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# The Universes of Calvin and Hobbes:

## Towards an Understanding of Calvin's Anthropology and his Political Thought

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*In addition to arguing that Calvin's anthropology impacts on his political thought, this paper asserts that his doctrine of common grace is vital to any coherent statement of his political theory. In Calvin's thought, human depravity necessitates external coercion, and the degree of this coercion is proportionate to the depravity of humanity. It is also contended, that for Calvin, alongside the state being an agent of coercion, God is an agent of such coercion as well. Calvin teaches such divine coercion in his doctrine of common grace. The thesis acknowledges a prima facie contradiction between Calvin's anthropology, and his envisioned polity. The contradiction is made explicit by a study of Hobbes' anthropology and scientific view of the universe. Hobbes' authoritarianism flows from a marriage of his pessimistic anthropology and his a priori exclusion of providence as a determining factor of civil society. This paper seeks to answer the question, 'If Calvin saw humans as so self-interested, why does his ideal polity not more resemble one specifically designed to repress human expression?' The conclusion is that Calvin's doctrine of an active God like an active state, restraining the wickedness of humans, must be considered in any attempt to properly explain his political thought as a corollary of his anthropology.*

This article is concerned with the effect of John Calvin's (1504-64) *descriptive* theory of human nature on his *prescriptive* theory of political thought. At first glance, there appears to be a contradiction between Calvin's view of human nature and his ideal polity, because he allocates a degree of freedom to citizens, which is surprising, given his belief in the essential wickedness and malevolence of humankind. To demonstrate this, we have only to compare and contrast the anthropologies and political theories of Calvin and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Both thinkers have very similar anthropologies, but they envisaged radically different commonwealths. This contrast arises from the opposing understanding of the universe which each of these

thinkers incorporated into his political theory. Calvin believed in an active God, who, by his common grace, constantly diminishes the wickedness in the wills (and consequently in the behaviour) of all political actors, thereby diminishing their destructive potential. Hobbes believed in a closed system of nature, without any supernatural interaction. Any antisocial proclivities must therefore be exorcised by temporal coercion. To gain a proper understanding of Calvin's concept of human nature, human behaviour, and his state theory, we have to realise that Calvin's doctrine of common grace is essential to any understanding of his political thought. Common grace is the idea which links Calvin's *descriptive* anthropology to his prescriptive *political* thought.

Calvin recognised a link between human nature and political theory, though he never elaborated on any such connection as an issue in itself. However, in the middle of discussing humankind's radical corruption by sin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he lamented the general neglect of the issue amongst ecclesiastical authorities.

Thus it happens that when the church fathers are discussing free will, they first inquire, not into its importance for civil or external actions, but into what promotes obedience to the divine law. Although I grant this latter question is the main one, I do not think the former ought to be completely neglected.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of human nature is essential for political dialogue. Roger Trigg suggests: 'Without a conception of what it is to be human, no one can say much about human societies or human practices.'<sup>2</sup> Political discourse without a theory of human nature is incomplete: 'Political argument, just as much as political activity, involves a conception of what is involved in being human.'<sup>3</sup> To think about human nature is to postulate what is and is not possible in political societies and institutions. Progress and change can only be defined within the limits of what humans can do. The concept of human nature must always be explored and considered for social change to be assessed, or even suggested.<sup>4</sup> Trigg's assertion is justified;

Ideas of human nature are not merely of importance to the individual, but radically affect the kind of society we live in and the kind we would like to live in. Are we, on the other hand, social beings by nature, eager

to cooperate with others for the common good? Our political views may be influenced by our answers. There is also the problem about whether our natural inclinations and desires have to be restrained in society or whether they find proper expression in it.<sup>5</sup>

Once this nature is expressed, theorists usually reveal the nexus between this natural condition and the origins of the state as a political entity. In this context the 'state of nature' is 'an attempt to account for the very existence of any state. It represents a vital stage in the process of argument; Man understood—but at the point before the synthetical process starts'.<sup>6</sup>

The best example of such a connection is found in the system of Thomas Hobbes. Essentially, his system rests on physical laws expressed by two agents—human psychology made manifest in outward behaviour; and the state. Whatever the force leading an object or political actor one way, it must be equalled or exceeded, to bring the object or political actor to a stop or in the opposite direction. The force intrinsic to the object or political actor is human nature, or, commonly observed characteristics that people generally seem to share. The outside force repressing this intrinsic nature is state coercion. When this principle is married to a pessimistic anthropology, Gianfranco Poggi concludes: 'The whole political realm is here conceived as a remedy to the built in liabilities of human nature.'<sup>7</sup>

Hobbes' system is entirely premised on his bleak view of human nature, and expressed in the scientific method he developed.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, when he criticised the Greek political thinkers for their lack of attention to physical coercion, he attributed it to 'a superficial view of human nature'.<sup>9</sup> His view of human nature is comparable to that of Calvin's. Frederick Copleston, for instance, draws no distinction between the two.<sup>10</sup> Not enough has been written on Hobbes' exposure and possible debt to Calvinism. This is despite Martinich's pointed remark concerning Hobbes' theory of human nature: 'His doctrine was Calvinism without original sin.'<sup>11</sup>

The proper view of unbridled human nature as far as Hobbes was concerned, is of brutal self-interest. Hobbes was never ambiguous or elusive: 'In the state of nature there is in all men a will to do harm.'<sup>12</sup> Also, 'and of the voluntary acts of every man the object is some *Good to himselfe*'.<sup>13</sup>

Essentially, humans are animals, forever trying to aggrandise their own power. A proclivity that 'ceaseth onely on Death'.<sup>14</sup> Calvin was largely at one with Hobbes' diagnosis. Unless there is some sort of restraint on humans,

No one would wish to yield to others; everyone would try the extent of his powers, and thus all would end in prey and plunder, and in the mere license of fraud and murder, and all the passions of mankind would have full and unbridled sway.<sup>15</sup>

Calvin also detected an intrinsic haughtiness that Hobbes would later affirm as well,

To such an extent unquestioningly does ambition prevail among men, that many are always eager to contend for power, and endeavour to obtain it even at the hazard of their lives. In every age the whole world has been convulsed by the desire of obtaining kingly power; and there is not a village so inconsiderable as not to contain men who willingly undertake to become rulers; and all this proves that man is an animal desirous of honour.<sup>16</sup>

In view of this, it is reasonable to conclude that the human natures postulated by Calvin and Hobbes are, overall, not significantly different. The belief in determinism held by each theorist will later be duly considered.

There are, for Hobbes, two possible origins of the state. The people, out of a state of war, may institute a sovereign, or, the sovereign can acquire his power by victory. The origins of the state, however, do not prove or disprove legitimacy. Calvin published no detailed opinion on the historical origins of the state. He simply urged that it was necessary and that it was also proper. Necessary because civil society could not flourish without it; and proper because God wills and approves of it.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, in Hobbes' thought, the state exists of necessity. This was not original to Hobbes, but Hobbes' offence was to consider this as sufficient ground for political theory, not necessarily backed up by Scripture. Without the state, no society can flourish. Human nature and its social expression, inexorably lead to the establishment of the commonwealth. Constant fear of death due to the total absence of laws and restraint, leads people to give up their complete liberty, which is really no liberty at all. Consequently, people invest their wills into a single sovereign.<sup>18</sup>

This is enough justification for Hobbes. In his mind, the sovereign has specific attributes;

One Person, of whose Acts a great Multitude, by mutuall Covenants one with another, have made themselves everyone the Author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their Peace and Common Defence.<sup>19</sup>

Such a contract cannot be between just the few, it must bind the majority. This is so that the enemy, those outside of the contract and hence unbridled, may be overcome in the case of war.<sup>20</sup> The contract must be virtually unbreakable, lest the destructive whims of humankind lead to the state of nature again.<sup>21</sup> All people in the commonwealth have denied themselves the freedom to live according to their individual wills, and now, 'the wills of many (are) in the will of one man'.<sup>22</sup> To distinguish between the will of the subjects and the sovereign is now unknown. However, even though this contract has been made, human nature is still what it was beforehand. There is no divine hand restraining the wickedness of the human will, as there is in Calvin's thought. It is at this point that Hobbes began to prescribe the principles of right government, that is, the amount of coercion needed to bridle human actions in order to maintain peace.

For Hobbes, the ideal sovereign is one person. Although he accepted that there had been successful systems in the past in which power was invested in a cabinet, the only way to be certain of solidarity is in a monarchy. Hobbes rejected the Thomist *a priori* justification for monarchy. Such a view posits that, much like heat can only be generated by something hot like fire; logically, a unified commonwealth can only be begotten by a unified sovereign or monarch.<sup>23</sup> Hobbes argued from history and pragmatism. To keep humanity from warfare, a completely sovereign force must govern them. Hobbes recognised a radical English tradition that would consider such a plan as a total abrogation of freedom. Instead, it posited a plurality of leaders. By contrast, Hobbes asserted that even if all the legislators are in agreement with each other, 'the subjection of citizens is as great as it could possibly be'.<sup>24</sup> Hobbes was asking if there is any difference between numerous wills, all in singular agreement, as opposed to one will. Absolutely none, he declared. However, what if there are numerous wills all conflicting? Then, 'civil war returns, and the right of the private sword, which is worse

than any subjection'.<sup>25</sup> Not only is the best government to be ruled by one man, but he is to gather as much power as possible in the event of a division in sovereignty, and consequently, civil war.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, in an often-quoted pericope of his *Institutes*, Calvin argued that freedom from tyranny is best preserved by a classical mixture of aristocracy and democracy;

For if the three forms of government which the philosophers discuss be considered in themselves, I will not deny that aristocracy, or a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy, far excels all others: not indeed of itself but because it is very rare for kings so to control themselves that their will never disagrees with what is just and right; or for them to have been endowed with such great keenness and prudence, that each knows how much is enough. Therefore, men's fault or failing causes it to be safer and more bearable for a number to exercise government so that they may help one another, teach and admonish one another; and, if one asserts himself unfairly, there may be a number of censors and masters to restrain his willfulness.<sup>27</sup>

The moderation that Calvin suggested in the above quote, is a concept that occurs throughout his ethics, and reveals Aristotelian influences upon his thought.<sup>28</sup> It is also the quality that he thought is most wanting in rulers, and its absence leads them to, 'indulge their lusts, while they think it lawful to desire whatever pleases them'.<sup>29</sup> For this reason a monarchy is not practical. There have to be many leaders to share wisdom and 'undertake the care of ruling and defending the people'.<sup>30</sup> Of course, Calvin presupposes that such magistrates can actually work together for unselfish ends.

In Hobbes' system, human nature and the metaphysical identity of the sovereign and subjected will necessitates certain rights that the ruler is obliged to exercise. No sovereign can be called unjust, because his will is the same as that of the subjects. For subjects to call a sovereign unjust is the same as saying that the sovereign does not do their will—an absurdity in Hobbes' system.<sup>31</sup> No sovereign is unjust. The law must be in the hands of only one legislator, and this legislator is the sovereign.<sup>32</sup> The sovereign need look no further than his own will in matters of legislation: '*All judgment*, therefore, in a commonwealth

belongs to the possessor of the swords, *i.e.*, to the holder of sovereign power.<sup>33</sup> His will is to be enforced by violence, ‘by which men are compelled to observe them (laws); for otherwise they should be made in vain’.<sup>34</sup> Due to the innate impulse for dominion and glory, the sovereign must have plenary control over doctrines as well. Hobbes believed that all wars are mostly due to ideas and ideological disagreements. Therefore, there can only be one religion in any state—that which the sovereign determines.<sup>35</sup> Reminiscent of Plato’s Republic, censorship has to be enforced, in the event of the citizens reading seditious materials that praise tyrannicide.<sup>36</sup> Even accounts of neighbouring countries, which are presented in a better light than the sovereign’s realm, are to be suppressed, in case people became dissatisfied with the state of their nation. Essentially, it is the duty of the sovereign to ‘root these doctrines out of the citizens’ minds and gently instill others’.<sup>37</sup> What weakens a commonwealth most, is the danger of believing that matters of right and wrong are of personal judgment and not determined by the sovereign: ‘Of doctrines that dispose men to sedition, the first, without question, is: that knowledge of good and evil is a matter for individuals.’<sup>38</sup> The citizen has no right to invent ideas or doctrines, and no right to look beyond the sovereign’s will in matters of conduct. There is no right to disagree or speak ill of a sovereign.<sup>39</sup> In fact, official doctrines are to be enforced by the sword. Any dissenter opposed to the sovereign is to be justly destroyed for usurping his authority and bringing closer the dreaded state of nature.

Calvin, unlike Hobbes, rejected the idea of the sovereign’s will as the final authority. The people and lesser rulers can always look past the sovereign, to the Bible, for ultimate authority: ‘He (the Apostle Paul) calls them higher powers, not the supreme, who possess the chief authority.’<sup>40</sup> It is God’s word, the Bible, that the will and legislation of the ruler is to be measured against.<sup>41</sup> The ruler is ultimately instituted by the will of God, working through temporal events. He is to govern according to God’s will as revealed in the Bible. This is what is meant when describing Calvin’s polity as a theocracy. Cheneviere’s definition: ‘A theocracy designates simply a society which authority is regarded as emanating from God and exercised by His representatives,’<sup>42</sup> is inadequate because it is too inclusive and vague. Even Hobbes, despite his scepticism of revelation, and an active God outside of the biblical account, held that all power ultimately derives from God.<sup>43</sup> However, Hobbes’ extreme Erastianism rules out the possibility of his theocracy as having anything in common with Calvin’s. For Calvin, divine rule or theocracy is the actual rule



of biblical principles. Theocracy has to be verifiably theocratic. It is not just a first cause or grand narrative to explain and justify political actions taken by the state. Verification is only possible by comparing political principles with God's revealed Word. All law must spring from, and be measurable against, the Decalogue and other divine imperatives found in the Bible.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Calvin's theocratic polity is under the rule of bibliocratic law.

Hobbes' view of popular participation in government also flows from his theory of human nature. Since all humans seek themselves to appear wise before others, they will always disagree with one another.<sup>45</sup> Any form of public participation in legislation will surely lead to a state of war between factions. Hobbes used the lesser cities of ancient Greece as an example of bastions of 'of the Aristocraticall, Democraticall factions'.<sup>46</sup> These factions are inevitable when the people (the ochlocracy) have any power. Hobbes' attitude to democracy hardened as he grew older. In his treatise, *On the Citizen*, he approved of the monarch setting a date for the people to gather and vote on his replacement when he was near death.<sup>47</sup> However, by the time he wrote *Leviathan*, he had hardened his views considerably.

As to the question...who shall determine of the right of Inheritance...we are to consider, that either he that is in possession, has the right to dispose of the Succession, or else that right is again in the dissolved Multitude. For the death of him that have the sovereign power in propriety, leaves the Multitude without any sovereign at all: and therefore they are incapable of Election...which is a returne to Confusion, and to the condition of a War of every man against every man. Therefore it is manifest, that by the institution of Monarchy, the disposing of the Successor, is alwaies left to the Judgment and Will of the present Possessor.<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, due to the predisposition towards warfare, any power handed to the people will lead directly back to the state of nature. Unlike Calvin, there is no suffrage in Hobbes' ideal state. Calvin saw the value of suffrage, which was nothing new in early modern Europe. Most European cities then allowed male citizens to vote for key magistrates to run the city. Geneva already allowed for the election of council members before Calvin's stay, and during his lifetime.<sup>49</sup> To what extent Calvin was sincerely drawing democracy from the Bible, or just maintaining the *status quo*, is beyond this paper. Calvin's reasons for

popular election also flow directly from his theology of human sinfulness. Safety in numbers is what he saw to be the best way to maintain liberty, and ward off tyranny: 'The right to vote is the best way to preserve liberty.'<sup>50</sup> A number of leaders dilute the vices of the few, and contributes more wisdom and restraint. This right to vote does not extend to women. Calvin's views on women were traditional. Although he never reached the hysteria of his radical English disciples' denunciation of female rule, women are to be subordinate to men in political, ecclesiastical, and domestic affairs, and to be satisfied with their lot.<sup>51</sup> Calvin had a belief that if people are able to choose their own 'shepherds', they can do it responsibly. Nepotism was anathema to him, as hereditary rule 'seems not consistent with liberty'.<sup>52</sup> Suffrage is not simply the right of gathering to appoint the first sovereign, and thus ending a mythical state of nature, as in the system of Hobbes. Most theorists who asserted this concept, exhorted the masses to unquestioningly, and subserviently, obey the sovereign's fiat from that moment on in all legislation. On the other hand, suffrage in Calvin's polity is a continuous action. As soon as popular voting is withdrawn, liberty is abrogated.

In contradistinction to Calvin, Hobbes opined that under no circumstance is a lesser magistrate to reprove or remonstrate the sovereign. The magistrates 'have no other right, but what depends on the sovereign's will'.<sup>53</sup> No sovereign can be punished or put to death.<sup>54</sup> Essentially, Hobbes realised that he had posited an extremely austere regime, and recognised that critics would call it a tyranny. Unlike Calvin, Hobbes disregarded words like 'tyranny' and 'oligarchy' as mere 'cacophemisms' or pejorative terms signifying feelings, rather than real existing political situations. Whenever one utters the word 'tyrant' it signifies a disposition in the mind of the utterer rather than in the state. These different names are not different types of commonwealths, but '*different sentiments* on the part of the citizens about the ruler'.<sup>55</sup> Hobbes' polity is so harsh, that the following best sums it up: 'Outside the commonwealth anyone may be killed and robbed by anyone; within a commonwealth by only one person.'<sup>56</sup> Hobbes never claimed that his system would produce a more liberal regime than alternative systems. He justified such strictness by pointing out the destructive capabilities of humans, if they are given any power or freedom.

Generally speaking, in Calvin's thought, resistance is unlawful and an affront to God: 'The reason we ought to be subject to magistrates is, because they

are constituted by God's ordination.<sup>57</sup> Even wicked rulers are legitimate, and generally cannot be resisted by the masses. Tyrants are a sign of divine judgement against a nation.

Indeed, he says that those who rule for the public benefit are true patterns and evidences of this beneficence of his; that they who rule unjustly and incompetently have been raised up by him to punish the wickedness of the people; that all equally have been endowed with that holy majesty with which he has invested lawful power.<sup>58</sup>

In many ways Calvin was no modern man. He loathed any notion of popular resistance on the part of the masses when such resistance is on the grounds of political repression. In this respect, one can endorse McNeill's comment, 'We are not justified in tagging him with any modern political school'.<sup>59</sup> The best way to express Calvin's view of civil resistance, is that passive abuse is to be tolerated. The sovereign command to actively participate in impiety, is to be resisted. Essentially, obedience to the ruler is never 'to lead us away from obedience to him, to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be the subject'.<sup>60</sup> If the impulse to revolt originated in the populace because of a sense of victimisation or inequality, it is illegitimate. The subject, according to Calvin, is mistaken in identifying the sovereign's actions against him/her as invalid. Here, the subject is simply ignorant of divine judgement. Calvin's opinion that the masses cannot revolt merely from ill sentiments towards their rulers is the difference between him, and his radical followers.

However, this is not the last word on the matter of resistance for Calvin. Calvin was an adherent to what has been known as the constitutionalist theory of resistance. This aspect of Calvin's theory of resistance resembles the theories of Bodin and Hobbes. Both these theorists posited that political change should only originate within the sphere of sovereignty. Sovereignty, for politically and socially pragmatic purposes, cannot be divided. Calvin, held that resistance on the grounds of social crimes such as harsh rule, political and economic victimisation, inequality, or incompetence, can be undertaken by those already inside the sphere of official sovereignty. The lesser magistrates, such as the council members, and the representatives of the state, are allowed to rebel against tyrannical rulers. This is because God also raises these lesser magistrates up as well, and also works through

them. Therefore, for minor officials to rally against a sovereign is not against God's will, but a fulfillment of it. In such circumstances, resistance does not come from without the sphere of official state rule, but is a form of state self-discipline and control.

For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings; if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance.<sup>61</sup>

According to Calvin, the magistrates obey God by legislating justice and equality for the populace. Calvin stated this numerous times. Consider as an illustration his comment on Romans 13:4, that magistrates are 'not to rule for their own interest, but for the public good'. He continued on to say that rulers are not 'endured with unbridled power, but what is restricted to the well-being of their subjects'.<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere he argued that the calling of the ruler is to assist with equity, justice, uprightness, the oppressed innocents, the poor, and to expose hypocrisy.<sup>63</sup> If the magistrates under the sovereign do not see these duties being carried out, they have the right to depose him.

Calvin was not as radical as many of his contemporaries and disciples. Although Quentin Skinner exaggerates Calvin's conservatism by stating that he initially advocated the 'Pauline doctrine of *absolute* non-resistance' until the mid-1550s, Skinner demonstrates the gulf between Calvin's theory of resistance, and that of his disciples.<sup>64</sup>

Of particular note in this connection are John Ponet (1514-56), John Knox (1515-72), and Christopher Goodman (1520-1603). Ponet in his work, *A Shorte Treatise of Politike Power* (1556), asserted that the right to revolt and even to carry out regicide, should pass into the realm of the masses. He reasoned that any member of the body that would destroy it has to be removed: 'This lawe testifieth to every mannes conscience, that it is naturall to cutte awaie an incurable membre, which (beig suffered) wolde destroie the hole body.'<sup>65</sup> This includes 'Kinges, Princes and other governours', who 'though they be the chief membres, yet they are but membres'.<sup>66</sup> Goodman's treatise, *How Superior Powers ought to be Obeyd* (1558)

contains a remarkably similar exhortation, *viz.* that all subjects are bound by a covenant with God to

cast forthe all evill from them, and to cut of every rotten membre, for feare of infecting the whole body, how deare or pretious soever it be. If death be deserved, death: if other punishmentes, to see they be executed in all.<sup>67</sup>

John Knox in his apocalyptic diatribes, was as radical, openly exhorting *all people* from *all stations* to ‘bridle and repress their (kings’) folly and blind rage’.<sup>68</sup> He even went so far as to recommend regicide as a mandatory remedy to certain types of tyranny, lest the wrath of God be provoked upon the repressed subjects.<sup>69</sup>

To perceive Calvin as an enemy to liberty is simplistic. Calvin allowed disobedience, but removed much of the right from the subjects, and put it in the hands of the lesser magistrates. The people may revolt, but only when right religion is denied, or if they are forced to participate in immorality. In a Calvinist polity, there should be no repression, as those who have the power to repress, are morally obliged not to.

We now pass from considering the political theories of Calvin and Hobbes, to considering their respective worldviews, in an effort to understand their divergent polities. Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is easily as profound and thoughtful as Aristotle’s *Politics*, though the former, unlike the latter, had no influence on subsequent political developments. Hobbes, like Aristotle, is concerned with human nature, and he begins his work with a statement that effectively sums up his view of nature in general, and humans in particular. He described human beings as ‘*Automata* (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheeles as doth a watch)’. The heart is ‘but a *Spring*’, and the nerves are ‘so many *Strings*’, and ‘the *Joynts*, but so many *Wheeles* giving motion to the whole body’.<sup>70</sup> The significance of this statement becomes apparent, when Hobbes’ philosophy of movement and causation is taken into consideration. Hobbes observed that ‘when we see how anything comes about, upon what causes, and by what manner; when the like causes come into our power, we see how to make it produce the like effects’.<sup>71</sup> It is this belief that enables M.M. Goldsmith to sum up Hobbes’ aim as the attempt ‘to create a philosophic system which embraced the science of natural bodies and extended the methods of that science to human actions and political bodies’.<sup>72</sup> Hobbes

had a mechanistic and behaviourist view of humanity. Actions are products of cause and effect, like all other movement in the universe. Every inclination 'proceedeth from some cause in a continual chain' which has its origin with 'the hand of God the first of all causes'.<sup>73</sup> Nature is essentially a closed system. All phenomena are to be explained by other existing phenomena, *i.e.*, material phenomena. Hobbes affirmed that every human being has a will, but he denied that it is free. In his fascinating dialogue with John Bramhall, Hobbes makes his uncompromising determinism explicit. All people have a will, but the will, like any other entity, is moved by an external agent;

The question therefore is not whether a man be a free agent, that is to say, whether he can write or forbear, speak or be silent, according to his will; but whether the will to write and the will to forbear come upon him according to his will, or according to anything else in his power. I acknowledge this liberty, that I can do if I will; but to say I can will if I will, I take to be an absurd speech.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore,

each propension of a man during his deliberation, is as much necessitated and depends on a sufficient cause as anything else whatsoever.<sup>75</sup>

Another outside object or cause determines the will, like everything else in the universe. He wrote that 'no liberty can be inferred of the will, desire, or inclination.' In fact, sounding remarkably like a twentieth century analytical philosopher, he maintained that the concept of a free will is meaningless.

If a man should talk to me of a free-will; or any free, but free from being hindered by opposition, I should not say he were in an error, but that his words were without meaning; that is to say, absurd.<sup>76</sup>

Hobbes did not have a difficult time attempting to buttress his determinism either theologically or philosophically. Theologically, he was simply following the teachings of the Reformers, Luther and Calvin. Both were radical determinists in the Augustinian tradition. That is, they allocated no uncaused or contingent movement to the human will. God actually moved the human will in accord with his own divine will. Indeed, Calvin in his dealing with

providence in the *Institutes* affirmed that chance, an uncaused event, is a false and impious belief to hold.

We do not, with the Stoics, contrive a necessity out of the perpetual connection and intimately related series of causes, which is contained in nature; but we make God the ruler and governor of all things, who in accordance with his wisdom has from the farthest limits of eternity decreed what he was going to do, and now by his might carries out what he has decreed.

But this determinism also applies to human wills.

From this we declare that not only heaven and earth and the inanimate creatures, but also the plans and intentions of men, are so governed by his providence that they are borne by it straight to their appointed end.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, as Overhoff brilliantly documents, the similarity of the Reformers' doctrine of the human will and that of Hobbes' is 'not ill-founded'.<sup>78</sup> The difference between the Reformers, particularly Calvin, and Hobbes, was Hobbes' deism. Seventeenth-century deism rediscovered the impersonal unmoved-mover. Hobbes was certainly Aristotelian in his assertion of all natural causes stretching back in a continual chain beginning with the will of God. Calvin, against the rationalistic Libertines of his time, attacked the view of early deism by affirming that God is present in all changes in the created order. He actively effects all movement in all spheres of reality.<sup>79</sup>

As Hobbes materialistic determinism taught, all human actions and proclivities are to be understood and directed through temporal means. Any human movement must be restrained with equal or greater force in the opposite direction. The human will towards destruction can only be restrained by fear of punishment, to the extent that the individual sees it more in his/her interests to remain docile. Unlike Calvin's system, Hobbes' has no appeal to God's common grace in restraint, but only to the coercive capabilities of the temporal sovereign. Hobbes recognised the impulse towards power in all people. Consequently, people have to be deprived of political right and power, and also repressed.<sup>80</sup> The reason Hobbes prescribed such massive doses of political repression is because the impulse to destruction in humans is so extreme. Such a tendency has to be countered.

The wickedness of human character is evident to all, and experience shows only too well how poorly the mere awareness of a promise made without threat of penalty hold a man to his duty. Hence security is to be assured not by agreements but by penalties; and the assurance is adequate only when the penalties for particular wrongs have been set so high that the consequences of doing them are manifestly worse than that of not doing them.<sup>81</sup>

This is how the student is to understand the political thought of Hobbes. His commonwealth is functionally a great bridle for humankind. The notion of restraint when coming to grips with Hobbes' system of thought, leads to the clarification of the issue of human nature and the state in Calvin's political thought. There is an apparent contradiction when comparing the anthropologies and envisioned polities in the theories of Calvin and Hobbes. Both thinkers envisaged the same wicked drive to destruction, self-interest, hedonistic pleasure, and glory in the unbridled human. However, their views on the state are radically different.

Even though Calvin's view of human nature is second to none in bleakness, his ideal state does not resemble a machine designed to repress the destructive and antisocial proclivities of humans. This is a sharp contrast to the Hobbesian system. Calvin thought that a plurality of rulers, and a system of checks and balances are the best way to govern. This is because liberty is maintained, and consequently, happiness and peace. Hobbes insisted that power should not be divided, and if it is, then the commonwealth will dissolve into bloody anarchy due to the impulse for glory and domination in all people. Calvin believed in constant participation by citizens through the ballot. Hobbes rejected suffrage, because of the innate impulse for disagreement within humans. Calvin believed that the main ruler might be deposed, and resisted by the populace, if the populace is prevented from participating in true religion, or forced to participate in impiety. He also recommended that lesser rulers revolt against a king or sovereign, if they perceive the ruler as being unjust, or disinterested in the well-being of the masses. Hobbes rejected the right to any disobedience or disloyalty directed towards the sovereign. This is because of his fear of the commonwealth returning to its origins as a situation of universal war. Calvin posited a state of mutual remonstrance within the government, so as to limit the powers of those in official ruling capacities. Furthermore, Calvin recommended a government



offering suffrage to the citizens, so that they may choose their rulers, and decide in matters of legislation. On the other hand, Hobbes rejected any division of power between multiple rulers and magistrates, and was therefore totalitarian in thought. He also abhorred the suggestion that the dictator be accountable to any person or laws, and that suffrage be denied. However, both thinkers largely have the same view of human nature, which represents a necessary link between descriptive and prescriptive theory in political thought. There seems to be an inconsistency between Calvin's theology of human nature and his suggested ideal polity. If the coercive duties of the state are directly proportionate to the impulse for antisocial activity in its citizens, why did Calvin and Hobbes have such radically different views on politics?

Hobbes' worldview was not atheism. However, the deistic God he envisaged, in real life, is the equivalent to no God at all. Neither atheism nor deism recognises providential intervention. Consequently, any antisocial tendencies intrinsic in humans must be eradicated by temporal or corporeal and psychological coercion. God does not share the burden of coercion with the state in Hobbes' system, as he does in Calvin's. God's coercion is the crucial difference between Calvin and Hobbes. Some attention has been given to Calvin's view of common grace as a restraint upon nature and society for the preservation of order.<sup>82</sup> Essentially, Calvin taught that God has certain ends ordained for society, that is, that peace should exist for the spiritual flourishing of the elect. Nevertheless, the fury of human wickedness is such that if God was to let the wills of the reprobate follow their own courses, then there would be no peace, only chaos. Hence, God bridles or restrains the wicked wills of the damned so as to create a more bearable existence for the elect. As Schreiner says, in Calvin's political theology, 'Like nature, the continuation of the civil realm was due to God's providence and the continual bridling of disorder'.<sup>83</sup>

The doctrine of common grace is crucial in Calvin's worldview. It explains the actions of people in the light of his doctrine of human depravity. Calvin advanced a God, who in his common grace, restrains the wickedness in people, in order to make life more bearable.

If every soul is subject to such abominations as the apostle boldly declares, *we surely see what would happen if the Lord were to permit human lust to wander according to its own inclination*. No mad beast

would rage as unrestrainedly; no river, however swift and violent, burst so madly into flood. In his elect the Lord cures these diseases in a way that we shall soon explain. *Others he merely restrains by throwing a bridle over them only that they may not break loose, inasmuch as he foresees their control to be expedient to preserve all that is.* Hence some are restrained by shame from breaking out into many kinds of foulness, others by the fear of the law—even though they do not, for the most part, hide their impurity. Still others, because they consider an honest manner of life profitable, in some measure aspire to it. Others rise above the common lot, in order by their excellence to keep the rest obedient to them. *Thus God by his providence bridles perversity of nature, that it may not break forth into action; but he does not purge it within.*<sup>84</sup>

Calvin held that because it is not in the nature of ‘impious and obstinate men’ to obey the will of God, he ‘bend(s) them to execute his judgements’ and ‘from this it appears that they had been impelled by God’s sure determination’.<sup>85</sup> So God’s determinative will is wielded ‘to compel the reprobate to obedience’.<sup>86</sup> For Calvin, as long as societies compounded with the non-elect are peaceful, divine coercion is occurring. Essentially, God often wills ‘that men’s wills also incline to the same end (as His)’.<sup>87</sup> Calvin effectively illuminated the doctrine of common grace in restraint when he considered events in the book of Exodus.

Who inclined the wills of the Egyptians toward the Israelites so that they should lend them all their most precious vessels (Exod. 11:2-3)? They would never voluntarily have been so inclined. Therefore their minds were more subject to the Lord than ruled by themselves.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, for Calvin, human beings never reach their potential depravity in outward expression. People are never as destructive as their nature would lead them to be: ‘for they are constrained by his hand as though by a bridle or a halter, so that now he restrains them, since it pleases him to do so.’<sup>89</sup> It is clear that Calvin saw two restraints upon human beings for social ends—God and the state. Presumably, if God wants peace on earth but does not desire governments to exist, he would increase his restraint to make up for the lack of restraint from the state. Furthermore, if God has nothing to do with restraining the malevolent wills of humans, the state would have to use more coercion, fear of pain, brainwashing, and deprivation of freedom, in

order to keep society peaceful (as in Hobbes' system). The active God is the determining factor when considering Calvin's political theory as a corollary of his theology of human nature. The active God also explains the difference between the political thought of Calvin and that of Hobbes. The difference is not due to internal contradictions in the thought of either thinker, but is attributable to their divergent worldviews. Calvin looked at the behaviour of humans in reality, and realised that there is quite a contrast between social behaviour, and his pessimistic anthropology. He could easily explain this via the biblical notion that God invisibly restrains people from much wickedness. Hobbes perceived people to be just as destructive as Calvin did. However, Hobbes believed that people are only brought to obedience and peacefulness by state coercion: 'Therefore man is made fit for society, not by nature but by training.'<sup>90</sup> Calvin's polity is far more liberal than Hobbes', despite the identical wickedness both thinkers attribute to humankind. This difference is the result of two different explanations of the universe held by Calvin and Hobbes. Calvin's belief in a restraining God enabled him to recommend a regime that creates more liberty. Albeit, in the systems of Calvin and Hobbes, there is equal restraint. However, in Calvin's system, common grace is not felt or known in the same way that political repression is. Common grace is a theological explanation for human behaviour. People are depraved, yet they do not always act in depraved ways. Calvin's conclusion is that God must be diminishing their depravity, so that it does not fully manifest itself. The state addresses the depravity that God allows to manifest. Consequently, the state does not have to coerce to the full extent of human wickedness, only to the degree that God's lack of restraint necessitates. Therefore, a regime need not necessarily be completely preoccupied with coercion and repression. Freedom is passed into the civil realm.

It can be seen that, for Calvin, political thought was not just a matter between humans as both subjects and rulers. There is a divine third party who is not merely a token justification for the existence of a regime. God, in Calvin's political thought, is just as active as the state, and this notion impacted on how Calvin considered a commonwealth should be constituted. Calvin's political theory has the interesting factor, that there is a division of labour between God and the state. His concept of common grace is necessary to examine, as it is the nexus between his anthropology and his political thought. Without common grace, Calvin's political thought as an expression

of his theory of human nature is incoherent. To allow such freedom to a populace, so destructive, in the hope to achieve a peaceful commonwealth, is absurd. This was made evident in the study of Hobbes political theory and his materialistic views of causation and the will. This coupled with Hobbes negative view of human nature means that considerable restraint is needed when considering the maintenance of a civil society. In Calvin's system, such restraint is provided in his doctrine of common grace. Consequently, to ignore Calvin's doctrine of common grace, when examining his anthropology and political thought, would be to produce a truncated, and ultimately inadequate, portrayal of his thinking. It would be the same as ignoring Hobbes theory of human nature in an effort to understand his thought. In Calvin's political thought, as well as people knowing that they are being coerced into conforming to the state's ends, they are also, unwittingly, being coerced by God for his ultimate purpose. This end is simply to create a peaceful society in order that the elect can properly dedicate their work and thoughts to God in quiet worship. God's glory is everything in Calvin's political thought, and in a Calvinist polity.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.5 (1559), Ford Lewis Battles (tr.) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).
- 2 Roger Trigg, *Ideas of Human Nature: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 3.
- 3 Ian Forbes, "Political Theory and Human Nature," in Ian Forbes and Steve Smith, *Politics and Human Nature*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p. 1.
- 4 Forbes, "Conclusion," *ibid.*, p. 191.
- 5 Trigg, *Ideas*, p.2
- 6 Conal Condren, *Three Aspects of Political Theory*, (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1979), p. 26.
- 7 Gianfranco Poggi, *The State: Its Nature and Development and Prospects*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 13.
- 8 Stephen Holmes in his excellent 'Introduction' to *Behemoth* disagrees with the view that Hobbes saw self-interest or preservation as the primal impetus to all human volition. Saying that such an opinion 'cannot survive a careful scrutiny

of the relevant texts' (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. x. Nevertheless, Hobbes was categorical at times in his belief in the plenary self-interest of human volition (see this article, p. 35). Even if, as Holmes rightly believes we should, we treat *Behemoth* as the practical application of his conceptual thoughts contained in his *Leviathan*, it is still easy to hold that Hobbes considered humans as essentially self-interested animals. There is nothing explicit in *Behemoth* that confutes this.

- 9 Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p. 22.
- 10 Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Vol 5: The British Philosophers from Hobbes to Hume* (New York: Image Books, 1994), p. 55.
- 11 A P Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography* (Cambridge: CPUP 1999), p. 180.
- 12 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 26.
- 13 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Richard Tuck, ed., (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p. 93.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 15 John Calvin, *Commentary on Daniel, 4:10*, Thomas Myers (tr.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).
- 16 John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah, 3:6*, William Pringle (tr.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).
- 17 *Ibid.*, Inst. 4.20.4.
- 18 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 72.
- 19 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 121.
- 20 T. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 104.
- 21 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 117.
- 22 Hobbes, *Elements of Law*, p. 106.
- 23 Aquinas, *The Political Ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Hafner Press, 1953), p. 180.
- 24 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 93.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 222.
- 27 *Inst* 4.20.8.
- 28 Cf. *Inst.* 3.19.9; Aristotle, *Ethics*, J.A.K. Thompson (tr.) (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), p. 135; J.T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (Oxford: OUP, 1973), pp. 201-202.
- 29 *Com.Dan.*, 6:8-9.
- 30 John Calvin, *Commentary on Micah, 6:5*, John Owen (tr.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

- 32 *Ibid.*, p 184.
- 33 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 79.
- 34 Hobbes, *Elements of Law*, p. 113.
- 35 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 81.
- 36 Cf. Plato, *Republic*, Book 3. Many editions.
- 37 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 146.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- 39 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 234.
- 40 John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 13:1, John Owen (tr.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).
- 41 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 82:1, James Anderson (tr.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).
- 42 Marc Cheneviere, 'Did Calvin Advocate Theocracy?' *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol.9, (n.m. 1937):160.
- 43 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 231.
- 44 Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), p. 50.
- 45 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 81.
- 46 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 225.
- 47 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 98.
- 48 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 136.
- 49 Hopfl, *Christian Polity*, p. 133.
- 50 John Calvin, *Harmony of Genesis, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses: A Harmony)*, Deut. 15, Charles William Bingham (tr.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).
- 51 See, Willis P DeBoer, 'Calvin on the Role of Women', in David E. Holwerder ed., *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin: Essays in Honor of John Bratt*, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1976), pp. 236-56.
- 52 *Com. Mic.*, 6:5.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 55 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 92.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 57 *Com. Rom.*, 13:1.
- 58 *Inst* 4.20.25.
- 59 John T. McNeill, 'John Calvin on Civil Government', in George L. Hunt, ed., *Calvinism and the Political Order: Essays Prepared for the Woodrow Wilson Lectureship of the National Presbyterian Center Washington, DC* (Philadelphia:

Westminster Press, 1965), p. 36.

60 *Inst* 4.20.32.

61 *Inst* 4.20.31.

62 *Com .Rom.* 13:4.

63 John Calvin, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 22:16 John Owen (t.r.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

64 Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought Vol 2*, (Cambridge, CUP, 1978), p. 193. Writer's italics. Calvin in the first edition of his *Institutes*, has a theory of resistance involving forced impiety: 'But in that obedience which we have shown to be due the authority of rulers, we are always to make this exception, indeed, to observe it as primary, that such obedience is never to lead us away from obedience to him, to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject to whose majesty their scepters ought to be submitted'. *Inst* (1536), 6.C.51. Also, Calvin gives his support for constitutional resistance within the same edition of his *Institutes*: 'For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings I am so far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings, that, if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, for by it they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance'. 6.C.55. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), Ford Lewis Battles (tr.) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

65 John Ponet, *A Shorte Treatise of Politike Power* (Strasburg?, 1556), (The English Experience, No 484, Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum), p. 108.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Christopher Goodman, *How Superior Powers ought to be Obeyd* (Geneva, 1558), (The English Experience, No. 460, Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum), p. 190.

68 John Knox, *Selected Writings of John Knox: Public Epistles, Treatises, and Expositions to the Year 1559* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1995), p. 507.

69 *Ibid.*, pp. 517-18.

70 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 9.

71 *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

72 M.M. Goldsmith, *Hobbes's Science of Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 229.

73 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 146.

- 74 Thomas Hobbes, 'Of Liberty and Necessity' sec. 3, in Vere Chappell ed., *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), p. 16.
- 75 *Ibid.*, sec.11, p. 21.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 77 *Inst.* 1.16.8.
- 78 Jurgen Overhoff, 'The Lutheranism of Thomas Hobbes', *History of Political Thought* Vol XVIII, No. 4 (Winter, 1997): 118.
- 79 John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, Benjamin Wirt Farley (tr.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), pp. 242-53.
- 80 Hobbes, *Leviathan* p. 34.
- 81 Hobbes, *On the Citizen* p. 78.
- 82 Susan E Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), pp. 70-83.
- 83 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 84 *Inst.* 1.3.3. Italics added.
- 85 *Inst.* 1.18.2.
- 86 *Ibid.*
- 87 *Inst.* 2.4.6
- 88 *Ibid.*
- 89 John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will* On Book Two, Sec.258, ANS Lane ed., G. Davies (tr.), (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 39.
- 90 Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, p. 25.