

Academic Editor: Douglas M. Jesseph

Received: 6 June 2022

Accepted: 15 August 2022

Published: 22 August 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

theism. Part 2 revisits atheist readings of Hobbes. For these to be successful, commentators such as Curley and Jessepoh should foreground their arguments with the moderate unity thesis. Part 3 then considers a theist Hobbes. To highlight the important consequence of these methodological considerations, I evaluate a paper by theist proponent Geoffrey Gorham [16], written in response to Jessepoh's reading of Hobbes's natural philosophy. Part 4 considers textual evidence and discusses the challenges of esoteric reading to address Hobbes's apparent inconsistency, and Part 5 concludes with reflections on how methodological readings have the potential to lead to new substantive findings in Hobbes scholarship.

Though this paper is primarily concerned with substantive issues surrounding the theism debate (with an eye directed to Gorham's theist reading), I hope to show that underexplored methodological matters—such as will be discussed regarding the unity thesis or Hobbes's philosophy of science—make a big difference in the debate. As another consequence, this paper intends to motivate further exploration into *Concerning Body* in any serious study of Hobbes, which tends to be underrepresented in that substantive debate. To be clear, this paper does not aim to secure conclusive results, but hopes to—at the very least—show how substantive and methodological issues converge when exploring the plausibility of interpretations. In short, a return to the theism dispute invites a reconsideration of Hobbes's scientific methodology as it pertains to his metaphysics and political philosophy [17,18].⁶ Exploring the unity thesis as a methodological device in this dispute can shed further light on *Leviathan*, especially since autonomy political commentators often read that text as self-enclosed.

2. Unity and Autonomy in Hobbes

Unity proponents consider that Hobbes took “seriously his pronouncements on the relationship of dependence among the parts of his system” [12] (p. 67). Such proponents “base their interpretations of his philosophy on the idea that the entire theoretical edifice should be seen as a coherent whole” [12] (p. 67). Hobbes's system (or “Elements of Philosophy” as he often put it) is tripartite: *De Corpore* first, *De Homine*, and finally *De Cive*. *Leviathan*, seeing as it concerns humanity, would appear to occupy the place of *De Cive* in that system. As Hans Dieter Metzger puts it, “Hobbes made every effort to minimize the impacts of events on the development and presentation of his political theory. Hobbes wanted his theory to be understood scientifically according to the model of Galileo's astronomy and Harvey's account of the circulation of the blood” (Cited from [17] (p. 21n)). The strongest unity variant holds that Hobbes maintains his entire system to be (logically) deducible from basic, analytically stipulated definitions and first principle-expressing causes. On this strong reading, we should be able to syllogistically derive Hobbes's political theory from basic principles. In contrast, the moderate-to-weaker view holds that there are methodological and metaphysical continuities, or patterns, in Hobbes's project. In other words, “there may be no hope of a derivation of politics from Hobbes's materialist metaphysics, but the political theory can be seen as paralleling the reasoning that underlies the natural philosophy and first philosophy” [12] (p. 68).

Syllogistically deriving political prescriptions from materialist foundations appears implausible. After all, normative elements in Hobbes's political theory seem to have content that could not be explained from definitions such as causation and body. Nonetheless, there are interesting connections that can be drawn from Hobbes's first philosophy in making sense of his politics. The unity thesis may help us make sense of Hobbes's religious views that are often discussed in the context of the latter. For instance, since all ideas are ultimately derived from mechanical processes of sensation, ideas of an *immaterial* God make little sense. We know that Hobbes in certain works will defend a *material* God apparently consistent with his materialist framework, but this conception runs into problems with Hobbes's own ontological principles. Accordingly, Hobbes usually speaks of God in negative terms. So, unsurprisingly, caution should be exercised when attributing positive religious views to Hobbes, given his discussions of religion in the context of a functioning commonwealth.

After all, according to *Leviathan*, we should follow the pronouncements of the sovereign first and foremost, and Hobbes lived his life under a sovereign who supported a Christian God.

Now, the autonomy lens can invite commentators to focus on *Leviathan* and Hobbes's political ideas, judging his natural philosophy, mathematics, and epistemology as largely superfluous [19,20].⁷ Besides apparent inconsistencies across his works, the main evidence for this view is that Hobbes published the works for his system out of order, with *De Cive's* preface assuring readers of the work's conceptual independence.

Like the unity thesis, there are stronger and weaker autonomy variants. Gorham's approach settles on the stronger side of the autonomy thesis since it tries to isolate what Hobbes says about God in *Leviathan*, bracketing important metaphysical considerations in *Concerning Body* about causation and explanation. The strong autonomy approach is concerning since it downplays Hobbes's general method presented in both texts about the unity of phenomena and the unity of his system.⁸ I discuss this in greater depth later. For now, we should note this: adopting the unity or autonomy thesis will change how we make sense of Hobbes, not only in relation to his religious beliefs but with regard to his philosophy more generally. Indeed, the strong unity thesis involving strict logical derivation is implausible, and the strong autonomy thesis is potentially arbitrary and ahistorical. We need a reading that can account for Hobbes's views on method, science, God, and politics, and this paper explores some options.

Since *Concerning Body* makes the clearest claims about Hobbes's metaphysics, this should be our focus in order to get closer to answers on the substantive issue of the theism debate. As he puts it in the first chapter, "my purpose is, as far forth as I am able, to lay open the few and first Elements of Philosophy in general, as so many Seeds, from which pure and true Philosophy may hereafter spring up by little and little" [9] (*Concerning Body* 1.1.1). This is a clear indication of the weak version of the unity thesis. Sciences are not logically deducible from first philosophy, but appendages sprout atop its fertile ground. We might compare this to Descartes's tree of philosophy, which situates normative disciplines such as medicine and morals as the highest branches. Accordingly, to bring the first philosophy in *Concerning Body* to bear on the religious discussion in *Leviathan*, a methodological appeal to the unity thesis is helpful, since *Leviathan* can be seen as one of those branches.

3. Hobbes the Atheist

Several commentators have discussed the plausibility of an atheistic Hobbes. Among the most prominent defenders is Curley, who has generated much debate in the literature. For Curley, Hobbes was likely an atheist, but at least a skeptic and secular moral philosopher. His reading draws mainly from English and Latin *Leviathan*, *De Cive*, and *Anti-White* (only citing *Concerning Body* once, briefly).⁹ His central argument relies on the apparent incompatibility of Hobbes's moral and political philosophy with Christian ethics, which he assumes essential to Christian faith [3] (pp. 99, 105).¹⁰ Curley also makes connections to Machiavelli and Spinoza on irreligiosity and cites Leibniz's concern for these connections, drawing from Hobbes's contemporaries in analysis of irony in Hobbes. Curley criticizes the theist reader Kavka for an autonomy interpretation of *Leviathan* [3] (p. 92). In addition, he criticizes the Taylor–Warrender thesis regarding Hobbes's laws of nature by considering changes made in the Latin version of *Leviathan* [3] (pp. 103–104).

Though there are other defenders of an atheistic Hobbes, these readings are often marginalized [3] (p. 91). At least two reasons stand out: First, esoteric readings require a higher burden of proof. Atheist interpretations must explain away Hobbes's numerous pronouncements about God. Second, there are problems with the historical intelligibility of atheism in early modern Europe, both for moral and scientific reasons. David Berman gives a snapshot of the divide quite well:

Although Hobbes was thought to be a covert atheist in his own time—indeed almost *the* atheist—scholars are now evenly divided on his actual religious beliefs. Whereas Hobbes's contemporaries employed depth interpretation, there has been

a growing tendency to accept the surface meaning of Hobbes's statements and, hence, the sincerity of his Christian professions [4] (p. 64).¹¹

To return to the theism debate anew, this section considers Jesseph's defense of an atheistic Hobbes. Besides directly engaging and further developing this thesis from Curley, Jesseph also mobilizes Hobbes's naturalistic works (which Curley rarely does), which will tie into our methodological discussion of the unity thesis. Though atheist readings could be defended under the autonomy thesis, taking, say, *Leviathan* as a main point of departure, such readings miss out on supportive cross-textual evidence. Hobbes's general metaphysical views—views consistent with *Leviathan*—are articulated in greater detail elsewhere, and these can be marshalled to show that God (in the traditional interpretation, at least) is incoherent (or superfluous) for Hobbes given the metaphysical commitments in his system, especially those regarding causation and explanation.

Despite the bulk Hobbes wrote on religion and biblical interpretation,¹² Jesseph issues a variety of arguments that call into question a theistic Hobbes, most gravitating around the unity of Hobbes's corpus and the materialistic foundations of his philosophy [5] (p. 142). Jesseph, like Curley, argues that Hobbes frequently dissembles. Jesseph defends "Hobbes as a religious ironist" by not only appealing to the internal coherency of Hobbes's position in relation to other texts, but also externally, referencing Hobbes's contemporaries [5] (p. 156). Indeed, "the best way to resolve the question of how to take Hobbes's religious writings is to pay attention to the interpretations offered by his contemporary readers," for they would clearly be in the best position to judge it, given their propinquity to current conventions of rhetoric [5] (p. 160). Who else, of course, would be able to understand whether Hobbes was being ironic than the people living at the same time? Numerous contemporaries of Hobbes's accused him of atheism and failed to consider his biblical exegesis and religious statements as work of serious devotion.¹³ Jesseph cites Clarendon, for example, who judges "that Hobbes's 'light and comical interpretations' expose the Word of God 'to the mirth of those who are too much inclin'd to be merry with Scripture'" [5] (p. 158). It is possible that Hobbes's accusers did so for political expediency, but the sheer quantity of religious attacks on Hobbes by his contemporaries is peculiar. Curley takes a similar approach and argues, drawing from numerous Hobbesian sources suggestive of the unity thesis, that we should consider the historical context in our evaluation of irony in Hobbes [3] (p. 93).

I now examine several arguments. These implicitly draw from the weak unity interpretation, and it is from this that they gather their strength. First, Jesseph claims that Hobbes's discussion of religion in the early passages of *Leviathan* detail humanity's psychological propensity toward religion rather than any endorsement. Here, Hobbes looks very similar to Hume. Second, Jesseph argues that an immaterial God is hardly compatible with Hobbes's materialist metaphysics. In *Concerning Body* and *Leviathan*, Hobbes holds that "the only substance is body . . . all phenomena of the natural world arise from the motion and impact of material bodies" [5] (p. 142). Intelligible causes, in Hobbes's account from *Concerning Body*, are material ones. Consequently, immateriality would suggest a causally impotent God [5] (pp. 146, 150). This would be no God at all. Showing that Hobbes's metaphysics remain unified across the board, and that it ties into his account of human cognition (as I do later), would make this argument more compelling.

What about a material God? If God were to exist, He could only exist as a body given Hobbes's ontology. Yet, Hobbes speaks of God largely in negative terms due to his account of human knowledge acquisition [4] (p. 66). Because ideas arise from bodies interacting with perceptual organs, we never, strictly speaking, have an idea of God [5] (p. 143). Furthermore, there is a conflict between Hobbes's empiricism and this idea. If ideas ultimately stem from the transmission of bodies to sensory faculties, any genuine talk concerning ideas not traceable back to bodies, causes, or sensation, is moot. If Jesseph were to highlight how Hobbes's scientific methodology remains consistent on this across numerous works, as suggested by the unity thesis, then this argument about the absurdity of a material God would better parry against non-fideist theist objections.

The same problem concerns the idea of infinity [5] (p. 144). God is supposed to be infinite. This leads to a contradiction: “Hobbes’s ontology admits only bodies, each of which is coincident with some bounded, determinate part of space; God, however, is infinite and incomprehensible, and this rules out the possibility that God could be a body in the sense defined by Hobbes. Thus, no Hobbesian God exists” [5] (p. 144). This is supported by *Leviathan*, where Hobbes claims “the Word *Body*, in the most generall acceptance, signifieth that which filleth, or occupieth some certain room or imagined place; and dependeth not on the imagination, but is a reall part of that we call the *Universe*” [10] (L 3.34.206; 3: 610). In *Answer to Bramhall* Hobbes claims, mentioning *Leviathan*, that God occupieth no determinate space given His infinite, subtle nature [11] (AB 4.297). Hobbes remarks: “to say that God is an incorporeal substance, is to say in effect that there is no God at all” [11] (AB 4.305-7). What are we to make of this? Possibly, Hobbes is trying to put the burden on his interlocutor with the latter claim, for all bodies must take up a space and place to exist given his scientific commitments. Again, an appeal to the unity thesis vis à vis Hobbes’s epistemology and account of perception makes this argument most plausible, since a theist defender could reply that *Concerning Body’s* ontology does not apply to Hobbes’s discussions of God in other texts.

Jesseph also considers the problem of God’s location. Now, Hobbes rules out the possibility of a pantheistic God [5] (p. 145). In *Leviathan* [10] (2.31.190; 2: 564): “those philosophers who said the world (or the soul of the world) was God spake unworthily of him, and denied his existence”). “Hobbes’s basic ontological principles, suggest Jesseph, “commit him to the conclusion that if God existed, He would have to be a body that lacks spatial location, which is equivalent to God’s being a body that is not in space. All this is a very obvious contradiction” [5] (p. 146). The contradiction, again, is only apparent if the unity thesis and the consistency of Hobbes’s principles are established.

Finally, Jesseph reflects on the consistency of Hobbes’s own system. The foregoing suggests that an orthodox Christian God is hard to reconcile with Hobbes’s materialism. This might, at best, give us good reason to view Hobbes as a theological skeptic or an unorthodox theist, like a Mormon materialist today.¹⁴ But could Hobbes even consistently pronounce himself an atheist in the first place? Jesseph thinks not, for it would undermine the authority of Hobbes’s own political theory: the sovereign must approve public expression of religion [10] (L 2.31.192; 2: 570). As Jesseph remarks, “Hobbes had ample reason to profess belief in a deity, whether or not such professions were sincere. Hobbes never lived under a sovereign who permitted the expression of atheistic opinions, and his own political theory stresses the subject’s duty of conformity to the sovereign’s dictates concerning pronouncements on religion, irrespective of any privately held beliefs” [5] (p. 152).

A final compelling argument Jesseph advances that explicitly appeals to the unity thesis concerns Hobbes’s general methodology. Supposing the reliability of his method, one interpretive strategy is to consider Hobbes as a dissembling atheist or skeptic. For Hobbes claims that true ratiocination requires sure definitions, and that all ideas derive from the senses: “Concerning the Thoughts of man . . . the Originall of them all, is that which we call SENSE; For there is no conception in a mans mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense” [10] (L 1.1.3; 2: 22). In *Concerning Body*: “The first Beginnings therefore of Knowledge, are the Phantasmes of Sense and Imagination” [9] (1.6.1). It remains unclear, then, how one could ever have an idea of God or even provide a definition of Him.¹⁵ And if God can never be conceived or defined, it seems implausible to reason using the idea of God to ground or derive other premises, such as the generation of the world. Now, *Concerning Body’s* method is consonant with *Leviathan*. Hobbes aims to reason from mechanical causes to effects or from effects to causes, understood within the context of materialism. In other words, for philosophy to be justified in its findings, Hobbes proposes a method constraining knowledge to bodies, i.e., matter in motion. On this view, immaterial beings are dismissed as mental fantasies. Though Hobbes permits speculative, probabilistic reasoning, he restricts this to material causes concerning bodies, and this applies equally to his first philosophy as to his political theory.

The theist reader thus has good reason to de-emphasize the unity of Hobbes's general methodology to underscore theistic passages and unique claims of the non-systematic *Answer to Bramhall* and *Anti-White*. However, if it can be shown that this method is consistent across Hobbes's system, the theist reader will need to justify that de-emphasis. Hobbes has an entire chapter on method in *Concerning Body* [9] (1.6). This approach employs empirical methods, including heuristics of *scientia* and probable knowledge. With *scientia*, we reason from mechanical causes to effects (which are a priori), with probable knowledge from effect to cause [9] (*Concerning Body* 1.6.1-2; 4.1.1). A commentator wishing to bracket the significance of Hobbes's method—in order to avoid the possibility that Hobbes was a skeptic or atheist—will have difficulty if *Concerning Body* is included in the picture.

We should also appreciate that *Leviathan* and *Concerning Body* were written co-temporaneously, though published at different times (see also [21])¹⁶. Most consider that Hobbes was writing his treatise on body while civil war broke out. This prompted him to shift priorities. Interpreters have good reason to suppose the plausibility of, at minimum, a weak version of the unity thesis. Otherwise, it would appear that Hobbes was deeply confused about his own project, with separate works written at very close and often overlapping intervals (see also [22]).¹⁷ Noel Malcolm [23] (p. 29) notes that Hobbes “drafted and redrafted his major work on logic, metaphysics, and physics, *De corpore*, throughout the 1640s,” finding Hobbes to vacillate in the development of his method during this period. If anyone appeals to both texts written around the same time, it is reasonable to consider a weak version of the unity thesis as an interpretive strategy, and use that as a basis for determining to what extent Hobbes attempted to refine his views on method prior to *Leviathan*.

Atheistic commentators such as Jesseph and Curley would likely be more effective if they developed their stance on the unity thesis more explicitly in their argumentation. They could show that an atheistic reading is, to be sure, possible under the autonomy thesis, and that an admittedly unorthodox, fideist reading is also possible given the unity thesis. Yet, nonetheless, the best case for an atheistic Hobbes can be made by drawing from the broadest collection of Hobbes's works in his system—political, metaphysical, and mathematical.

4. Hobbes the Theist

Although theistic readings predominate, many can be made more plausible through an autonomy lens, bracketing Hobbes's first philosophy, natural philosophy, and general methodology. Such readings can then cast away problematic issues in *Concerning Body* on the place, function, and intelligibility of God.¹⁸ [24] As Jesseph shows, taking this natural philosophy seriously leaves traditional God little space, and a corporeal God looks troubling given Hobbes's arguments in *Concerning Body*. Theist readers can avoid these issues by focusing on *Leviathan* and, for instance, *Answer to Bramhall*, minimizing the natural philosophy and methodological pronouncements there. For, in those texts, Hobbes goes to great length discussing God and the Bible, and he also omits the full picture on his materialist metaphysics.

Now, as noted, it is possible to develop a theistic reading with an inclusive consideration of Hobbes's works. So, theist commentators may very well, and some indeed have, made use of the unity thesis in their interpretation. For instance, Martinich's classic theist defense takes a contextual, though admittedly *Leviathan*-focused approach: “Because I do not want to be sidetracked by the need to explain minor differences between Hobbes's various works, I will discuss these other works only insofar as they complement the project of interpreting *Leviathan*” [6] (p. 15).¹⁹ More recently, Cromartie [25] adheres to unity in considering a variety of Hobbes's texts (including *Concerning Body*) and his philosophy of language, arguing that Hobbes was probably a theist, though God is no object of knowledge [25].²⁰ Nonetheless, such readers will have a hard time squaring several claims in *Concerning Body*, and so it is unsurprising that they focus on *Leviathan* instead. There are also interpreters who focus more narrowly on *Leviathan*, and theirs seem to be the most persuasive since they do not need to address those problems. For readings

that, whether implicitly or explicitly, use an autonomy interpretation to focus on *Leviathan* with less eye to the larger historical context of Hobbes's other works, consider Kavka [19] (pp. xiii, xiv 361–3), Lloyd [7], and Rose [24]. All three commentators hardly, if at all, cite *Concerning Body*.

Others consider that Hobbes does discuss God in numerous places—the *Anti-White*, *Leviathan*, and *Bramhall*, for instance—and so if Hobbes's God has trouble fitting with his methods and metaphysics, as developed in *Concerning Body*, this can be more easily explained as jumbled or unresolved thinking. After all, Hobbes writes his works across a long span of time amidst much political interruption.²¹ At the same time, taking Hobbes's word seriously requires taking seriously the methodological unity he intends. And, though it would be easy to dismiss Hobbes as lost in conceptual crisis, we must recall that he thought deeply not only about political theory, but about optics and natural philosophy, getting into numerous heated debates in mathematics and mechanics. Whatever rationale readers adopt, the autonomy thesis will usually be the more successful route for theists. This takes us, then, to Gorham's response to Jesseph on physics and theology. Being clearer about their interpretive frameworks could have avoided much contention.

Gorham, who I will later discuss pace Jesseph, appeals a great deal to the *Answer to Bramhall*.²² Relying on this text leads to at least two problems. First, Hobbes never intends to publish *Answer*, which is supported in Hobbes's correspondence. Even Bramhall confirms his reluctance to publish it, and so reluctance is needed before considering it as part of his intended system [26] (p. 54). Because Gorham relies on this text, he is constrained to adopt either a very weak version of the unity thesis, or the autonomy thesis. The former is more likely since Gorham tries to triangulate a theist Hobbes supported through the unity of two main texts—the *Answer* and *Leviathan*. Yet, if even a weak version of the unity thesis is adopted, Gorham should more carefully consider (even if only to reject) key claims in *Concerning Body*. But this is not feasible, since Hobbes's metaphysical positions there lead to complications vis à vis God, as previously noted.

If Hobbes seriously intended his project's unity, he likely understood how his exchange with Bramhall—though perhaps exonerating him of atheism—would confuse careful readers, because ideas of God developed in *Answer* contradict *Concerning Body* in crucial sections. Of course, it is possible that Hobbes had simply changed his mind about God in *Answer*, but then it would be reasonable to assume that he would want this to be made public, to reflect his considered philosophical views. Yet he does not publish.

Second, it is unclear how Hobbes can consistently accommodate a corporeal God with his materialist metaphysics and the negative theology of *Leviathan*. Taking *Answer* seriously requires, it seems, downplaying previous works of Hobbes's system. Gorham expresses bewilderment that “a surprising number of commentators who broach the questions of Hobbes's religion ignore altogether his corporeal God” [16] (p. 241). Perhaps many commentators do because, as Jesseph suggests, it either makes Hobbes's system or the standard notion of God incoherent. One explanation is to suppose Hobbes is simulating. Textual evidence confirms Hobbes's prima facie endorsement of simulation in *De Cive*, *Leviathan*, and *De Homine* [26].²³ Theist defenders wishing to sidestep Jesseph's objections, while avoiding the hermeneutical problems associated with esoteric debates, are probably better off prioritizing the autonomy thesis. Furthermore, the autonomy thesis does have its own virtues: more applied philosophical potential, for instance. But it is doubtful that it will get us closer to Hobbes's considered views.

At this point, it is worth considering motivations for the theistic reading. There is a great variety of nuance in theistic interpretations. Some interpreters see Hobbes's theism as essential to his philosophy; others see him as a secularist with personal theological commitments.²⁴ Unless we have reason to think otherwise, it makes sense to stick to exactly what Hobbes said. This approach prevents us from reading too much into the text. How can we be certain that we are not projecting our understanding of atheism into Hobbes's text? Clearly Hobbes must be an atheist, so the story goes, for if he were a theist, his views would be incoherent. Yet, it would be odd, we might think, for Hobbes to write so much on

religion, God, and the Bible if he were an unbeliever. After all, lengthy parts three and four of *Leviathan* are devoted to these issues. They are clearly important to Hobbes.

This looks like solid ground to reject atheist readings, especially when we include Hobbes's remarks on God in *Answer to Bramhall*. Yet, this response is not fully convincing. It fails to consider how the unity of state and religion was taken for granted during Hobbes's time. In fact, it was largely inconceivable to split the two in seventeenth century Europe. Any political philosophy would have to account for the commonwealth's public religion to persuade Hobbes's readers. Furthermore, Hobbes's observations on religion are hardly positive. He makes numerous scathing remarks regarding the papacy and organized religion, especially in *Leviathan*. Disbelief in God does not mean disregarding the social power of religion.

That Hobbes writes extensively on religion is hardly surprising and should not constitute conclusive evidence in favor of the theist reading, as such beliefs and institutions are a reality of human life, especially during Hobbes's time. Because Hobbes aims to mobilize a political theory that can, as it were, tame humanity's fanatical impulse and secure peace, he must inevitably include lengthy discussions on religion. This is one explanation as to why Hobbes cared about how God was worshipped.

There are other reasons for motivating the theist reading. For example, some claim that atheism in our current sense was a conceptual impossibility for Hobbes's time [4] (p. 1). "Atheism" had a much broader use in the seventeenth century than today, including the professing of heterodox beliefs. A deist or natural theist would be considered an atheist in this view, which complicates the story. Even if the concept of atheism in our sense is murky given Hobbes's time, it still remains the case that Hobbes's own system—especially when considering his natural philosophy and views on causation—makes the traditional notion of God problematic. If it is true that atheism was a conceptual impossibility, perhaps Hobbes's philosophy presses him to the edge of that paradigm.

Finally, some claim that we should understand the aims of Hobbes's contemporaries. We might, for instance, consider whether Hobbes's contemporaries accuse him of atheism to undermine the legitimacy of his political project. After all, several contemporaries opposed Hobbes's highly authoritarian, royalist views. It would be an easier political task to delegitimize his views through atheistic personal attacks than engage the intricacies of his system. On this reading, it seems that the charge of atheism is more of a political fabrication than anything else. However, this is difficult to justify, since we will have a hard time discerning whether Hobbes's contemporaries honestly believe his system entails atheism.

These are all reasons commonly adduced to motivate the theist reading. Despite strengths, this interpretation is probably implausible. First, it requires reliance on a weak version of the autonomy thesis to be persuasive, and it is unclear if we can (or should) make sense of any of Hobbes's works in isolation from his system. If theistic readings draw from unpublished works such as *Answer to Bramhall* or *Anti-White* but avoid published, systematic texts such as *Concerning Body*, these readings remain ambiguous as to whether they would make use of the autonomy or the unity thesis. Though we should think of interpretive strategies as lying on a continuum, appealing to unpublished texts and not published ones seems unwarranted. *Concerning Body* was important to Hobbes, while he never intended *Answer* to be published. Hobbes even references the former, as if to urge readers to read and take seriously that text, multiple times in *Dialogus Physicus*. There is a good debate to be had as to whether published works should take priority over unpublished ones, but this exceeds this paper's scope. A reasonable strategy would prioritize the published, systematic works for a systematic philosopher such as Hobbes.

5. Unity, Theism, and Dissimulation

Let us consider textual evidence that could be used to support the moderate unity thesis that could, in turn, be supportive of the atheist reading. Concerning the science of politics, Hobbes says:

It appears that Reason is not as Sense, and Memory, borne with us; nor gotten by Experience onely, as Prudence is; but attained by Industry; first in apt imposing of Names; and secondly by getting a good and orderly Method in proceeding from the Elements, which are Names, to Assertions made by Connexion of one of them to another; and so to Syllogismes, which are the Connexions of one Assertion to another, till we come to a knowledge of all the Consequences of names appertaining to the subject in hand; and that is it, men call SCIENCE . . . Science is the knowledge of Consequences, and dependence of one fact upon another. [10] (L 1.5.21; 2: 72)

For Hobbes, the correct method, use of names, and logic legitimates a science of politics. Part of this involves the scientific, materialist account of bodies in motion discussed in *Concerning Body* [9] (1.1.6-8). In Chapter 9 of the OL of *Leviathan*, Hobbes's classification of the sciences reflects a similar presentation to *Concerning Body*. This methodological convergence of the two texts lends support for the unity thesis [27].²⁵ Hobbes suggests that "the skill of making, and maintaining Common-wealths, consisteth in certain Rules [28],²⁶ as doth Arithmetique and Geometry . . . which Rules, neither poor men have the leisure . . . curiosity, or the method to find out" [10] (L 2.20.107; 2: 322). In *De Corpore Politico* Hobbes similarly argues in Chapter XX, Part II of *De Corpore Politico* that, from a material understanding of human cognition and emotion, "thence proceed his actions . . . and lastly how a multitude of persons natural are united by covenants."

Similarly, in *Leviathan*, Hobbes has "derived the Rights of Sovereigne Power . . . from Definitions . . . universally agreed on" [10] (L 3.32.195; 3: 576). This same process is reiterated: "I pretend not to advance any Position of my own, but onely to shew what are the Consequences that seem to me deducible from the Principles of Christian Politiques" [10] (L 3.43.331; 3: 954).

Regarding politics and mathematics, Hobbes underscores their convergent method and rules. This is apparent in *Dialogus Physicus*. Hobbes ("Character A") constantly self-cites *Concerning Body*. Hobbes's dialogue concludes with remarks for proceeding in physics and politics: ". . . Meanwhile, content with Hobbesian physics, I will observe the nature and variety of motion. I will also use the same Hobbesian rules of politics and ethics for living".²⁷ [29] This echoes *Concerning Body* on the mathematical foundations of natural philosophy, which, according to Hobbes's hierarchy of the sciences, has epistemic priority [9] (1.1.2-9). Consider also the dedicatory epistle to *Six Lessons*, which relates mathematics and civil philosophy through methods grounded on materialist elements:

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 a place for demonstration . . . Geometry 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. (1656, *Epistle*; EW 7:183-4)

According to Jesseph, this passage suggests that for Hobbes "natural philosophy must have two parts. One is the doctrine of motion or mechanics, which is at best conceptually distinct from geometry or first philosophy: it is grounded in definitions which express true causes while its conclusions are both necessary and a priori. The remainder of natural philosophy . . . will be grounded in hypotheses which express the possible causes of phenomena" [30] (p. 138). He continues: "Similar remarks can be found at the beginning of Part IV of *De corpore*, when Hobbes announces that his investigation into 'Physiques, or the Phænomena of Nature' must proceed without the 'synthetic' method of demonstration from known causes and must undertake an 'analytic' approach in which the causes are hypothesized, and the results compared to experience. Nevertheless, the fundamental

properties of motion are known a priori, and it is also a priori certain that the phenomena of nature are produced by the motion and impact of bodies" [30] (p. 139) Though the *Six Lessons* passage isolates cases where those in arts deduce consequences (relatedly in civil philosophy and mathematics), in line with the preceding passages in Hobbes, Hobbes is clear that philosophical subjects—first philosophy included, which is also the basis of other subjects—operate within convergent methodological parameters (including fundamental presuppositions such as motion, connections, causes, bodies, etc.).²⁸ To be sure, Hobbes does distinguish demonstrable and indemonstrable sciences, but in any case, science for Hobbes concerns knowledge of the consequences of bodies (cf. *Leviathan* Chapter V and OL Chapter IX)²⁹ (see also [31]).

These passages support the interpretation that Hobbes intended his system of politics to be loosely derived from definitions, a logic, and a related method concerning fundamentals of motion, all of which are indicated in *Concerning Body*. Even if *Six Lessons* emphasizes construction rather than definitions, it is clear that the ratiocination involved in such demonstration, whereby actual causal knowledge becomes possible, relies on particular definitions and assumptions about the nature of bodies and the way we are to make sense of them.³⁰ Because of the loose consistency of methodological presuppositions across many of Hobbes's works, especially as they relate to *Concerning Body*, we are justified in taking the latter into account for a weak unity interpretation of the political texts. This also, as Part 2 notes, gives us pause for strong theist philosophical readings. Hobbes speaks of the deducibility of his philosophy from basic definitions, and first philosophy includes branches such as civil philosophy with fruits of politics and ethics [9] (*Concerning Body* 1.1.8). Taking the fruit while neglecting its root appears misguided, unless one would also do away with the whole tree, as in the autonomy approach of many theist accounts.

Hobbes in the dedicatory epistle to the English edition of *Concerning Body* declares: "all I have said is sufficiently demonstrated from Definitions." Though the logical deducibility of Hobbes's system is doubtful, Hobbes during this period clearly intends his system to be unified under a single overarching method, and this is key to appreciate his philosophy of science. An isolated reading of one or more texts outside of this holistic context, accordingly, needs strong justification.

With these *prima facie* reasons to take moderate unity as our point of departure, let us consider Gorham's theist critique of Jesseph. In trying to reconcile a materialist God with Hobbes's principles, Gorham argues that Hobbes's God enables "a theological grounding for materialist science" [16] (p. 244). This appears to contradict *Concerning Body's* very foundations: theology for Hobbes is *not* part of science or philosophy, let alone first philosophy: "The subject of Philosophy, or the matter it treats, is every Body . . . And this may be deduced from the Definitions of Philosophy . . . it excludes Theology, I mean the doctrine of God, Eternal, Ingenerable, Incomprehensible" [9] (*Concerning Body* 1.1.8). Hobbes warns that we cannot have knowledge of God (and related dogmatic ideas) who is at best only "an object of Faith, and not of Knowledge" [9] (*Concerning Body* 1.1.8). Without invoking the autonomy thesis as a frame, it is dubious that Gorham's materialist Hobbesian God can be seen as compatible with the metaphysics of the bodies laid out in *Concerning Body*. For Hobbes in *Concerning Body* not only clearly rejects the philosophical legitimacy of theological groundings, but he also takes *Concerning Body* to deal only with ordinary natural bodies, and this is problematic because that text states that only ordinary bodies exist [5] (p. 144), [32].³¹

Citing *Answer to Bramhall*, Gorham tries to show how Hobbes could maintain the philosophical coherency of God as an infinite body by distinguishing bounded, particular bodies from body as such [16] (p. 244). Body as such, he remarks, is indeterminate, and so would not be bounded like a normal body. There are a few questions with this attempted reconciliation where clarification by Gorham would have been helpful, and which also invites discussion as to the status of the unity of Hobbes's philosophy. First, there is the unclear leap from Body's indeterminate magnitude to its infinitude (how can we know God as "infinite corporeal spirit"?). Furthermore, it is conceivable that the material universe is

finitely bounded and so even if God did exist as indeterminate body as such (supposing, of course, that God were only body, and not the conjunction of body *and* non-body), on that assumption body would also presumably be finitely bounded (and thus not God). Second, it is unclear if body as such is meant in an ontological sense or a conceptual sense. If ontologically understood and supposing a finite universe, there is no God. If conceptually understood, then there is no working argument for God's *existence*, only the possibility of the existence of God (and there is the additional puzzle for making sense of this argument when accounting for Hobbes's other remarks that we have no idea of God, nor the infinite, as Hobbes declares in multiple authorized texts,³² and ideas are the basic elements of ratiocination in philosophy). Third, even if God were body as such given an indeterminate universe, God still seems causally superfluous at least on *Concerning Body's* framework, for we only need to appeal to particular bodies and laws of motion in scientific explanation.³³ An impotent or superfluous God, as Jesseph notes, is no God.³⁴ A final question is that if God is thought, as Gorham suggests, to be an infinite body as such, it is unclear how this particular view is to be distinguished from pantheism. Recall that Spinoza was conceived in the modern period as the atheist par excellence. Gorham's brief footnote remarks about the question of pantheism, namely, that Hobbes's God is not a pantheistic one because God is a "special body among others" is puzzling given his discussion of God understood as body as such [16] (p. 247n43). At the very least, more clarification on this question would have been helpful, and drawing from *Concerning Body* might be one way of making sense of the incoherence of pantheism for Hobbes.

The question as to the compatibility of *Concerning Body* with the Bramhall exchange, as Gorham begins to explore, is an interesting one. However, a detailed analysis of this exceeds the present paper's scope.³⁵ At the very least, what is clear is that if we accept the unity thesis and central claims of *Concerning Body*, as the above suggests, Gorham seems shaky. He preferentially cites *Concerning Body*: "Hobbes does employ theological premises" claims Gorham, when he, for example, discusses light and heat in *Concerning Body* [16] (p. 249).³⁶ Yet, an appreciation for *Concerning Body's* methodological intentions reveals that those scientific discussions utilize the hypothetical and conjectural, rather than the deductive method; the former are, as it were, Hobbes's explanatory grab-bag of suppositions, arguably of less foundational value than the a priori arguments at the head of the treatise, but in any case are not theological. Hobbesian foundational philosophical principles concern basic relations between matter in motion, while suppositional ones are speculative and probabilistic. Hobbes's discussion of magnets toward *Concerning Body's* end, for instance, showcase his belief that materialist metaphysics can, at least in principle, explain their attractive powers [9] (4.30.390-4). The theological remarks to which Gorham refers are simply claims to the effect that God (or nature) *could have* produced phenomena in a wide variety of ways. They should not be understood as foundational to his system, nor could they be, since God cannot be an object of philosophical knowledge for Hobbes [9] (1.1.8).

Supernatural premises are, for Hobbes, groundless and unphilosophical; they resist mechanical explanation in terms of bodies in motion, which for Hobbes is first philosophy's domain. Despite this, Gorham claims that Hobbes "relies on corporeal God to account for the ultimate origin of motion" [16] (p. 249). It is odd for Gorham to reference *Concerning Body* here, for in it, Hobbes asserts that the world's origin is in principle unknowable to us.³⁷ Moreover, "whether we suppose the World to be Finite, or Infinite, no absurdity will follow . . . The questions therefore about the *Magnitude* and *Beginning* of the World, are not to be determined by philosophers, but by those that are lawfully authorized to order the Worship of God [i.e., the Sovereign]" [9] (4.26.1). This is further support for the unity thesis, for politics picks up loose ends that metaphysics cannot readily integrate. Gorham supposes that Hobbes requires a corporeal God to solve the problem of motion. As the passage above suggests, however, this is a theoretical limit of scientific–philosophical reasoning and, therefore, practically determinable only by sovereign decree.

Quoting the *Historical Narration Concerning Heresy*, Gorham contends that Hobbes "subtly adjusted" his metaphysical principles "to make room for his corporeal God" in

a discussion on God's supposed dimensions [16] (p. 248). Making room for God in the causal story, given foundations of *Concerning Body*, would likely require more than subtle adjusting. Furthermore, the quote that Gorham cites as evidence can actually be interpreted as consistent with *Concerning Body*, since it begins with the qualification that the principle at hand is one of *religion*, i.e., theology, and not philosophy: "The first principle concerning all religion is that *God is*, that is to say God is something and not a mere fancy . . ." (Hobbes, cited from Gorham [16], p. 248). Arguably, Hobbes is not adjusting his metaphysical principles here, which are discussed fully in *Concerning Body*. Rather, he is discussing theological principles that fall within the purview of the sovereign, not the philosopher and scientist. Supposing that Hobbes does not radically change his system later, Gorham's reading will make more sense on an autonomy interpretation.

Finally, Gorham claims that "Hobbes insists on the infinitesimal resistance of the divine substance in order to exempt it from the difficulty . . . about the propagation of endeavor. Even if motion is propagated infinitely through God's spirit, it will not diminish before reaching ordinary body" [16] (p. 254). It is unclear how such an explanation differs from the anti-scientific "subtleties of Metaphysics" that Hobbes rejects, being "kept up by erring men, and such as understand not the words they dispute about" [9] (*Concerning Body* 1.2.5). For Hobbes has no idea of infinity, understands spirit in material terms, and rejects positive accounts of divine substance [10] (L 3.34.207–209; 3: 610–614). In short, Gorham is relying on words and distinctions Hobbes in his systematic philosophy finds problematic. Instead, Gorham could have explicitly taken an autonomy frame, making the case for a Hobbesian God without having to trouble with *Concerning Body*.

A unity thesis defender might be pressed to explain *Answer to Bramhall* and Hobbes's articulation of a corporeal God. If Hobbes were only writing about God to avoid persecution, it would have been easier for him to simply feign orthodoxy. For a bodily God might appear just as blasphemous as denying God's existence [33].³⁸ If God has a body, He seems theoretically divisible, and then is not God. The unity thesis still advocates the need to account for what Hobbes says about his corporeal God. However, because *Answer* is a late text that Hobbes intended to remain private [26] (p. 54), interpretive latitude seems permissible. It is possible that Hobbes simply changes his mind this late in the game. A less messy explanation, assuming that Hobbes was not deeply confused about his own project, is that he finds himself in a political corner; the only way to coherently maintain God, given materialism, is to have a corporeal God. There is some precedent for this in the early Christians. Hobbes has already published that incorporeal substances are like round squares. Defending the incorporeality of God would, therefore, imply God's nonexistence. This would indeed be political suicide. Under pressure, he needs to say something consistent with his previous views, or appear unphilosophical. At the same time, he realizes, given his system, that a bodily God is incoherent at worst, and explanatorily useless at best. This is, possibly, why he wants the exchanges to remain private, ensuring his system remains consistent to the learned public.

Though espousing orthodoxy is safer, it would undermine claims in *Leviathan*. There, we recall, Hobbes argues that we should properly speak of God negatively (unless to honor Him, which would involve non-philosophical language). Moreover, "incorporeal spirit" has no sense, and this is precisely the orthodox way God is articulated. On the one hand, Hobbes is committed to materialism and so, if there were a God, He must be a body. But on the other hand, Hobbes's negative theology precludes determinate judgments about God. On pain of dangerous blasphemy and contradiction of the sovereign, Hobbes must say something. If he admits God has no body, this entails atheism given his system. And if he admits a corporeal God, he possibly undermines his claims about philosophy's scope without further specification on the status of minimal natural theology. A corporeal God is less dangerous, politically speaking, and preserves the basis of his system. Accordingly, it may help us to explain Hobbes's views in *Answer* and *Anti-White*. Because of these problems, though, we should be weary of any claims regarding the theism dispute that rely

heavily on unpublished or unsystematic texts, as does Gorham, unless they jettison the unity thesis.

At this juncture, we should consider the difficult question of dissimulation, irony, and intentional ambiguity in Hobbes as one means of addressing apparent philosophical inconsistencies.³⁹ Now, there is plenty of evidence that Hobbes condoned deception to promote peace and avoid the perils of war. Kinch Hoekstra remarks that “Hobbes himself recommends that a ‘wise man should so write’ that he is understood on one level by all, and on a deeper level by the wise” [26] (p. 41). Berman maintains the same line as Jesseph, defending what he calls the “crypto-atheist hypothesis” [4] (p. 65). Indeed, “Hobbes agrees that truths that would lead to disruption should be kept private” [26] (p. 44). Civil war is a central concern for Hobbes, and atheistic professions undermine the consistent practical end of his philosophy to prevent discord.

Hoekstra’s observation supports the claim that Hobbes could never profess atheism, as he was always subject of a sovereign prohibiting it: “The sovereign is the one who has the final right ‘both to decide which opinions and doctrines are inimical to peace and to forbid their being taught’; even if the sovereign mistakes in authorizing a doctrine, the subject is bound not to speak against his determination” [26] (p. 44). Furthermore, Hobbes “states in *De homine* that ‘sometimes simulation is without fault’” [26] (p. 46), for “Profession with the tongue is but an externall thing” [10] (L 3.42.271; 3: 784). One last example: “In a private discussion with the third earl of Devonshire, Hobbes maintained that it was ‘lawful to make use of ill Instruments to do ourselves good’” [26] (p. 46). It is certainly hard to defend esoteric readings, but at least in this case we have textual support that Hobbes endorses such approaches given proper ends.

The Hobbesian acceptance of permissible dissemblance creates interpretive problems for both theism-dispute parties. For Gorham, possibly *Answer* is one instance where Hobbes intends to dissemble. Recall that “Bramhall and Hobbes both note that Hobbes urged several times in his initial letter that it remain private” [26] (p. 54). It is reasonable to infer that the posthumously published Bramhall exchanges were never meant by Hobbes to modify his system. Perhaps he only uses them to dissemble after charges of heresy accumulate. On the other hand, there are difficulties with maintaining the unity thesis given Hobbes’s endorsement of deception. Should we take *Leviathan* at face value, let alone *De Corpore* or the supposed unity of his system? This leaves us with interpretive puzzles not dissimilar to the supposed satire of Machiavelli’s *Prince*. Such questions ultimately lie outside the scope of this paper. Still, they are valuable because they remind us to not take everything Hobbes says at face value. And, given the peculiarity of his corporeal God—compared to what is more consistently found in Hobbes’s published system and his views on causation and explanation—we are justified in being skeptical about those pronouncements.

6. Concluding Remarks

This paper has returned to the substantive Hobbes theism debate, this time by reconsidering arguments for and against an atheistic Hobbes against the backdrop of his methodological pronouncements and differing interpretative strategies by commentators. Theist interpretations, as we have seen, make more sense when certain texts in natural philosophy and metaphysics—such as *Concerning Body*—are downplayed or viewed as separable from political ones—such as *Leviathan*—since the metaphysical and methodological claims in the former leave little space for God. This was one shortcoming with Gorham’s arguments. On the other hand, atheistic interpretations can be more easily defended if we take seriously Hobbes’s intention for the unity of his system, which necessarily includes *Concerning Body*’s foundational materialist claims on causation and scientific (or what he calls philosophical) explanation. Jesseph’s atheistic Hobbes would have been more secure against Gorham’s objections had he more explicitly invoked the unity thesis.

Now, one might object that the present line of argumentation, in dealing with Hobbes’s remarks of a materialist God, at most establishes that Hobbes was inconsistent and not

the stronger claim that he was an atheist. While plausible, there are at least two ways to address the question of inconsistency. First, many of the Hobbesian works that theist readers marshal as their strongest evidence turn out to be works that Hobbes did not authorize or endorse as part of his considered system (e.g., the Bramhall exchange published posthumously in 1682). It seems reasonable, as far as theories of philosophical interpretation go, to assume that systematic published works retain priority, and this is common practice in numerous fields including Kant scholarship, Hobbes studies, Nietzsche studies, and so on [34].⁴⁰ Second, and in addition, we have plenty of evidence (and several other commentators, as I have referenced in the foregoing, support this view) that Hobbes found deception and dissimulation to be acceptable in appropriate political contexts.

What is clear, at least, is that if the interpretive priority principle is reasonable, then we are justified to prefer statements from works such as *Concerning Body*—which include claims incompatible with Gorham’s materialist God, e.g., that natural philosophy only considers ordinary natural bodies and that only such bodies exist (or can be known through philosophizing)—over lesser works such as the Bramhall exchange, since it was never authorized for publication. Given Hobbes’s own permissive remarks on deception, it is possible to view this apparent philosophical inconsistency as no real inconsistency at all (for Hobbes’s arguments in the deprioritized work could be seen as involving politically motivated dissimulation, as suggested in Part 3), and so at the end of the day the atheist position looks plausible under assumption of the unity thesis regarding Hobbes’s general method and scientific–metaphysical assumptions. However, even if this stronger conclusion is rejected and instead only the minimal conclusion, i.e., that Hobbes is inconsistent, is accepted⁴¹ [35] then it is nonetheless significant; such a conclusion could, for instance, give more credence to the autonomy reading, despite many theistic commentators wishing to endorse the unity thesis. In any case, I do not claim to conclusively show that Hobbes was an atheist, but at least indicate that methodological concerns are valuable for making sense of important substantive issues, and to this extent they have been underexplored in the Hobbes theism debate.⁴²

There are two additional upshots from the foregoing analysis: first, the autonomy thesis can limit the richness of possible interpretations of *Leviathan*, especially for political theorists. Granted, a lot of mileage can be gained from *Leviathan* alone. But, as our inquiry shows, readings that draw from multiple authorized sources, especially Hobbes’s *Concerning Body* hold promise. A holistic reading of Hobbes enables a richer understanding of his political theory by placing it in a larger philosophical context, including Hobbes’s views on mathematics, science, and method. Second, the unity thesis can promote renewed exploration into *Concerning Body*. Hobbes’s treatise on metaphysics, logic, language, and materialist mathematics can illuminate *Leviathan*, and so should not simply be left for theoretical commentators on Hobbes.⁴³

A non-fideistic theistic Hobbes remains philosophically problematic and politically inexpedient. Hobbes’s metaphysics would appear contradictory in many respects, and scientifically confused in others. Moreover, political commentators would have to disentangle a mass of theological commitments and apparent inconsistencies—unless they adopt the autonomy thesis and focus only on *Leviathan*. This paper’s approach, alternatively, clears space for a more philosophically interesting secular interpretation. Becoming clearer on our methodological intention remains key. And, persuading commentators to consider Hobbes’s thought from a unified perspective can help illuminate Hobbes’s natural philosophy to be as significant as he himself saw it during his life.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I am appreciative of the keen input provided by three anonymous reviewers. Their remarks, in addition to helpful feedback from Doug Jesseph, have helped me to sharpen this paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 Classic atheist Hobbes commentators include Edwin Curley [1–3], David Berman [4], and Douglas Jesseph [5]. For theist Hobbes commentators, see A.P. Martinich [6], S.A. Lloyd [7], and Yves-Charles Zarka [8].
- 2 Common reasons for seeing Hobbes as a theist include his statements in the Latin *Leviathan* (1668) and Bramhall exchange (1682). Theistic proponents ask why an atheist would dedicate so much writing on God and scripture. Considering Hobbes like Spinoza in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) makes this less puzzling; both look more like scholarly hermeneutics than devout dedications.
- 3 I give references to Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Philosophy, the First Section, Concerning Body* [9], abbreviated as *Concerning Body*, with part, chapter, and section number separated by periods; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [10], abbreviated as L. References to *Leviathan* including part, chapter, and original 1651 pages separated by periods followed by a reference to volume and page number of Hobbes 2012; and Thomas Hobbes, *An answer to a book published by Dr. Bramhall, late bishop of Derry; called the Catching of the leviathan. Together with an historical narration concerning heresie, and the punishment thereof* [11], abbreviated as *Answer to Bramhall*, or AB.
- 4 For unity proponents, see Douglas Jesseph [12] and Noel Malcolm [13], especially Chapter 5, ‘Hobbes’s Science of Politics and His Theory of Science’. See also Alan Ryan [14] and Maurice Goldsmith [15].
- 5 This is not to say that it is impossible to defend autonomy atheist readings, nor that it is impossible to defend unity theist readings; the nature of the readings simply lend themselves to these poles, as we will see when considering Hobbes’s natural philosophy.
- 6 Howard Williams [17] rather boldly claims that Hobbes’s “political philosophy forms by far and away his most important contribution to philosophy, and that most of his other writings on metaphysics, physics and mathematics are largely of antiquarian interest” (p. 20). Williams’ last assumption seems implausible. Note, however, that he mainly works at the intersection of the history of philosophy and practical philosophy; many other philosophers take a similar approach. In fact, moral philosopher Bernard Gert [18] makes a related remark in addressing why he did not translate the early chapters of *De Homine* (p. 35n). I would like to challenge hasty dismissals of Hobbes’s theoretical philosophy, even for those working in practical philosophy such as Williams.
- 7 See Gregory S. Kavka [19] (p. 68). Even though some may see the autonomy view as an implausible non-starter, it might be thought useful for applying Hobbesian moral and political philosophy to contemporary problems, as it avoids conceptual and historical baggage. For approaches motivated in this way, see chapters from the edited collection, S. A. Lloyd (ed.) [20].
- 8 When I refer to Hobbes’s methodology, I typically do not refer to his specific statements on analysis vs. synthesis. Rather, I have in mind his more general methodological approach, which involves reasoning from causes and effects. In fact, Hobbes defines philosophy in *Concerning Body* [9] (1.1.2) in precisely this way: “PHILOSOPHY is such knowledge of Effects or Appearances, as we acquire true Ratiocination from the knowledge we have first of their Causes or Generation: And again, of such causes as may be from knowing first their Effects.”
- 9 Curley defends the atheist reading yet rarely cites *Concerning Body*, though he does maintain a unity reading in considering a variety of Hobbesian texts.
- 10 Indeed, in *De Corpore Politico* (Part II) and *Leviathan* Hobbes strips away Christian tenets, claiming the only necessary article of belief is “Jesus is Christ.”
- 11 The divide has since shifted toward theism, though some newer works have rekindled the debate. See the *Hobbes Studies*, 26 (2013) Special Issue on Hobbes and politics vis à vis theology.
- 12 Parts three and four of *Leviathan*—nearly half of the treatise—are devoted to biblical interpretation, analysis of church structure, and religion in the commonwealth.
- 13 One concern in the literature involves grappling with what Hobbes says in Chapter 14 and 15 of *Leviathan* on laws of nature and their source of normativity. “Forbidden” actions imply a moral Being doing the forbidding [10] (L 1.15.76; 2: 232). There are two ways around this problem: first, this can be understood in prudential terms; it would be self-interestedly foolish to undermine such laws. Second, and connected to this point, Hobbes writes in the natural law tradition inherited as an early modern.
- 14 All post-Reformation formularies (and the Roman church) have language to the effect that God is a spirit without body, parts, or passions. At Hobbes’s time, unlike modern Mormonism, the notion of a material God was so out of the mainstream that it would almost immediately be recognized by contemporaries as either implying the denial of God’s existence or as Epicureanism in disguise. I thank Thomas Williams for this insight.
- 15 In fact, this is largely what Hobbes does in *Leviathan*; his theology remains negative. We do not conceive, imagine, or have an idea of God. Attempts to speak of His attributes is only to honor [10] (L 2.31.190; 2: 564).
- 16 Although *Leviathan* was finished in 1651 and *Concerning Body* in 1655, Curley notes that Hobbes worked on *Concerning Body* as early as 1643 [21] (p. li).
- 17 Curley comments that though *Concerning Body* was “the first part of Hobbes’ projected tripartite system of philosophy,” he began “this work some years earlier, but set it aside to finish *De Cive* (the third part of his system), because he felt it necessary to address the political issues of his day before completely laying the foundations of his politics in natural philosophy” [22] (p. 497).

- 18 This is precisely how Matthew Rose [24] defends a theist Hobbes, implicitly utilizing an autonomy reading of *Leviathan* rather than other texts or Hobbes's general methodology and system.
- 19 Interestingly, Martinich rarely cites *Concerning Body*.
- 20 Cromartie leans on the autonomy side regarding the unity of Hobbes's practical and theoretical philosophy; Cromartie claims Hobbes believes a reality-ordering God, yet that God has little to do with Hobbes's moral thinking. However, if we are to take Hobbes at his word, and also accept God as foundational, it is unclear how this would not factor in to moral thinking. Cromartie appeals to the unity thesis with regard to Hobbes's theoretical works, but the autonomy thesis when his moral philosophy is invoked [25] (p. 870).
- 21 Curley conjectures that "in the *Examination of White* Hobbes was experimenting with a position which he was tempted to adopt, as his way of dealing with the religious issue" [3] (p. 108).
- 22 For Gorham, determining the publication date is important so we can know whether we can charitably read *Answer* back into *Leviathan*. Though published posthumously in 1682, Gorham believes it likely composed in 1668 [16] (p. 241). He claims that there is evidence that Hobbes's corporeal God can be found as early as the days of the *Meditations*, though this is speculative at best because it rides on guesswork regarding what is contained in a *lost* letter of Descartes to Mersenne.
- 23 See Hoekstra [26], p. 46.
- 24 See Curley [3] (p. 91) for more on the variety of theist readers.
- 25 Sorell claims that "Hobbes makes the body of science look remarkably unified and homogeneous in its emphasis on motion" [27] (pp. 49, 54–58). Still, *Leviathan* and *Concerning Body* diverge to a great degree.
- 26 Cf. to OL differences: "The science of making and maintaining commonwealths has definite and infallible rules" [28] (p. 135).
- 27 From Shapin and Shaffer [29] (p. 391).
- 28 I am not so concerned here with the question of "construction" in Hobbes but rather simply wish to note what Hobbes takes to be shared assumptions and methods across various fields of intellectual inquiry that could lend credence to the unity reading. For instance, both moral philosophy and mathematics concern matter in motion. The former focuses on "matter in the mind", whereas "the Effects of Simple Motion" and the "Properties they produce, from which kind of Contemplation spring that part of Philosophy which is called Geometry" [9] (*Concerning Body* 1.6.6). See Zarka [8], for more on Hobbes's first philosophy as discussed in *Anti-White*.
- 29 For a more detailed discussion of Hobbes's views of demonstration, see Jesseph [31].
- 30 This is supported by Jesseph's reference to *Six Letters*: "Hobbes also regarded civil philosophy as properly demonstrable, at least once his account of the generation of the commonwealth had been accepted. The reason here is revealing: Because the commonwealth is created by man, its causes are fully knowable by men, and there is room for a genuinely demonstrative science of the commonwealth" [31] (p. 88, and see also p. 105n16).
- 31 Hobbes clearly has in mind theology properly understood. However, I leave open the question as to whether (minimal) natural theology might be excluded, though it appears to make little sense given many of Hobbes's other statements and commitments in *Concerning Body*. At the very least, allowing for Hobbes to engage with minimal, non-dogmatic theology could help to explain his remarks on what could arguably be called natural theology in the final chapter of Part 2 of *Leviathan* (yet, even there Hobbes entertains a largely *negative* theology, suggesting that we cannot have any idea of God like he does in the reply to Descartes' *Meditations*). For a discussion on natural theology in Hobbes, see Benjamin Milner [32], who reads Hobbes to be politically disingenuous in *Leviathan's* so-called natural theology. I discuss dissimulation in Hobbes later in this section.
- 32 For example, see the tenth objection in Hobbes's set of replies to Descartes' *Meditations*.
- 33 Strictly speaking, it is true that Hobbes's exclusion of theology from the topic of *Concerning Body* could be taken as support for Gorham in the sense that it would then be unsurprising that Hobbes's discussion on *finite* bodies does not explain God. Even so, if *Concerning Body* is taken seriously, then God would seem explanatorily useless (in line with Jesseph's original objections as indicated in Part 2), since philosophy for Hobbes is supposed to explain the world, and the philosophy of body of *Concerning Body* has little need of God understood as body as such for causal explanation of phenomena. Even if Hobbes would allow for the existence of God in a non-philosophical sense, this claim would still go too far for Gorham's purposes, who—as I note in the next paragraph—sees in *Concerning Body* what I interpret to be metaphysical (i.e., philosophical and not merely theological) foundations of God in Hobbes. So, if *Concerning Body's* comment excluding theology supports Gorham with regard to belief in the *possible* existence of God, he nonetheless goes too far with regard to the import of his arguments for the indirect *knowledge* of God's existence via foundations in physics.
- 34 In fact, Robert Boyle raised a similar objection to Hobbes in his "Animadversions on Hobbes" from 1674, pp. 104–105 (cited from Shapin and Schaffer [29], (p. 206).
- 35 Even if there is an apparent mismatch between *Concerning Body* and the Bramhall letter regarding key philosophical concepts, it is still possible to read them as somewhat compatible, at least in certain respects (although I believe the unity thesis would render the incompatibility more likely). For a passage that might support their compatibility, consider Hobbes's remarks on [11] p. 18 of *Answer* (1682), where he claims only to *believe* and not know God's existence (and so mere belief in God seems compatible with *Concerning Body* if it is taken to be theological and not philosophical conviction): "Though I believe the Omnipotence of God,

and that he can do what he will, yet I dare not say how every thing is done, because I cannot conceive nor comprehend either the Divine Substance, or the way of its operation. And I think it Impiety to speak concerning God anything of my own head . . . which I understand not." In contrast, consider Hobbes's remarks on [11] pp. 73–74, where he mentions that belief should be informed by reason. If the right reasons can be interpreted to concern causes and effects moving from sure definitions (cf. *Leviathan* Chapters V and VII or the discussion on ratiocination in *Concerning Body*), it is unclear on what basis his belief can be for God (and so unsurprising that Hobbes claims elsewhere that he has no idea of God): "Belief requires Teachers and Arguments drawn either from Reason, or from some thing already believed. Where there is no reason for our Belief, there is no reason we should believe." I cite these to avoid the impression that either side is definitive, but I hope that this paper's overarching discussion on Hobbes's method will allow us to make better sense of the puzzle of their (in)compatibility.

36 It is unclear what is meant by "theological premises," since light and heat are physical phenomena for Hobbes. As physical phenomena, they pertain to body, and body is the topic of Hobbesian metaphysics (which is to say, of philosophy). It is unclear if they can be both theological *and* philosophical premises if Hobbes is correct that philosophy excludes theology, though perhaps Hobbes is merely inconsistent here.

37 For Hobbes, the world is just bodies in motion [9] (*Concerning Body* 4.26.5).

38 Cf. to *Mr. Hobbes Considered* [33], where Hobbes argues with Wallis that his corporeal God is not heterodox, but quite in line with Christian tradition. Curley suggests that Hobbes's material God is not necessarily a dangerous move, since seventeenth century church councils were largely silent on metaphysical issues not pertaining to the trinity, so "a Christian can be a materialist about both God and the soul" [2] (p. 258).

39 See Curley [2] pp. 261–3. I discuss this further in Part 5.

40 This is not to say that the priority principle is not unproblematic. In fact, there are many reasons to consider abandoning it. See, for example, William A. B. Parkhurst [34].

41 See Deborah Baumgold [35] for a discussion on the problems of consistency across Hobbes's works. She focuses on inconsistency in view of the compositional process of Hobbes's political works, but similar findings might be discussed in the future concerning the theism dispute.

42 On the whole, the methodological debate remains largely inconclusive, though I have tried to present some pieces of evidence that might be explored in the future to favor the unity thesis (generally, I stipulate unity to see what implications follow for the theist debate, which might in turn provide justification to re-investigate the plausibility of unity). It is still an open question as to how Hobbes's various works hang together despite Hobbes's own ambitious voicing of their systematic unity, and I lack the space to engage in an in-depth methodological analysis; such a task would require a paper (or even monograph) of its own, one less concerned with substantive issues as I am here.

43 To illustrate the fruitfulness of such an approach, consider Howard Williams' interpretation of Hobbes's political theory vis à vis Kant. Williams' comparative discussions neglect *Concerning Body*, as well as Hobbes's philosophy of science. Williams argues that Hobbes's political thought deeply influences Kant. Yet, what Hobbes are we speaking of here? The political theorist, interpreted through the autonomy lens of the *Popularphilosophen* of Kant's time, or the systematic Hobbes concerned with the interconnections between metaphysics, mathematics, and politics? One potential pitfall of Williams' analysis stems, I believe, from the fact that he neglects the heavily materialist underpinnings of Hobbes's philosophy, as well as Hobbes's views on method. Unlike *Leviathan*, Hobbes's materialist method is better articulated in *Concerning Body*. Kant may have found influence in Hobbes, but he only had access to one dimension of his thought in *De Cive* (and perhaps *Leviathan*). Williams does not cite *Concerning Body* a single time. Looking into that text could have changed his comparative analysis. This lesson holds for us as well: future commentators stand to benefit from including *Concerning Body* in their analyses to provide the most charitable reading of Hobbes and to show how his views on politics, theism, and science relate.

References

1. Curley, E. "I Durst Not Write so Boldly" or, How to Read Hobbes's Theological Political Treatise; Bostrenghi, D., Spinoza, H., Eds.; Bibliopolis: Naples, Italy, 1992.
2. Curley, E. Calvin and Hobbes, or, Hobbes as an Orthodox Christian. *J. Hist. Philos.* **1996**, *34*, 257–271. [[CrossRef](#)]
3. Curley, E. Religion and Morality in Hobbes. In *Rational Commitment and Social Justice: Essays for Gregory Kavka*; Coleman, J.L., Morris, C.W., Eds.; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1998; pp. 90–111.
4. Berman, D. *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell*; Routledge: London, UK; New York, NY, USA, 1990.
5. Jessep, D. Hobbes's Atheism. *Midwest Stud. Philos.* **2002**, *26*, 140–166. [[CrossRef](#)]
6. Martinich, A.P. *The Two Gods of "Leviathan": Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1992.
7. Lloyd, S.A. *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes's Leviathan*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK; New York, NY, USA, 1992.
8. Zarka, Y. First Philosophy and the Foundation of Knowledge. In *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*; Sorell, T., Ed.; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK; New York, NY, USA, 1996; pp. 62–85.
9. Hobbes, T. *Elements of Philosophy, the First Section, Concerning Body*; Andrew Croke: London, UK, 1656.
10. Hobbes, T. *Leviathan*; Malcolm, N., Ed.; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2012.

11. Hobbes, T. *An Answer to a Book Published by Dr. Bramhall, Late Bishop of Derry; Called the Catching of the Leviathan. Together with an Historical Narration Concerning Heresie, and the Punishment Thereof*; Printed for W. Crooke at the Green Dragon without Temple-Barr: London, UK, 1682.
12. Jesseph, D. Hobbes on “Conatus”: A Study in the Foundations of Hobbesian Philosophy. *Hobbes Stud.* **2016**, *29*, 66–85. [[CrossRef](#)]
13. Malcolm, N. *Aspects of Hobbes*; Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2002.
14. Ryan, A. Hobbes’s Science of Politics and His Theory of Science. In *The Philosophy of the Social Sciences*; Pantheon: New York, NY, USA, 1970.
15. Goldsmith, M. *Hobbes’s Science of Politics*; Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA, 1966.
16. Gorham, G. The Theological Foundation of Hobbesian Physics: A defence of corporeal God. *Br. J. Hist. Philos.* **2013**, *21*, 240–261. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Williams, H. *Kant’s Critique of Hobbes*; University of Wales Press: Cardiff, UK, 2003.
18. Gert, B. (Ed.) *Man and Citizen: De Homine and De Cive*; Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis, IN, USA, 1991.
19. Kavka, G.S. *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 1986.
20. Lloyd, S.A. (Ed.) *Hobbes Today: Insights for the 21st Century*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2012.
21. Curley, E. (Ed.) Introduction to Hobbes’ Leviathan. In *Leviathan with Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*; Hackett Publishing Company: Cambridge, UK, 1994.
22. Curley, E. (Ed.) A Review and Conclusion. In *Leviathan with Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*; Hackett Publishing Company: Cambridge, UK, 1994.
23. Malcolm, N. A summary biography of Hobbes. In *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*; Sorell, T., Ed.; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK; New York, NY, USA, 1996; pp. 13–44.
24. Rose, M. Hobbes as Political Theologian. *Political Theol.* **2013**, *14*, 5–31. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Cromartie, A. The God of Thomas Hobbes. *Hist. J.* **2008**, *51*, 857–879. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Hoekstra, K. The End of Philosophy (The Case of Hobbes). *Proc. Aristot. Soc.* **2006**, *106*, 23–60. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. Sorell, T. Hobbes’s Scheme of the Sciences. In *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*; Sorell, T., Ed.; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK; New York, NY, USA, 1996; pp. 45–61.
28. Hobbes, T. *Leviathan with Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*; Hackett Publishing Company: Cambridge, UK, 1994.
29. Shapin, S.; Shaffer, S. *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 1985.
30. Jesseph, D. Hobbesian Mechanics. In *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy: Volume III*; Garber, D., Nadler, S., Eds.; Clarendon Press: Oxford, UK, 2006; pp. 119–152.
31. Jesseph, D. Hobbes and the Method of Natural Science. In *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*; Sorell, T., Ed.; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK; New York, NY, USA, 1996; pp. 86–107.
32. Milner, B. Hobbes: On Religion. *Political Theory* **1988**, *16*, 400–425. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Hobbes, T. *Mr. Hobbes Considered in His Loyalty, Religion, Reputation, and Manners*; Andrew Crooke: London, UK, 1662.
34. Parkhurst, W.A.B. Does Nietzsche have a “Nachlass”? *Nietzsche-Stud.* **2020**, *49*, 216–257. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Baumgold, B. The Difficulties of Hobbes Interpretation. *Political Theory* **2008**, *36*, 827–855. [[CrossRef](#)]