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“Kingdom of God” and *Potentia Dei*. An Interpretation of Divine Omnipotence in Hobbes’s Thought

Carlo Altini

Scientific Director, Fondazione Collegio San Carlo
Via San Carlo 5, 41121, Modena (Italy)
altinic@fondazioneancarlo.it

Abstract

The relationships between politics and religion have always been the focus of Hobbesian literature, which generally privileges the theme of the Christian State, i.e. the union of temporal and spiritual power in a sovereign-representative person. This essay presents other perspectives of interpretation, which analyze the relationships between politics and religion in Hobbes’ works by using specifically metaphysical and theological categories – liberty/necessity, causality, kingdom of God, divine prescience, *potentia Dei* etc. – which allow us to reconsider the nature of political power (and the relevance of modern technology for the contemporary politics). The core of Hobbes’ argumentation concerns the theoretical status of determinism (i.e. the relationships between liberty and necessity) with regard to the reduction of «*potentia*» to «*potestas*» not only in political philosophy, but also in metaphysics and theology. In many passages of Hobbes’ works, then, it is possible to understand the role of God’s idea in the natural and political philosophy: God’s idea as first cause or as omnipotence is only a reassuring word useful to describe the necessary, mechanical and eternal movement of the bodies and useful to justify the materialistic determinism in anthropology and politics. Body and movement are the necessary fundamentals of the universe which find in itself - without reference to the category of «*possibility*» in politics and in physics - the motives and the reasons of his own structure and function (from causes to effects).

Keywords

Hobbes; Power; Liberty; Necessity; God

The relationship between politics and religion has always been the focus of Hobbesian literature, which generally privileges the theme of the Christian State, i.e. the union of temporal and spiritual power in a sovereign-representative person, as exemplarily portrayed in the title page of

Leviathan. Over the last few decades, however, other perspectives of interpretation have become established, which analyze the relationship between politics and religion in Hobbes by using specifically theological categories.¹ This essay takes the latter direction, and aims at offering elements to think over the above-mentioned relationship by using two key categories of Hobbesian theology – the kingdom of God and *potentia Dei* – which allow us to reconsider the limits of political sovereignty.²

I. Determinism and Divine Prescience: Hobbes against the Theory of Liberty

The theme of *potentia Dei* is found in the long and articulated debate between Hobbes and Bramhall on the relationship between liberty and necessity.³ The Hobbesian argument is entirely played upon the level of

¹ Cf. L. Damrosch jr., “Hobbes as Reformation Theologian. Implications of the Free-Will Controversy”, in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XL, 1979, 339-352; R. Polin, *Hobbes, Dieu et les hommes*, Paris, Puf, 1981; B. Willms, *Thomas Hobbes. Das Reich des Leviathan*, München, Piper, 1987; M. Malherbe, “Le regne de Dieu par la nature chez Thomas Hobbes”, in *Archives de philosophie*, LIII, 1990, 245-259; L. Roux et F. Tricaud (éd.), *Le pouvoir et le droit. Hobbes et les fondements de la Loi*, Saint-Etienne, Université de Saint-Etienne, 1992; E. Giaccotti, “La funzione dell’idea di Dio nel sistema naturale e politico di Hobbes”, in Id., *Studi su Hobbes e Spinoza*, ed. by D. Bostrenghi and C. Santinelli, Napoli, Bibliopolis, 1995, 239-258; J. Overhoff, “The Lutheranism of Thomas Hobbes”, in *History of Political Thought*, XVIII, 1997, 604-623; A. Pacchi, *Scritti hobbesiani*, ed. by A. Lupoli, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1998; L. Foisneau, *Hobbes et la toute-puissance de Dieu*, Paris, PUF, 2000; J. Overhoff, “The Theology of Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan”, in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, LI, 2000, 527-555; M. Pécharman, “La puissance absolue de Dieu selon Hobbes”, in G. Canziani, M.A. Granada and Y.-Ch. Zarka (ed. by), *Potentia Dei. L’onnipotenza divina nel pensiero dei secoli XVI e XVII*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2000, 269-293; C. Leijenhorst, “Hobbes’s Corporeal Deity”, in L. Foisneau and G. Wright (ed. by), *Nuove prospettive critiche sul “Leviatano” di Hobbes nel 350° anniversario di pubblicazione*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2004, 73-95; A. Herla, *Hobbes ou le déclin du Royaume des ténèbres. Politique et théologie dans le “Leviathan”*, Paris, Kimé, 2006.

² The following abbreviations have been used in referring to the Hobbes’ works: *E* = *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. by J.C.A. Gaskin, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994; *C* = *On the Citizen*, ed. by R. Tuck and M. Silverthorne, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998; *Cor.* = *Elementorum Philosophiae Sectio Prima De Corpore*, in *Thomae Hobbes Malmesburiensis Opera philosophica*, ed. G. Molesworth, London, Joannem Bohn, 1839-1845, vol. I; *L* = *Leviathan*, ed. N. Malcolm, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2012; *LN* = *Of Liberty and Necessity* in *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*, ed. by V. Chappell, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999; *Q* = *The Questions concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. by W. Molesworth, London, John Bohn, 1839-1845, vol. V.

³ Cf. J. Bramhall, *A Vindication of True Liberty*, 1645; Th. Hobbes, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, 1646; J. Bramhall, *A Defence of the True Liberty from Antecedent and Extrinsic Necessity*,

incommensurability: nothing in God – not His wisdom, will, goodness, might or justice – can be judged by the standard of human reality.⁴ For instance, human justice always implies a law and therefore a contract but this is certainly not the case with divine justice, which is not subjected to any contract or law. God’s justice cannot be defined as observance of a law established by a superior power, because such a power does not exist: thus God cannot sin against the law – because He is not subjected to it – and, as a consequence, He cannot be unjust. God’s actions are always just simply because He is the one who accomplishes them, the sole bearer of an absolutely irresistible might, the one and supreme holder of all the wills of men: only a person who holds such might is above any law. In Hobbes, the divine attribute of might is thus justified not only at a logical and ontological level, but also at a moral level:

The power of God alone without other help is sufficient justification of any action he does. That which men make amongst themselves here by pacts and covenants and call by the name of justice, and according whereunto men are counted and termed rightly just or unjust, is not that by which God Almighty’s actions are to be measured or called just, no more than his counsels are to be measured by human wisdom. That which he does is made just by his doing it: just, I say, in him, not always just in us [...]. Power irresistible justifies all actions, really and properly, in whomsoever it be found; less power does not, and because such power is in God only, he must needs be just in all his actions.⁵

God cannot sin. First of all, His actions are just because they derive from His irresistible might. Secondly, only the one who is subjected to a superior law can sin, and this is not the case with God. If so defined – sheltered from any accusation of moral irrationality – divine omnipotence involves, however, two limitations that force Hobbesian argument to stop. First of all, not even God can do everything, because this is something impossible in itself, i.e. something which is self-contradictory. Secondly, there is another kind of things, which are not impossible in themselves, but are rather a consequence of divine decree; all this is incompatible with God’s decree itself. The difference between these two kinds of impossible things – the logical impossible and the ontological impossible – is also marked by the role of

being an Answer to a Late Book of Mr. Thomas Hobbs of Malmsbury, intituled A Treatise of Liberty and Necessity, 1655; Th. Hobbes, *The Questions concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, 1656; J. Bramhall, *Castigations of Mr. Hobbes his Last Animadversions in the Case concerning Liberty and Universal Necessity*, 1658; Th. Hobbes, *Answer to Bishop Bramhall’s Book called “The Catching of Leviathan”*, 1668.

⁴ Cf. *LN*, 21 ss., 28 ss.; *Q*, 115 ss., 138 ss., 143–144. Cf. also *E*, §§ I.XI.1–3; *C*, § XV.14.

⁵ *LN*, 22–23.

God's will which, in the first case, is inoperative (and could not be otherwise) whereas, in the second case, it acts precisely to define the present order of the world, the only real one because God wants it. Not only is God's might simply not absolute, but it even seems to be subjected to His own will; yet to formulate an explicit opinion on the nature of that will is not deemed useful by Hobbes, simply because the Divine is unknowable. In spite of this, the Hobbesian argument on universal determinism suggests that divine will is meant to be necessary. In an anti-anthropomorphic vision of God, divine decree must be considered coeternal with Him and coessential to His nature. Divine will is thus eternal, immutable and necessary. It is no coincidence that Hobbes deems it pointless to infer the theological fundamentals of universal determinism because the theory of *divine prescience* is more suitable to justifying the doctrine of necessity. In Hobbesian thought, the relationship between determinism and divine prescience is much tighter than the one between determinism and *potentia Dei*. It is God's prescience, and not His might, to define His ultimate perfection:⁶ this latter idea would then be limited if there were agents freed from necessity, i.e. falling outside the range of His prescience. Hobbes sets the issue of *potentia Dei* at a logical-philosophical and not ethical-political level: determinism and prescience build up the theoretical framework for the actual *ordinate* action of God. The *absolute* action of God is only a theoretical model of divine action and relates to the "time preceding" God's decree on the choice of the present order of the world, which, once settled, is eternal and immutable, mechanical and necessary, even when miracles are operated. Hobbes's discourse on *potentia Dei* is understood as dealing more with liberty and necessity than with omnipotence and miracles; all that happens falls within the range of *potentia Dei*, as it has been foreseen by Him *ab aeterno*. Thus there are not two different ways (*ordinate* and *absolute*) for God to act *in the world*, because universal determinism, through the design of divine prescience, is precisely the clearest expression of *potentia Dei*. Hobbes calls it "God's decree": all things proceed necessarily from His eternal will. God's decree and prescience are one and the same thing with the theory of determinism; they are not two distinct powers in God (necessity and will), but rather the same reality – divine action – that unfolds in the world through the concatenation of the causal series, i.e. through secondary causes. Each event is produced by the convergence of many causal chains and the divine decree is precisely their causal

⁶ Cf. *Q*, 18 s., 105, 175 s., 209 ss., 234 s., 246, 423-424, 433.

connection, as causal chains are always determined by the immutable will of God.⁷ The unconditioned beginning of all causal series is to be found in God: so *potentia Dei* is identified with His being the cause of the mechanical motion of bodies, which has been decided from time immemorial and is therefore immutable. For this reason, Hobbesian materialistic and mechanistic determinism is more a consequence of God's *prescience* than of His might.

II. "Potentia Dei" in the Kingdom of God by Nature

At the level of philosophical-political argument, many passages of *De cive*⁸ and *Leviathan*⁹ show the theme of *potentia Dei* in connection with the image of the "Kingdom of God", which Hobbes uses to point out a precise series of distinctions among a "Kingdom of God by Nature", a "prophetic Kingdom of God" (which is in turn subdivided into Kingdom under the Old Covenant and by the New Covenant) and the "future Kingdom of God". Hobbes immediately identifies the underlying theological-political problem, i.e. the relationship between might and right in the *Kingdom of God by Nature*: "In the *Natural Kingdom* God's right to Reign and to punish those who break his laws is from *irresistible power* alone".¹⁰ At this level, there is not any obligation to obey God resulting from a *covenant*, an alliance, an agreement or a contract, but the divine right to rule arises clearly from nature. Omnipotence gives God the right to rule and man is accordingly obliged to obey him because of his weakness, which generates fear and hopelessness. In the "Kingdom of God by Nature", the relationship between God and men corresponds to the concept characterizing the mutual relationship among men in the state of nature, where the range of natural right extends to the whole range of legitimacy for actions considered useful to the purpose of self-preservation. Hobbes does not ascribe the features of rationality to divine will, because it is a self-determined might: "When we ascribe to God a *Will*, it is not to be understood, as that of Man, for a *Rationall Appetite*, but as the *Power*, by which he effecteth every thing".¹¹ According to Hobbes, if man abides by divine power on the basis of pure

⁷ Cf. *LN*, 20, 22–23, 41; *Q*, 12, 102–103, 139.

⁸ Cf. *C*, chapters XV, XVI and XVII.

⁹ Cf. *L*, chapters XXX, XXXI, XXXV and XXXVIII.

¹⁰ *C*, 173.

¹¹ *L*, 566.

might and not of gratitude, this of course must not be considered dishonourable for God; however, it must be noted that such a power has a natural basis and that, at a political level, it corresponds to the one deriving from the claim *ex generatione* or *ex delictu*, and not from *ex consensu*.¹² If God is a sovereign whose irresistibility, omnipotence and inscrutability justify obligation and obedience, then He is a sovereign *by acquisition*, not *by Institution*; so He is a sovereign ruling over men in a condition similar to the one of the state of nature, in which men live *before* the foundation of a common power. However, Hobbes soon points out that the expression “Kingdom of God by Nature” contains an anthropomorphic metaphor it would be useful to consider as such, in order to underline the supremacy of might as the divine right to rule the world. This right, however, is not enough to “rule”, as it lacks “word”, i.e. verbal expression:

God is king of the whole earth; and he is not shaken from his throne if a few men deny his *Existence* or his *Providence*. God so rules all men through power that no man can do anything which He does not want done; yet this is not Reigning in the precise and proper sense. A ruler is said to reign if he rules through *speech* rather than *action*, i.e. if he rules by *precepts* and *threats*. In the kingdom of God therefore we do not count inanimate bodies or things without reason as subjects (though they are subject to divine power), because they *do not understand* God's *precepts* and *threats*. Nor do we count *Atheists*, because they do not believe that God exists, nor those who believe in God's existence but not in his governance here below; for though they too are ruled by the power of God, they do not accept his *precepts* or fear his threats. The only persons to be numbered in the kingdom of God are those who accept that he is ruler of all things, that he has *given precepts* to men and *set penalties* for transgressors. All the rest we should call not subjects but enemies of God.¹³

The “Kingdom of God by Nature” is built on a juridical foundation that is such only in a metaphorical sense, because His “rule”, based on His omnipotence, must never be confused with the “rule” of an earthly sovereign, which is founded on a covenant, an agreement and a decree publicly known, because explicitly pronounced. It is therefore clear that, although defining a virtually all-encompassing range of action over the whole present order of the world, God's might is not a claim to “rule”. God is not submitted to the standards of juridical argument, not only because His nature and His actions comply with the extra-juridical language of omnipotence not only because, strictly speaking, He is not a subject (the only category suitable to the specific nature of juridical language), but also because the juridical

¹² Cf. *E*, I.XI.11-12, II.III.1-2, II.IV.10; *C*, VIII-IX; *L*, XX.

¹³ *C*, 172.

dimension belongs radically to the human world of *becoming* and of *institutions*. In God, ruling and governing are not the same thing. As a matter of fact, although God governs all the creation as the primary cause of every motion, He “rules”, in an analogically and metaphorically anthropomorphic form, only over those who believe He is the cause of the world, i.e. over those who *recognize* Him, through an aware deliberation, as the supreme entity acting directly in the lower world. To simplify: in the Kingdom of God by Nature, the political body does not coincide with the whole of mankind, but only with the community of believers who recognize God as king of the lower world. Therefore, divine omnipotence is not a legitimate right to rule, unless on condition of the voluntary recognition of man.

According to Hobbes, ruling through prescriptions means legislating, i.e. to openly proclaim regulations that must be respected by the governed on the basis of the original covenant. In order to respect this very tight link between juridical and linguistic-communicative dimension, divine laws also appear in three manners:¹⁴ the rational word (expressed in the dictates of just reason, which are condensed in natural law), the sensible word (expressed in the immediate revelation through the senses) and the word of prophecy (expressed in the display of divine will through a trustworthy intermediary). Among these three manners in which God’s words appear, the least relevant in Hobbes’s analysis is the one connected with the sensible word (because it only refers to *particular* people who had direct access to an epiphany of the Divine), whereas the distinction between rational word and word of prophecy is crucial, as it corresponds to the difference between the “Kingdom by Nature” and the “prophetic Kingdom of God”:¹⁵

A twofold Kingdom is attributed to God; which corresponds to the difference between his *Rational* and his *Prophetic Word*. There is the *Natural Kingdom* in which he rules through the dictates of right Reason. It is a universal kingdom over all who acknowledge the divine power because of the rational nature which is common to all. And there is the *Prophetic Kingdom*, where too he rules, but by his *Prophetic Word*. It is a particular kingdom, because he has not given positive laws to all men, but only to a particular people, and to certain specific men whom he himself chose.¹⁶

The “Kingdom of God by Nature” is not obviously limited to natural laws, because political societies of an acquisitive and institutive kind can also be established there. The “naturalness” of this divine kingdom depends on

¹⁴ Cf. C, XV.3-4, XVII.15-18; L, XXXVI.

¹⁵ Cf. L, 554-556.

¹⁶ C, 173.

how God addresses man (in this case, through the dictates of natural reason), and not certainly on being a state of nature *tout court*. Thus it is not the mutual relationship among men, but the one between God and men that is in a natural condition, to the extent that the precepts regarding worship and honour of God must be deduced only from natural reason, not from revelation (which is not given at the level of the “Kingdom of God by Nature”). However, the aim of natural laws on divine worship (“to render honour to God”) can be achieved more through the establishment of common public policies than through the persistence of private and personal habits, which stand necessarily in mutual contrast. In the “Kingdom of God by Nature” (in which God rules – if recognized – by means of His omnipotence), it is up to the State to judge which attributes and rites render honour to God; a sign of honour to God is all that is decided by the State, the sole legitimate *interpreter* of natural laws, which is therefore able to establish – being the sole and legitimate holder of the juridical responsibility for worship in front of God – a uniform worship that single individuals must compulsorily abide with.¹⁷

III. “Potentia Dei” in the Prophetic Kingdom of God

After the “long night” mankind spent in the darkness of atheism, superstition and idolatry, God led Abraham to the true religion by revealing Himself supernaturally to him, and making a covenant with him through the establishment of the sign of circumcision. In this way Hobbes opens chapter XVI of *De cive*,¹⁸ which is devoted to the Kingdom of God under the Old Covenant. Hobbes asks himself why God accepts to undergo a covenant to obtain obedience, which was already due to Him by nature and recognized to Him as creator of the world?

The words “that I be your God and the God of your descendants after you” do not mean that *Abraham* satisfies this *agreement* merely by acknowledging the power and Dominion that God has over men by nature, i.e. by the general recognition of God, which is a matter of *natural reason*; but by the specific recognition of him [...]. It is certain that *Abraham* believed that the voice was the voice of God and a true revelation, and that he wanted his followers to worship the one who had so addressed him as God, creator of the universe; and his faith lay not in believing that *God exists* or that his promises *are true* (which all

¹⁷ Cf. *E*, I.XI.12; *C*, XV.16-18, XVI.7; *L*, 570-572.

¹⁸ Cf. also *L*, XXXV, XXXVIII, XL.

men believe), but in not doubting that the one whose voice and promises he had heard was God. It is also clear that *God of Abraham* signifies not simply *God* but *God appearing to him*.¹⁹

The worship that Abraham owed to God was not the worship of reason but the worship of religion and faith revealed supernaturally. It is no longer the universal God of mankind, who speaks by means of natural reason, but rather the *particular* God of Abraham, who speaks by means of a special revelation, through which Abraham becomes the only and legitimate interpreter of the law and word of God. Abraham's descendents, the people of Israel, will renew the covenant with the God of Abraham²⁰ by confirming their obligation to Him and, along with that, the establishment of His Kingdom under the Old Covenant. This latter situation is restored and renewed by the revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai through which, for the first time in the proper sense, the Scriptures also start to speak of institutive, and of not acquisitive, "kingdom":

For although God was their [the people of Israel] king both by *nature* and by the *Agreement* with *Abraham*, they nevertheless owed him not only natural obedience and natural worship, as his subjects, but the religious worship which *Abraham* had instituted they owed him as subjects of *Abraham, Isaac* or *Jacob*, their natural Princes. For the only *Word of God* that they had received was the natural word of right reason, and there was no *agreement* between God and themselves except in so far as their wills were included in the will of *Abraham*, as their Prince. But now, by the *agreement* made at Mount [*Sinai*, a *kingdom of God by design (institutivum)*] comes into being over them, as each individual gave his consent.²¹

In this case, "kingdom" has no anthropomorphic derivation (as was the case, on the contrary, with the expression "Kingdom of God by Nature") because, in His prophetic kingdom, God is a monarch in the proper sense, He is endowed with sovereign power over his subjects who, by making the covenant, accept God as a king, and give their consent to the foundation of the prophetic Kingdom of God, i.e. of a civil kingdom in which God is sovereign under the Old Covenant: "By the *Kingdome of God* is properly meant a Commonwealth, instituted (by the consent of those which were to be subject thereto) for their Civill Government".²²

While analyzing the features of the prophetic Kingdom of God, the Hobbesian argument refers to the theme of *potentia Dei*, but it does not

¹⁹ C, 189-190.

²⁰ Cf. C, XVI.5-8; L, XXXV.

²¹ C, 191-192.

²² L, 640.

assign a primary role to it. As a matter of fact, in the chapters of *De cive* and *Leviathan* devoted to such analysis, discussion hinges on the relationship between civil and ecclesiastical power, and Hobbes tries constantly to carry out a *reductio ad unum* of the two forms of supremacy in a single sovereign-representative person, in an attempt to avoid divisions and conflicts between the two instances of authority, as well as theoretically and practically implement the two philosophical-political theses on unity and indivisibility of sovereignty.²³ While tracing back the various periods in the history of the Jews, as summarized in the Old Testament, Hobbes ascertains that civil and ecclesiastical powers have always been an exclusive privilege exercised by a one and single person, holder of the supreme authority to interpret the law and the word of God, who is allowed to decide on the truth of prophecies and authenticity of the prophets, as well as to establish regulations for the conduct of civil life everybody must obey. *All* the members of the community owe a *simple* obedience to such a person as regards both religious and civil matters. For this reason, the form of government *by right* of the Jews can be defined as a “priestly kingdom” or a “royal priesthood”, according to whether the king or the priest had the primacy in different historical periods. However, what did not change during all the time leading from Abraham to Jesus Christ was the unity and indivisibility of the two (civil and ecclesiastical) powers in the same function: “In God’s Kingdom obedience had to be given to the princes *Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses*, and the *Priest* and the *King*, each in his time [...]. If the King or Priest who held sovereign power ordered any other thing that was contrary to the laws, that was an offence by the older of sovereign power, not by the subject; whose duty is to carry out the orders of his superiors, not to dispute them”.²⁴

The legitimate authority to legislate and constrain lies only in the function of the secular prince (whether priest or king): so, even in the prophetic Kingdom of God under the Old Covenant, it is clear that awarding God the title of king is not directly relevant, except in an anthropomorphical sense. While ending the section by dealing with the “prophetic Kingdom under the Old Covenant”, Hobbes aims to emphasize the two serious forms of degeneration – sometimes mutually interdependent – that undermine the unity of theological-political sovereignty: on the one hand, the attempts to separate civil and ecclesiastical power, thus generating conflicts between the two instances of power that may lead to proper civil wars; on the other

²³ Cf. *E*, II.VII; *C*, XVI.11-17, XVII.14-28; *L*, XXXIII, XXXVI-XXXVII, XXXIX-XLII.

²⁴ *C*, 201-202.

hand, the claims of single individuals for independence of judgment and interpretation in civil and religious matters. According to Hobbes, the Old Testament supplies arguments that allow avoiding both dangers.

The “prophetic Kingdom of God” refers not only to the revelation of the Old Testament, but also and obviously to the revelation of the New Testament. In this way Hobbes passes from the “Kingdom of God under the Old Covenant” to the “Kingdom of God by the New Covenant”.²⁵ Jesus Christ was sent to mankind to restore the Kingdom of God with a new alliance whose sign is baptism, i.e. a new covenant by which man agrees to obey the God of Abraham and believe Jesus is the Christ (whereas God agrees to forgive sins and open the doors of the Kingdom of Heaven). However, the Kingdom of God will not begin until the second coming of Christ on Judgment Day: “hence Christ is not yet seated in the seat of his Majesty”.²⁶ The Kingdom of God by new Covenant is far from coming, as the time Christ spent among men does not hint at a kingdom in the proper sense, but rather at a regeneration or a renewal, i.e. a pastoral function. Until the return of Christ, the Kingdom of God is not “of this world” but “of another world”, because Christ was not given the authority to rule or legislate by God, but only to *teach* and *advise* the way and means of salvation, which cannot be known through natural reason:

The Regime under which Christ rules his faithful in this life is not properly a Kingdom, or government (*imperium*), but a Pastoral office or right to teach, i.e. God the Father has not given him authority to *give judgements* about mine and thine as he has to the Kings of the Earth, nor to *compel* by *penalties* or *make laws*, but he has given him authority to reveal to the world and to *teach the way* and *the knowledge of salvation*, i.e. the authority to *preach* and to *explain* to men what they should do to enter into the *kingdom of heaven* [...]. For Christ was sent to *strike an Agreement* between God and men; no one is obliged to give obedience until after he has entered into an agreement; hence no one would be obliged to accept his verdict, if he had given judgement on questions of *right*. But in fact, trials of legal matters, whether between believers or unbelievers, have not been entrusted to Christ in this world. This is apparent from the fact that that right belongs without question to *Princes*, so long as God does not restrict their authority; and he does not do so this side of the day of judgement.²⁷

The office of Christ is composed of three parts, which correspond to three different periods: Redeemer, Shepherd and King. The first part (Redeemer)

²⁵ Cf. C, XVII; L, XLI.

²⁶ C, 207.

²⁷ C, 208-209.

already came true with Incarnation, in which Christ shows Himself as the Saviour; the second part (Shepherd) is the period in which the return of Christ is awaited and Christ carries out His role of master; the third part (King) coincides with Judgment Day and Salvation. So the kingdom of Christ, which corresponds to the third part of His office, is not of this world and, for this reason, the time of His predication “is not properly a Kingdome, and thereby a warrant to deny obedience to the Magistrates”,²⁸ as it – the world to come – will not begin until the final resurrection. The future Kingdom of God will be achieved only in that moment; and it will be achieved *on Earth*: “Salvation shall be on Earth, then, when God shall reign (at the coming again of Christ) in Jerusalem”,²⁹ i.e. not in a *coelum empyreum* or in the form of a “kingdom of darkness” (which implies the distinction between spiritual and temporal power).³⁰

Discussion on divine omnipotence can be developed at three levels: the ontological and metaphysical dimension; the “Kingdom of God by Nature”; and the “prophetic Kingdom of God”. However, it never seems to play a founding role in Hobbes’s philosophical system. It is thus clear that Hobbes neutralizes God’s might at the level of both natural philosophy and civil philosophy. As to the role of divine omnipotence in the Kingdom of God by Nature, the irresistible power characterizing God in that kingdom has not been of this world ever since the first covenant was made with the Jews, God “rules” over it only in a metaphorical and figurative sense, also because He needs to be *recognized* to “rule”. As to the actual relevance of *potentia Dei* in the prophetic Kingdom of God, divine intervention in the world is excluded not only by the *form* of the covenant, but even by the *content* itself, which postpones the coming of the Kingdom of God to Judgment Day. Moreover, Hobbes denies the presence of divine laws in the Kingdom of God after earthly life.³¹ So we do not find any trace of divine omnipotence in the actual order of the world. Not by chance Hobbes can afford to say: “For God truly reigns where the laws are obeyed for fear of God, not of men. And if men were as they should be, that would be the best form of commonwealth. But to rule men as they are, there must be power (*potentia*) (which comprises both right and strength) to compel”.³² This power to

²⁸ L, 776.

²⁹ L, 722-724.

³⁰ Cf. L, 710-728.

³¹ Cf. C, XVII.8.

³² C, 198.

constrain, the only actual one, is ascribed to the sovereign-representative person, not to God.

IV. The Reduction of “Potentia” to “Potestas” in Political Philosophy

In Hobbes’s political philosophy, the *personalistic* element is a trait which is highly typical of sovereignty.³³ However, it is not the only one. In fact, the element of political *mechanism* is also widely recognised.³⁴ It is no coincidence, then, that Carl Schmitt speaks of the Hobbesian oscillation between decisionism and positivism. Therefore a contrast emerges between two different concepts of the exercise of sovereign power, one *absolute* and the other *ordinate* (the theoretical root of which can be traced back to the Medieval distinction between *potentia absoluta Dei* and *potentia ordinata Dei* elaborated principally by Ockham and Duns Scotus). On the one hand, we have a concept of a sovereign who exercises *ordinate* power, in other words “mechanically”, his own power adhering to the criteria of positive law which he himself has created. On the other hand, we have a concept of a sovereign who exercises his own *absolute* power, suspending, in accordance with his own wishes, the validity of positive law, which he himself has created. In this second instance, the civil person, that is the sovereign-representative person, is *absolute* in the sense that he is able to go beyond the totality of positive laws, but, at the same time, the positive laws are the instrument through which the *potestas* of the State reaches, *ordinate*, the peak of its own *potentia*. This parallelism between *potentia Dei* and the power of the civil person in no way implies an acceptance of the theory of secularisation: the Hobbesian State is the result of human intellect and of human creative ability, and it has its origin only in the pact (*pactum unionis*), which was conceived in an individualistic manner. Such an individualistic or atomistic foundation does not imply the ideal of a sovereign-representative *persona*, but, rather, the image of the Leviathan as a *machina*.³⁵ What matters in the Hobbesian State is not representation through a person, but the factual and real provision of effective protection (“protection in exchange for obedience”, Carl Schmitt notes in *Der Begriff des “Politischen”*),

³³ Cf. C, II.4-8, V.6-12, VI.3-11, XII.4, XIV.1-3; L, XVI-XVIII.

³⁴ Cf. C, VI.19; L, *Introduction* and XXI, XXVI, XXIX.

³⁵ Cf. L, 16-18, 324-328, 344, 396, 458, 496-498, 510-512, 518, 540.

which can be ensured only by an effectively working command mechanism. This technical character, the concept of *machina machinarum*, is therefore the specific characteristic of the Modern State, which derives from Hobbes. Thus, personalism is at the service of mechanism and not the other way round. Within this technical-artificial dimension of the State, the legal system performs a central role, above all as the instrument through which laws are transformed into positive commands.³⁶ The State functions as a coercive mechanism which, through the public proclamation of laws, activates justifications of a psychological order, through which the citizen's will can be more directly disposed to obeying whoever equally holds *power and might*:

For he who has been granted *by right [iure]* all the power needed to coerce any number of citizens by penalties, has as much power [*potentiam*] as the citizens can confer upon him. It is evident therefore that in every commonwealth there is some *one man* or *one assembly [concilium]* or *council [curia]*, which has by right as much power [*potentia*] over individual citizens as each man has over himself outside of the commonwealth, that is, *sovereign* or *absolute* power [*potentia*], which is to be limited only by strength of the commonwealth and not by anything else. For if its power [*potestas*] is to be limited, it has to be by a greater power [*potestas*]; for the one that sets the limits must have greater power [*potentia*] than the one restrained by limits. The restraining power [*potentia*] therefore is either without limit, or is restrained in its turn by a greater power [*potentia*]; and so it will come down at least to a power [*potestas*] without other limit than that set by the strength of all the citizens together in its full extent. This is the so-called *sovereign power [imperium summum]*.³⁷

In Hobbes's sovereign-representative person, power and might are confused, without a meaningful conceptual distinction between them, so much so that on more than one occasion Hobbes uses *potentia*, *potestas* and *imperium* 'interchangeably':³⁸ "For the power [*potentia*] of the citizens is the power [*potentia*] of the commonwealth, that is, his power who holds the sovereignty [*imperium*] in the commonwealth".³⁹ If *potestas* is the

³⁶ Cf. *L*, XXVI.

³⁷ *C*, VI.17–18, 88.

³⁸ Cf. *C*, V.11, VII.3, VII.11–12, VIII.10. Hobbes does not make a clear distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*, between *power* and *might*, terms which he often 'confuses' and uses in ambiguous and interchangeable ways: cf. *E*, II.3–4; *L*, X (with differences between *English Works* and *Opera Latina*); *Cor.*, X.1; *An Answer to Bishop Bramhall's Book, called "The Catching of the Leviathan"*, in *The English Works*, ed. by W. Molesworth, London, John Bohn, 1839–1845, vol. IV, 298.

³⁹ *C*, 143.

equivalent of *imperium*, then *potestas* designates the right to command by whoever has the most *potentia*.

Clearly, Hobbes's political mechanism of the State is directly related to the new scientific paradigm asserted by Galileo Galilei. The Hobbesian State must function with mathematical exactness and geometrical precision. However, *exactness* in the political field means something completely different when compared to exactness in the field of mathematics and geometry. Indeed, mathematics and geometry – unlike politics – are untouched by *passions* and *opinions*. In this situation, also, the Leviathan State finds itself radically reduced to *technology*. The task of the sovereign-representative person is to develop techniques that are useful for an effective conservation and running of the State. It is clear that all this presupposes a prior restriction of the political arena, in other words, the restriction of the fundamental questions concerning the *purpose* of the State to a single condition: the State's role as a *guarantor* of peace and security. When faced with this compact mechanism which creates and regulates the political order, it is legitimate to ask: does it really make sense to talk of the *potentia* (or omnipotence) of the State? Are *potentia* and *potestas* really the same thing for Hobbes?

With regard to the might of the State, it is right to speak of omnipotence in a wider sense, even though it is nonetheless *relative*. The State is omnipotent in that it is the foremost power before which nothing – neither “from below” (the citizens), nor from “on high” (God) – can offer any *effective* resistance. However, no State is omnipotent, neither at a theoretical nor at a practical level. First and foremost it is necessary to consider, at least in theory, the possibility that exonerates the citizen from political obedience: however small, his right to resist is legitimate.⁴⁰ Secondly, the sovereign-representative person has to respect – at the level of his own juridical legitimacy, and even *in the absence* of effective sanctions – the dictates of natural law.⁴¹ Finally, within an international context, each State is confronted by other States, whose sovereignty is equally legitimate.⁴² Thus, to take it to its absurd conclusion, the Hobbesian State is hypothetically omnipotent only when all rights of resistance and every reference to natural law have been eliminated, and, lastly, once the effective conditions for a worldwide State have been achieved. Clearly, then, the achievement of the conditions required by Hobbesian theory is entirely improbable, as well as

⁴⁰ Cf. *E*, II.II.12-16; *C*, VII.18; *L*, XXI, XXVII.

⁴¹ Cf. *E*, II.IX; *C*, XIII; *L*, XXX.

⁴² Cf. *L*, 552.

theoretically unjustifiable. In speaking of the omnipotence of the Hobbesian State, we are talking about a *relative* omnipotence, as opposed to one which is absolute.⁴³

However, this does not imply a denial that the English philosopher indicates the way forward for a progressive linguistic and conceptual ‘coincidence’ of *potentia* and *potestas*. In Hobbesian political philosophy this ambiguity is intrinsic, or structural, and it is not restricted only to the relationship between conceptual analysis and terminology (in other words, the Hobbesian ‘confusion’ between *potentia* and *potestas*, *might* and *power*). The creation of the Hobbesian State can only be completed when *potentia* and *potestas* coincide. The State is the highest and noblest realisation of man’s *potentia*, in the form of *potestas*. The State is man’s greatest work of art, the most important creation of human genius: it is the only historical-concrete form through which human potential can be realised. The State, therefore, presents itself as an *act* of human *might*, as the single legitimate and effective achievement of human ability. As such, the State is – at one and the same time – the pre-eminent legitimate power that can be *realised*, the strongest coercive force and the highest legal authority (*potestas*, *imperium*, *auctoritas*), because it is the most extraordinary realisation of human might. For this reason, in Hobbesian theory, *potentia* and *potestas* are both intelligible in opposition to the difficulties which arise with the *actus*:⁴⁴ “It is unthinkable that a man or assembly which has direct and immediate power [*in potentia proxima & immediata*] of action should hold power [*imperium*] in such a way that it cannot actually give any commands; for power [*imperium*] is simply the right to give commands whenever it is possible by nature”.⁴⁵

The act (that is, the State) is that which *univocally* and legitimately comes into existence as a result of the coincidence of power and might; without the presence of either of these two elements, the act – the State – fails to come about. For the sovereign-representative person, the possibility of exercising acts of command is essential: power and might, together, express the conditions for the possibility of exercising such acts, independently of whether these can effectively be carried out. Moreover, we do not know the content of such acts and, in any case, this does not affect their potential to come about. Misery and nobility, advantages and disadvantages in the action of the State are excluded from the concept of *potentia* understood as

⁴³ Cf. C, XIV.1, XVI.15; L, X.

⁴⁴ Cf. C, VII.11–13 and VII.16, X.16.

⁴⁵ C, 99.

potestas: “For government [*imperium*] is a *capacity* [*potentia*], administration of government is an act [*actus*]; power [*potentia*] is equal in every kind of commonwealth; what differs are acts [*actus*], i.e. the *motions* and *actions* of the commonwealth”.⁴⁶ *Potentia* is that which the sovereign-representative person is able to do in that he has the *capacity* to do it; whereas *potestas* is that which the sovereign-representative person is able to do in that he has the *legitimacy* to do it. The content of the *actus* is irrelevant to Hobbes’s theory of sovereignty. How, then, can men protest against that which is the highest realisation of their own ability and potential? How can a man deny the right of the greatest product of his own intelligence and creativity? Man must be prepared to hand over his own *potentia* to allow it to be developed by the State as *potestas* and, therefore, as *actus*, without which the conditions for the fulfilment of his true abilities cannot exist. Man can fulfil himself completely (and his own well-being) only when the conditions for peace and security exist. Without *potestas*, there can be no *potentia* and, therefore, no *actus*. Without *potentia*, there can be no *potestas* and, therefore, no *actus*. Thus, there is only one way for *potentia* to become *actus*, which is by way of *potestas* created by man himself.

The nature of the relationship between *potentia* and *potestas* in Hobbes indicates the absence of a concept of *potentia* understood as possibility and faculty, as well as readiness to hand and openness. The English philosopher shows the *legitimate* way to justify the realisation of human *potentia* in terms of *potestas* created by man and for man’s *benefit*. Hobbes, however, does not discuss the ends to which the *potentia-potestas* should be directed. Man possesses a high level of *potentia* which, in the state of nature, remains completely ineffective. In this situation, it is necessary to provide a theoretical mechanism with which man can *autonomously* construct a *potestas* which is able to provide the conditions for the realisation of his own *potentia*. The resultant institution (the State) is essential for this process of creating *potentia-potestas*, rather than its end, understood as substantial content. In Hobbes, the *actus* is a product that has a “formal” value, because it creates the conditions for the effective realisation of human *potentia* through the mechanism of *potestas*. However, in Hobbesian theory the ends to which the realisation of *potentia* must be channelled are totally irrelevant. Therefore, it is indifference with regard to the substantial content of the *actus* – rather than questions of the amount of power, in other words omnipotence – which influences the Hobbesian interpretation of

⁴⁶ C, 125.

potentia in terms of *potestas*. It is not by accident, then, that the question of the might of the sovereign-representative person is not expressed by Hobbes in terms of omnipotence. The neutrality of *potentia-potestas* cannot enter into discussion of the goals of *actus*. On the one hand, then, the discussion of the *actus* is superseded by the theory of *potentia*: what counts is the possession of the capacity to act, independently of the goals to which it is directed. On the other hand, the discussion of the *actus* is substituted by the theory of *potestas*: what counts is the legitimacy of the capacity to act, independently of the forms of its concrete use. The goal of Hobbesian political philosophy (the search for peace and security) necessitates the reduction of *potentia* to *potestas* through the elimination of the question of the *actus*.

V. Determinism and Power: “Potentia” as Cause in Natural Philosophy

Hobbes was no fan of the idea of *potentia*. Nothing in his work, if correctly understood in the light of his complete philosophical system, aims at creating a justification for omnipotence. This is true with respect to both the ethical-political and the metaphysical-theological levels. Even the fact that the Hobbesian God is practically, if not nominally, “impotent” is proof of this: His power is ineffectual at a political level, given that it plays no substantial role in the Kingdom of God by its own nature, nor in the “prophetic kingdom of God”.⁴⁷ Moreover, God’s might is even ineffectual at the level of physics, given that this is restricted to His prescience: God’s intervention in the world is strictly tied to the eternal laws of causal determinism inherent in its true reality, i.e. the bodies in motion.⁴⁸ The faults in the mechanism of justification of *potentia-potestas* can be traced even at the level of Hobbes’s political philosophy. Similar considerations also apply to the arguments that Hobbes uses at an anthropological level. Indeed, the fundamentally obscure and miserable condition of man in the state of nature is immediately apparent, for although it is one in which everyone *nominally* enjoys freedom and absolute power, this proves to be totally inadequate for self-preservation. On the other hand, human power is dangerous at the level of practical consequences (the war of all against all): where everyone has power, no one has power. Moreover, all traces of man’s ineffectual power

⁴⁷ Cf. *C*, XV-XVII; *L*, XXXI, XXXIV-XXXVIII.

⁴⁸ Cf. *E*, LXI; *LN*, 19-21, 40-42; *Cor*, VIII.20, IX.7, XXVI.1.

are lost in the civil State; it is, therefore, useful and “productive” (that is effective) only when it is *transferred*. Lastly, the justification of the most important instrument which is able to develop the power of man, i.e. science, is shown to be both problematic and ambiguous. Despite being the most effective instrument for strengthening human power, science also risks re-involving man in mutual conflict, given that it can produce passions connected with the recognition of the desire for superiority, which has the potential to destroy peace. It is therefore clear that a thinker who tends to ‘empty’ the idea of power of its contents cannot be labelled as the standard bearer of omnipotence *tout court*.

However, leaving aside the issue that Hobbes may have wanted to avoid ‘filling’ the idea of power with more specific contents, it remains undeniable that Hobbes himself was one of the first theorists to initiate – from a formal and argumentative point of view – the modern reduction of *potentia* to *potestas*, above all in *linguistic* terms. This linguistic slippage is clear especially with regard to the determinism of his theory of physics. Hobbes’s wish to free himself of the weight of the Aristotelian-Scholastic legacy, especially where the idea of might – one of the key concepts in the teleological tradition of physics – is concerned, is thoroughly understandable. Hobbes’s physical mechanism brings to completion the parallelism between cause and effect on the one hand, and might and act on the other. This contributes to the exclusion of the idea of *potentia* from the semantic field, which is related to the concepts of *possibility*, *faculty* and *potentiality*, and reduces it to an idea of *potestas* which is mechanically determined in the relationship between cause and effect. *Potentia* correspond to cause and *actus* correspond to effect.

When any agent has all the accidents necessarily required by the agent itself to produce an effect on any patient, then we say that agent *can* produce that effect, if it is applied to the patient. Yet we showed that the accidents make up the efficient cause: so, the very same accidents make up both the efficient cause and the agent’s *potentia*. Therefore the agent’s *potentia* and the efficient cause are actually the same, but they are considered different as to a point: we say *cause* with reference to the effect which has been already *produced* and we say *potentia* with reference to the same effect *which still has to be produced*, so that the cause relates to the past and *potentia* relates to the future [...]. However they are considered in a different way, since we look to the *past* for the cause and to the *future* for *potentia*. Therefore both the agent’s and the patient’s *potentia*, which can also be called *entire* *potentia*, is the same as the entire cause [...]. Finally, if the produced accident is called *effect* with reference to the cause, then it will be called *actus* with reference to *potentia*. As an effect is produced at the very moment in which the cause is entire, *potentia* produces likewise the *actus* it can produce at the very moment in which it is

entire. As no effect can arise otherwise than being produced by a sufficient and necessary cause, similarly no actus is produced otherwise than being produced by a sufficient potentia, that could not but produce it.⁴⁹

It is the deterministic theory of events – and not merely an absolutist option regarding the theory of State or a re-elaboration in modern terms of the medieval concept of *potentia Dei* – which draws the interpretative background against which Hobbes works out the idea of *potentia-potestas*. Only a temporal difference (a cause corresponds to an effect in the *past*, while might corresponds to an act in the *future*), available exclusively at the *linguistic* level, distinguishes cause from might. This difference, however, can only be perceived at the human level, given that *in itself* – on an ontological level – it is absolutely irrelevant. Cause and might are the same because might – *where it exists* – is not a possibility but a necessity: *potentia* thus loses its root *posse* to come together with the idea of *necessity*. The possible *is* what is necessary, otherwise *it does not exist*. It is no accident that future events are contingent only for man, due to his lack of knowledge, but in themselves, they are necessary for the very reason that they have necessary causes, in exactly the same way as past events. Therefore, in reality, might does not exist *conditionally*; it cannot not exist, otherwise it simply would not be: “The *actus*, which exists, is a necessary *actus*; whatever *actus* there will be, it will be by matter of necessity”.⁵⁰ There is no middle position between not-being and being; might and act are no longer ways of being, but only belong to the realm of representation. For this reason, it becomes substantially impossible to distinguish between *active might* and the *efficient cause*, between *passive might* and *material cause*, between a *plenary might* and *entire cause*, or between *act* and *effect*. At this point it is not difficult to see the slippage of the idea of might towards the semantic field delimited by the idea of power. *Might* does not indicate that which has the *possibility* of becoming, but is that which has the *power* of becoming. A power which, indeed, implies the *necessity* of becoming. No act can exist unless it is produced by a plenary might, in other words an entire cause; and, if the cause is entire, that is, if the might is plenary, it cannot fail to produce an act.⁵¹ *Potentia* is, necessarily, *potestas*, otherwise it does not exist.

⁴⁹ *Cor.*, X.1-2.

⁵⁰ *Cor.*, X.5.

⁵¹ Cf. *Cor.*, IX.3-5.