Concerning “men’s affections to Godward”

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Concerning “men’s affections to Godward”: Hobbes on the First and Eternal Cause of All Things

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Abstract: In several places Hobbes gives what appears to be a version of the cosmological argument. According to one popular interpretation, these are not actually arguments at all, but are naturalistic descriptions of a psychological process. Advocates of this interpretation see this as an ironic criticism of religion, claiming that the psychological story implies that God is a human fiction; hence, it is evidence of Hobbes’s atheism. Such interpretations are unsatisfactory. I argue for a novel, non-ironic psychological interpretation. Hobbes describes a process that does not justify belief in God, but nevertheless involves rational activity. It is psychologically impossible to withhold belief in a first cause while engaged in a certain kind of activity—reasoning correctly and profoundly about the natural world. But because this process is regulated by reason and method, the natural philosopher need not have any qualms about holding the belief.

Keywords: God, religion, superstition, the passions, cosmological argument, suppositions, posits

1. Introduction

Hobbes’s views on the existence and nature of God have occasioned much controversy.1 He has been interpreted as holding positions ranging from sincere, if unconventional, Calvinism to out-

1 The title of this essay refers to Thomas Hobbes, Human Nature, xi.11.
and-out atheism. Of particular interest has been Hobbes’s apparent endorsement of a version of the cosmological argument. Take the following, for example:

For he that from any effect he seeth come to pass should reason to the next and immediate cause thereof, and from thence to the cause of that cause, and plunge himself profoundly into the pursuit of causes, shall at last come to this: that there must be (even as the heathen philosophers confessed) one first mover, that is, a first and eternal cause of all things, which is that which men mean by the name of God. (Lev. xii.6)

On the face of it, this argument would seem to be proof that Hobbes believes there is a God in at least a minimal sense—he believes in a “philosopher’s God,” an eternal, powerful, ultimate cause of the universe, which, even if not the personal God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, nonetheless commands our awe and admiration. But Hobbes’s endorsement of the argument is qualified in at least two respects. First, in his other treatments of the argument, he claims that arguments that the world has a finite duration are not valid (an assessment in obvious tension with the conclusion of the cosmological argument). Second, though the argument in Leviathan xxii.6 might appear to be a standard version of the cosmological argument, his discussion of the argument and a careful reading of the surrounding text show that his version differs in an important way from the standard one. It does not proceed from the actual impossibility of an infinite series of causes, but from our inability to conceive of an infinite chain. It is a description of a process that I dub the “Hobbesian Cosmological Argument-like Process” (HCAP). I shall call any interpretation that understands Hobbes’s apparent endorsement of the cosmological argument as a description of a psychological process by which we come to form a belief in the

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3 E.g. Hobbes, De corpore, xxvi.1; and Anti-White, ii.3, fol.9.
4 Hobbes, De corpore, xxvi.1.
existence of God, rather than an attempt to rationally justify this belief, an “HCAP interpretation.”

Generally, advocates of HCAP interpretations have argued that it is evidence of Hobbes’s irreligiosity and secret atheism, seeing the HCAP “as proof that Hobbes, like Epicurus sees the natural curiosity of humans in their search for ultimate causes, not as a proof for the existence of God, but to the contrary, proof of their enduring capacity to create gods in their own likeness to relieve metaphysical angst,”5 or even as an “ironic parody.”6 Such interpretations leave us in an unsatisfactory position. Hobbes very clearly distinguishes between two different kinds of theisms. The one is popular superstition and pagan polytheism; the other is the monotheist belief in an incomprehensible philosopher’s God. While Hobbes is undoubtedly a masterful ironist, and many of his pious declamations have a distinct air of insincerity, he appears genuinely to approve of the belief in a first cause and to hold genuine contempt for those who believe in ghosts and heathen gods. But on the usual HCAP interpretation, this discrepancy in Hobbes’s attitude appears prima facie unmotivated. After all, on the HCAP interpretation, both sets of beliefs arise as by-products of non-rational psychological forces. Both sets of beliefs seem equally unwarranted, and the standard, ironic HCAP interpretation flattens out the differences between the two.

I argue here for a non-ironic HCAP interpretation that explains this discrepancy in Hobbes’s attitude. The standard HCAP interpretation correctly identifies Hobbes’s statements of what seem to be a version of the cosmological argument as descriptions of a natural psychological process by which human beings come to form the belief in the existence of God. However, the standard, ironic interpretation fails to respect the distinction Hobbes draws between the HCAP and the process by which people come to hold polytheist and superstitious religious beliefs. Hobbes not only distinguishes these two very different theisms; he also provides them with two very different genealogies. In both cases, the mind is led naturally to

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5 Patricia Springborg, “A Corporeal Deity,” 928.
6 Douglas Jesseph, Squaring the Circle, 324.
form beliefs about unobserved beings, but it is clear from his discussion of these two processes that the beliefs thereby formed are not on level footing. The superstitious belief in ghosts and minor anthropomorphic gods is an error, a false belief in non-existent beings, arising from ignorance and the conquest of the passions by fear and anxiety. By contrast, although the HCAP is not an argument justifying the belief in the existence of God, it is nevertheless a process involving rational activity. It is the right-reasoning natural philosopher, plunging profoundly into an investigation of causes, who comes to believe in a first cause. When she is engaged in a certain kind of activity—reasoning correctly about the natural world—the natural philosopher must believe there is a first cause. The belief generated by the HCAP is like the belief in corpuscles and mind-independent substances—God is a supposed being or an inferred being, that is to say, a thing posited in the course of physical theorizing. Though God is a supposed being that the natural scientist must posit, as a matter of unavoidable psychological necessity, the belief is not ipso facto an error. Indeed, because the HCAP is regulated by reason and method, the natural philosopher need not have any qualms about holding the belief.7

In the next section, I briefly argue for the HCAP interpretation.8 There I distinguish between the HCAP and the process by which humans come to invent fictional beings and erroneously believe in their real existence. I explain his disdain for the latter and approval for the former. In section 3, I examine Hobbes’s views on supposed beings and theoretical posits. Supposed beings are at the heart of his philosophy of logic and science. In section 4, I consider a potential objection to my interpretation. According to Hobbes, it is possible to form empty (that is, non-denoting) but meaningful names, and the natural scientist sometimes finds it useful to suppose the existence of beings that she knows or believes are nonexistent. Thus, one might

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7 My position is analogous to Louis Loeb’s position on Descartes’s account of clear and distinct perception and the Cartesian Circle (see “The Cartesian Circle.”). Loeb argues that Descartes’s proof for the existence of a benevolent God is meant to remove doubt of clear and distinct perceptions by making doubt “psychologically impossible.” I argue that Hobbes thinks of the HCAP in a similar way: the right-reasoning philosopher, rigorously applying a sound method, eventually finds it psychologically impossible to refrain from a belief in a first cause. My thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out Loeb’s article.
8 Full defenses of the HCAP interpretation have been made elsewhere by other authors. See e.g. Curley “I durst not write so boldly”; Jesseph, “Hobbes’s Atheism;” Springborg, “A Corporeal God;” Springborg, “Hobbes and Epicurean Religion.”
think that God is simply like this—‘God’ is an empty name, with a proper use in speech and in theorizing, but with which we could dispense in principle. However, I argue, God is not a fiction of the mind in this sense, for God is not a revocable posit for human beings engaged in scientific inquiry. The human natural philosopher, under the compulsion of the HCAP, cannot take up a non-committal attitude toward this supposed being.

2. The HCAP Interpretation

Let us turn to Hobbes’s alleged endorsements of the cosmological argument. These occur in *Leviathan* xi.25, xii.6 and *Human Nature* xi.2. I have quoted *Leviathan* xii.6 above, but *Leviathan* xi.25 and *Human Nature* xi.2 are as follows:

Curiosity, or love of the knowledge of causes, draws a man from consideration of the effect to seek the cause, and again the cause of that cause, till of necessity he must come to this thought at last: that there is some cause, whereof there is no former cause, but is eternal, which is it men call God. So that it is impossible to make any profound inquiry into natural causes without being inclined thereby to believe there is one God eternal, though they cannot have any idea of him in their mind answerable to his nature. (*Lev.* xi.25)

[The] effects we acknowledge naturally, do include a power of their producing, before they were produced; and that power presupposeth something existent that hath such power; and the thing so existing with the power to produce, if it were not eternal, must needs have been produced by somewhat before it, and that again by something else before that, till we come to an eternal, that is to say, the first power of all powers, and first cause of all causes; and this is it which all men conceive by the name of GOD, implying eternity, incomprehensibility, and omnipotency. (*Human Nature*, xi.2)
The traditional cosmological argument is an argument that proceeds to the conclusion that there must be a first cause on the grounds that an infinite regress of causes is, allegedly, impossible. But notice that it is not clear that Hobbes is saying this in any of these passages. Rather, he is reporting on psychological facts about human beings. Humans, animated by curiosity and a “love of the knowledge of causes” are driven into an investigation of natural phenomena. When they plunge “profoundly” into such an inquiry, they must “of necessity” come to the conclusion that there is a first cause of all, which they call by the name, ‘God.’ There is no argument here because Hobbes is not giving us premises such that, were they true, they would logically guarantee the truth of the conclusion. The necessity that Hobbes refers to in Leviathan xi.25 is, on the HCAP interpretation, a psychological necessity. Our pursuit of philosophical knowledge, an inquiry into the causes of natural phenomena (and all the possible effects of the same), is limited by two facts about our psychology. First, since Hobbes subscribes to a version of the “copy principle,” there can be no ideas or images the content of which was not derived from the content of sense perception. Second, we are finite beings and simply incapable of actually performing the steps that reasoning backward through the whole course of all causes and all effects would entail. In De corpore Hobbes argues that it is not possible to form a conception of the infinite. Hobbes’s argument is based partly on the copy principle, but he also argues that it would not be possible to form an idea of the infinite by way of considering an infinite chain of events:

9 Human Nature xi.2 certainly comes the closest to an unambiguous statement of the cosmological argument. Yet even in this case it is implausible that this is what Hobbes is up to. Hobbes does not, on closer inspection, appear to give any argument for why it should be impossible for there to be a regress of causes. Indeed, given that every effect “presupposeth” a cause, what he actually says would imply that there is an infinite regress of causes. What blocks this inference is the positing of a regress-stopper—some first and eternal power. So, unless we believe that this regress-stopping first cause exists, what Hobbes says seems to imply that we should believe, inasmuch as we are trying to believe propositions on the basis of sound arguments, that there is no first cause. But Human Nature xi.2 gives us no reasons for accepting that there is such a regress-stopping cause. He just says that we “come to” an eternal first cause. It is more plausible that Hobbes is telling a psychological story. He reports a conceptual regress of posits he thinks we make in the course of investigating causes. This ascension from supposed cause to supposed cause to supposed cause is only halted by the stalling out of the imagination at some altitude.

10 I take the term from Don Garrett, Cognition and Content in Hume’s Philosophy.

11 Hobbes, Lev. i.2.
And though a man may from some effect proceed to the immediate cause thereof, and from that to a more remote cause, and so ascend continually by right ratiocination from cause to cause; yet he will not be able to proceed eternally, but wearied will at last give over, without knowing whether it were possible for him to proceed to an end or not. (*De corpore* xxvi.1)

The point is that one could not form an idea of the infinite by thinking through, in a stepwise fashion, the members of an infinite series. For even if someone reasons correctly, by “right ratiocination,” from one member of the series to the next, yet she will eventually be compelled to stop. There is, thus, a psychological limitation to our capacity to reason backward through a chain of causes and effects. Someone who reaches this limit “gives over” but cannot conclude, as a matter of logic, that there must be a first cause on the basis of their argument. The parallel here with the psychological descriptions in *Leviathan* xi.25, xii.6, and *Human Nature* xi.2 is striking. The compulsion in question is psychological, not logical. Seeking after the causes of observed effects and the causes of those causes in their turn, and proceeding rightly, and profoundly, one must eventually weary and give over at last, of necessity.¹²

One of the messages of *De corpore* xxvi.1 is that it is impossible to settle the question of whether or not the world had a beginning a priori. This is impossible, according to Hobbes, because “whether we suppose the world to be finite or infinite, no absurdity will follow” (*De corpore*, xxvi.1). Because you cannot derive a contradiction from either supposition, you cannot conclude a priori either that there exists or does not exist a first cause. This same point arises in *Anti-White*.¹³ There Hobbes argues that theologians who, like Thomas White, attempt to

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¹² Cf. Hobbes, *Lev*. vii.1: “Of all discourse [of the mind] governed by desire of knowledge, there is at last an end, either by attaining or by giving over.”

¹³ Worries about the reliability of *Anti-White*, which was written sometime in the early 1640s, as an authoritative source of Hobbes’s views can be ameliorated by pointing out that there is broad doctrinal continuity between the positions in *Anti-White* and *Human Nature* (composed and circulated in an unpublished manuscript around the same time) and later, more-or-less canonical works such as *Leviathan* and *De corpore*. Furthermore, on the point under consideration, both *Anti-White* and *De corpore* (Latin edition 1655; English edition 1656) are in agreement; hence, it appears that Hobbes did not change his mind substantially on this.
establish theological matters by the use of natural reason are “unphilosophical” (*Anti-White*, xxvi.2, fol. 287). Why? Because “the truth of any proposition consists in this: within the meaning of the predicate must be included that of the subject” and a proposition has been demonstrated a priori when “by means of explanations or definitions of the terms it has been made clear that the subject is contained within its predicate” (*Anti-White* xxvi.1, fol. 287). Thus, “those who declare that they will show [i.e. give an a priori demonstration] that God exists or that no body at all has existed at [a time] more than six thousand years ago, or at least at a period in the past, act unphilosophically” (*Anti-White*, xxvi.2, fol. 287v; the first interpolation is mine) for although some believe “that a consequence of the definition of ‘body’ is that body was created, or that a consequence of the definition of ‘incorporeal’ is that it has existed for ever,” (*Anti-White*, xxvi.2, fol. 287v) these people “do not adequately understand what ‘body’ or ‘the incorporeal’ is” (*Anti-White*, xxvi.2, fol. 287v). In other words, as “body is created” is not an analytic truth, it is not a necessary truth, and hence cannot be known a priori. No demonstration is possible because no contradiction results from the supposition of the contrary.\(^{14}\)

All demonstrations, Hobbes claims, proceed hypothetically and never have categorical existential import. In fact, Hobbes adheres to that distinctly Humean slogan that matters of fact and existence cannot be settled a priori, in the sense that no logical proof of a categorical existence claim is possible. There is no valid, a priori argument to the unconditional existence of any being, according to Hobbes, for “to prove that something exists, there is need of the senses, or experience” (*Anti-White*, xxvi.2, fol. 287). And even when the senses seem to indicate the existence of some being, “the demonstration is not thus established, for someone rigidly demanding the truth from people who say that Socrates lived or existed will tell them to add: ‘Unless we have seen [Socrates’s] ghost or spirit’ or ‘Unless we were asleep, we saw Socrates; so Socrates existed, etc.’” (*Anti-White*, xxvi.2, fol. 287). As these vehement denials of the

\(^{14}\) On the distinction between a demonstration and a proof of God’s existence, see A. P. Martinich, *The Two Gods of Leviathan*, 192–95 and 346–49. If I understand Martinich correctly, the HCAP would not count as a proof of God’s existence in his sense.
possibility of actually proving that the universe has a first cause occur not only contemporaneously with the circulation of the manuscript of Human Nature (ca. 1640) and before the English edition of Leviathan (1651), but are also repeated afterward in De corpore (1655), it is unlikely that Hobbes simply changed his mind (and then changed it back again). The more reasonable thing to do is to reinterpret his apparent endorsements of a cosmological argument. Hobbes must be doing something else, something other than giving a demonstration that God, the first cause of all, exists. This is the HCAP.

One fact about the discussion of the HCAP as it occurs in Leviathan and Human Nature is that in both cases Hobbes presents it as part of his larger discussion about the natural sources of religious beliefs. What is not often appreciated about this discussion, however, is Hobbes’s point that religious beliefs spring from two different sources, yielding two very distinct kinds of theisms, with very different effects on the believer’s behavior and mental state. Separating out these two beliefs, their sources, and their effects explains why Hobbes takes a dim view of the one and not the other. In Leviathan the HCAP is introduced first in the chapter “Of the Difference of Manners.” In this chapter, Hobbes is giving an explanation of the sources of “those qualities of mankind that concern their living together in peace and unity” (Lev. xi.1) and also the sources of the differences between people in this regard. All human beings, according to Hobbes,

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15 As pointed out by Thomas Holden, “Hobbes’s First Cause.”
16 An exception is Alan Cromartie, “The God of Thomas Hobbes,” 857–79. Cromartie sketches a position similar to mine in that it recognizes that Hobbes gives two different accounts of the motivations of two theisms. According to Cromartie, “[t]he relationship between fear and love of knowledge makes possible an interesting distinction between enquiries driven entirely by fear and others partly motivated by the pleasure intrinsic to knowledge-acquisition” (874), and so for Hobbes, “[t]he monotheistic believer thus had a different motive from the mere idolater” (875). “But,” Cromartie continues (citing Lev. xii.11), “the ‘Naturall seed’ of both kinds of religion was a short list of human weaknesses: ‘Opinion of Ghosts, Ignorance of second causes, Devotion towards what men fear, and Taking of things Casuall for Prognostiques’” (875). This is where Cromartie and I part company. That particular list of weaknesses pertains not to the (right-reasoning) philosopher but to pagans and superstitious monotheists. Hobbes gives their beliefs different genealogies. This is not simply a difference in motivation—the HCAP is a distinct belief-forming process, contrasted with the process yielding paganism and superstition. Cromartie also overlooks the point that Hobbes evaluates these distinct genealogies differently. I deny that fear and ignorance are involved in the HCAP, which involves knowledge. The HCAP is the process to which the right reasoning natural philosopher is subject, insofar as she profoundly pursues scientific knowledge. This is knowledge of “second causes,” exactly the sort of which the superstitious are ignorant and afraid. The HCAP-reasoner, not blinkered by fear, will not rest content with superficial explanations. Curiosity will push her to look for deeper causes. Her weakness is her finite power. I thank an anonymous referee for drawing to my attention to this potential source of confusion.
pursue their own “felicity” (*Lev. xi.1*). Though they all pursue this general end, different people differ from one another “in the way; which ariseth partly from the diversity of the passions in divers men, and partly from the difference of the knowledge or opinion each one has of the causes which produce the effect desired” (*Lev. xi.1*, my emphasis). Now that last point is important for our purposes. As we shall see, one psychological process yields the superstitious belief in spirits and ghosts and the pagan belief in a plurality of anthropomorphic gods. It is a process beginning in ignorance, anxiety, and fear, yielding ignorance, anxiety, and fear in a cycle sustained by the priestly classes. For “those men whose ends are sensual delight, and generally addicted to ease, food, onerations and exonerations of the body” are incurious sluggards and, lacking the ambition to pursue scientific knowledge, are ignorant of natural causes (*Human Nature* x.3).17 This ignorance has harmful social and psychological consequences, making them prone to fear phenomena with unknown but natural causes. The fear born of this ignorance makes a person superstitious and subject to the depredations of “ghostly men” (*Lev. ii.8*). The other process is the HCAP. It begins with knowledge and is sustained by curiosity, that peculiar “lust of the mind that by a perseverance of delight in the continual and indefatigable generation of knowledge excedeth the short vehemence of any carnal pleasure” (*Lev. vi.35*).18 The awe of the incomprehensible God disinclines one from theological speculations and makes one better suited for life in the Commonwealth.

Anxiety over “the future time disposeth men to inquire into the causes of things, because the knowledge of them maketh men better able to order the present to their best advantage” (*Lev. xi.24*) and though this anxiety over the future is shared by all humans, the knowledge of causes is not. There are two types of reactions to natural anxiety to which a person can be subject, determined (at least in part) by whether or not a person has a scientific and philosophical knowledge of causes. These two types of reactions are contrasted in *Leviathan* xi.25 and xi.26. In *Leviathan* xi.25, Hobbes describes the person driven to investigate causes primarily by curiosity

18 See also Hobbes, *De homine*, xi.9.
or “the love of the knowledge of causes.” This person moves from “a consideration of the effect to seek the cause, and again the cause of that cause” and proceeding thus, making a “profound inquiry,” they find in the course of their investigation that they are compelled to posit a first cause of all, which is called “God.” On the other hand,

they that make little or no inquiry into the natural causes of things, yet from the fear that proceeds from the ignorance itself of what it is that hath the power to do them much good or harm are inclined to suppose and feign unto themselves several kinds of powers invisible, and to stand in awe of their own imaginations, and in times of distress to invoke them, as also in the time of unexpected good success to give them thanks, making the creatures of their own fancy their gods. (Lev. xi.26, my emphasis)

These two different sorts of people end up with two very different dispositions and two very different beliefs with apparently different credentials. The person who engages in good philosophical reasoning concerning causes and effects finds herself compelled to posit the existence of a first cause of all. Her belief appears to be the result of the proper and skilled exercise of natural reason. The other sort of person, who makes a poor inquiry into the causes of things, winds up in abject, credulous, superstitious terror of his own fancies. Notice that this second person’s beliefs lack the credentials of the first; they are making a mistake the good natural philosopher does not make. They err in hypostatizing “the creatures of their own fancy” and in “standing in awe of their own imaginations.” They are the sort of people described, for example, in Leviathan ii.6–8 who, being ignorant of the true, natural causes of dreams, and being taken in by their occasional vividness, confuse themselves and wind up with the pagan belief in “satyrs, fawns, nymphs, and the like” or “the opinion that rude people have of fairies, ghosts, and goblins, and of the power of witches” (Lev. ii.8). The natural philosopher, presumably, has inquired into the causes of those fancies themselves and found that they are mere “idols of the
brain which represent to us bodies where they are not” \((\text{Lev. xxxiv.3})\). These “idols of the brain,” Hobbes is keen to insist, are “nothing at all” \((\text{Lev. xxxiv.3})\).

In the very next chapter of \textit{Leviathan}, Hobbes elaborates on the observations made in \textit{Leviathan} xi.23–27 (a catalogue of the problematic consequences of ignorance), giving us a natural account of the peculiarly human phenomena of religious belief. The story Hobbes tells, in short, is that religion arises in human beings because we, unlike other animals, are moved by the passion of curiosity and by anxiety to seek causal explanations, and we have a natural disposition to assume every event must have a cause.\(^{19}\) But we also have the capacity, when we are ignorant of “the true causes of things” to invent causes such as “fancy suggesteth,” or to accept causes by “the authority of other men” \((\text{Lev. xii.4})\). This natural inquisitiveness and the disposition to believe that every event has a cause, coupled with our capacity to invent causes, can breed in us an “over-provident,” miserable state “like to that of \textit{Prometheus},” continually gnawed upon by “the fear of death, poverty, or other calamity” \((\text{Lev. xii.5})\). It is in this context that Hobbes once again asserts that since the “perpetual fear, always accompanying mankind in the ignorance of causes (as it were in the dark), must needs have for object something,” in the absence of any known and visible causes, mankind invents for itself “some power or agent invisible” \((\text{Lev. xii.6})\). This creative power of human beings, spurred by anxiety, to set up and construct imaginary causes in the ignorance of truth is the reason “perhaps, it was that some of the old poets said that the gods were at first created by human fear” \((\text{Lev. xii.6})\). Hobbes adds,

\[\text{This opinion of the old poets] spoken of the gods (that is to say, of the many gods of the Gentiles) is very true. But the acknowledging of one God, eternal, infinite, and omnipotent, may more easily be derived from the desire men have to know the causes of natural bodies, and their several virtues and operations, than from the fear of what was to befall them in time to come. (Lev. xii.6, my emphasis)}\]

\(^{19}\) Hobbes, \textit{Lev. xii.2 and xii.3}.\]
Here Hobbes is explicitly talking about the construction of gods (mere idols of the brain), arising from fear due to an ignorance of causes, and he is contrasting this belief in gods and its source with the source of and belief in a single, incomprehensible God, which arises from sound philosophical inquiry into natural causes—the very contrast he made in *Leviathan* xi.25–26. The next thing Hobbes does in *Leviathan* xii.6 is to give a second statement of the HCAP. Notice that he begins this statement of the HCAP with “for.” This suggests that the HCAP is being given as an explanation for belief in the first cause. Why does the rational, methodological, philosophical inquiry into causes produce a belief in the first cause? Because belief in a first cause arises naturally and inexorably in people correctly exercising their philosophical reason in a thorough investigation of causes, motivated by the pure passion of curiosity, “without thought of their fortune, the solicitude whereof both inclines to fear and hinders them from the search of the causes of other things; and thereby gives occasion of feigning as many gods as there be men that feign them” (*Lev*. xii.6). Hobbes therefore not only distinguishes the sort of “constructive” process by which human beings come to feign gods to serve as the objects of their fears from the process by which they form the belief in a first cause of all, but it is also clear that the former process precisely does not alleviate “metaphysical angst.” Fear and ignorance, as the poets of old and Patricia Springborg have said,20 cause humankind to create gods, but this only exacerbates our terror. By contrast, a love of causes compels the scientific inquirer to “come at last” to the belief that there is “one first mover” (*Lev*. xii.6).

The very same contrast drawn in *Leviathan* also occurs in the discussion of the HCAP in *Human Nature*. In *Human Nature* xi.2, Hobbes gives the HCAP and then claims that by this sort of natural reasoning “all that will consider may know that God is, though not what he is.” That is, although we cannot form an idea or image of God, in the course of profound scientific inquiry into natural causes we nevertheless find ourselves unable to withhold belief in God’s existence.

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The psychologically irresistible pull to believe that God exists during the exercise of natural reason is contrasted with the belief in the existence of spirits. Hobbes is quite clear that in the case of those “other things, which some men call spirits incorporeal, and some corporeal, it is not possible by natural means only, to come to knowledge of so much, as that there are such things” ([*Human Nature*], xi.5). But, Hobbes continues, “[we] that are Christians acknowledge . . . that there are spirits . . . and that those spirits are immortal: *but, to know* it, that is to have natural evidence of the same, it is impossible” ([*Human Nature*], xi.5). Hobbes’s reasoning here does not have anything to do with the insignificance of “incorporeal spirit.” His point is instead that we do not, and cannot, have natural knowledge of the existence of spirits, for “spirits we suppose to be those substances which work *not* upon the sense, and [they are] therefore not conceptible” ([*Human Nature*] xi.5). Hobbes draws and defends the contrast between the belief in God—derived from the exercise of natural reason, as the unique first cause of all—and the pagans’ belief in gods and spirits by arguing precisely that they arise from different sources. The “heathens,” he concedes, “and all nations of the world, have acknowledged that there be spirits” ([*Human Nature*] xi.6) and from the apparent widespread agreement on this point, “it might be thought, that a man by natural reason, may arrive, without the Scriptures, to the knowledge of this, *that spirits are*” ([*Human Nature*] xi.6). However, this heathen belief in the existence of spirits differs from both the natural belief in God and the particularly Christian belief in spirits. The heathen belief is based neither in revelation nor natural reason and arises from a different source altogether:

[The] erroneous collection thereof by the heathens, may proceed, as I have said before, from the ignorance of the causes of ghosts and phantasms, and other such apparitions. And from thence had the Grecians their number of gods, their number of *daemons* good and bad, and for every man his *genius*; which is not the acknowledging of this truth, *that spirits are*; but a false opinion concerning the force of the imagination. ([*Human Nature*], xi.6)
Just as in *Leviathan*, Hobbes here locates the source of the pagan belief in spirits and gods in a mistake and contrasts this belief with the belief in a first cause. Hobbes claims that the exercise of natural reason in the pursuit of scientific knowledge yields the belief that there is a first cause. The belief in spirits is therefore unlike the belief in a single, incomprehensible Deity. The pagans construct their gods, for, ignorant of the causes of things and in fear of the unknown, they erroneously take their own imaginations and fancies for real things. Hobbes gives, in essence, an error theory to account for the belief in spirits. And Christian belief in the existence of spirits and angels is, predictably, insulated from Hobbes’s naturalistic critique. It is not in error and counts as knowledge (he says), for it is “not natural knowledge, but faith from supernatural revelation given to the holy writers of the Scriptures” (*Human Nature* xi.7).

Thus, while Hobbes certainly does recognize the existence of a natural human capacity and inclination to create gods to serve as the objects of our fears and hopes, he very clearly contrasts this belief with the belief in a first cause. The latter sort of natural theism, a belief in a philosopher’s God, seems to have credentials that the former sort lack. They arise from different natural processes. Beliefs of the former sort have a suspect pedigree; Hobbes debunks them by exposing their genealogy. The belief in the existence of a plurality of invisible agents, operating directly on our lives, subject to the same kinds of passions and desires that animate humans, is mistaken, and examining the natural source of this belief shows us why. Humans are naturally curious and take delight in seeking knowledge of the causes of phenomena for its own sake. We (the philosopher included) also seek the causes of phenomena out of concern for our futures. But some people are so disposed that this natural inclination to seek causes is hijacked by fear and ignorance. Hobbes does not, however, think that the belief in a first cause suffers from having its roots exposed. Belief in a single, incomprehensible Deity arises not from fear

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22 And Hobbes has a reason to do so, for if “this superstitious fear of spirits were taken away, and with it prognostics from dreams, false prophecies, and many other things depending thereon . . . men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience” (*Lev.* ii.8).
and ignorance but from a love of investigation, and a thirst for knowledge. It is the natural, psychologically inevitable outcome of an exhaustive exercise of sound philosophical reason in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. The necessary product of this rational activity, if not a strictly demonstrable belief, is not a demonstrable error.

3. Supposed Beings and Posits

Hobbes denies that the gods and spirits posited as the result of fear, anxiety, and ignorance described by the “poets of old” genuinely exist. Pagan beliefs in those gods and spirits are false. But he seems to think that the belief arrived at by the HCAP in the first cause is true and that the Deity so-believed really does exist. But how could this be? Hobbes does not think that matters of existence can be settled a priori, so there is no valid argument establishing the existence of a first cause, and yet he is also clear that we have no idea of God. Why not claim that the proposition ‘there is a first cause’ or ‘God exists’ is false, beyond human comprehension, or nonsense, or simply an expression of pious wonderment or some other non-cognitive mental state and, hence, not truth-apt at all? To answer these questions, I shall turn to the matter of “inferred existents” or “supposed beings” and examine a few of the scattered remarks on theoretical posits in Hobbes’s philosophy.

23 See Holden, “Hobbes’s First Cause,” for an articulation and defense of such a non-cognitive interpretation. Holden argues that although by the HCAP humans come to believe ‘God exists’ is true, ‘God is the first cause’ is not literally true—it is a non-cognitive expression of pious awe. Cromartie (“The God of Thomas Hobbes,” 868) argues that ‘God is’ is neither true nor false, but on somewhat surprising grounds. Cromartie claims that ‘God is’ does not meet Hobbes’s definition of a proposition, for in this (pseudo-)proposition, there is no predicate name linked to ‘God.’ Cromartie is mistaken about this, however. In several places, Hobbes explicitly addresses the case. For example, in the appendix to the Latin edition of Leviathan, in the dialogue “On the Nicene Creed,” Philosopher A specifically wonders whether ‘God is’ is really a proposition, since it does not seem to have the correct subject-predicate form: “But in this affirmation, God is, I do not understand what name is attributed to God” (Appendix, i.3). Philosopher B replies that “[when] someone says that God is, the word is is a substantive verb, which includes both the copula and the predicate . . . when the substantive verb is analysed [the expression is equivalent to] God is a being” (Appendix i.4).

24 Following Gianluca Mori, “A Secret Debate,” 206–7. Mori convincingly argues that Hobbes is the author of an anonymous letter forwarded by Mersenne to Descartes dated May of 1641, on the basis of the discussion of “inferred existents” occurring both in the anonymous letter, the Objections, and the discussion of the meaning of
One of the most explicit discussions of his views on supposed beings occurs in the *Third Set of Objections* to Descartes’s *Meditations*. There Hobbes writes that “[t]here is a great difference between imagining, that is, having an idea, and conceiving in the mind, that is, using a process of reasoning to infer that something is, or exists” (AT VII.177–78/CSM II.125). He goes on to complain that “M. Descartes has not explained how they differ” (AT VII.177–78/CSM II.125), and points out that the “Peripatetics of classical times taught clearly enough that a substance is not perceived by the senses but is inferred by reasoning” (AT VII.177–78/CSM II.125). Hobbes then goes on to pose his infamous question: “Now, what shall we say if it turns out that reasoning is simply the joining together and linking of names or labels by means of the verb ‘is’?” (AT VII.177–78/CSM II.125). To this question, he answers, “[I]t would follow that the inferences in our reasoning tell us nothing at all about the natures of things, but merely tell us about the labels applied to them” (AT VII.178/CSM II.125). Hobbes is preparing us for his own account of the distinction, insufficiently explained by Descartes and the Peripatetics, between having an idea and “inferring as the result of a train of reasoning that something is or exists.” As we have seen, however, Hobbes believes that to prove that something exists “there is need of the senses, or experience,” and so it is not possible to prove that something exists by way of a priori demonstration. What then could Hobbes have in mind?

Hobbes subscribes to a version of the copy principle and thus is a concept empiricist. But this needs some qualification; it would perhaps be best to describe Hobbes as a *conception* empiricist. The content of all ideas or conceptions is ultimately derived from sense perception. To have an idea or conception is, in his view, to have an image-like mental item representing, or purporting to represent, some object encountered in sense perception (or assembled in the imagination out of parts that were constituents of some perceptual representation). In the *Objections*, Hobbes gives the following example: “When I think of a man, I am aware of an idea

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‘God is’ in the 1668 appendix to the Latin edition of *Leviathan*, “On the Nicene Creed.” Mori is quite correct that Hobbes recognizes that the human mind is capable of non-imagistic representation by means of or grasped through propositions. I elaborate on this idea in what follows and find substantial evidence that it pervades Hobbes’s philosophy.
or image made up of a certain shape and colour; and I can doubt whether this image is the likeness of a man or not” (AT VII.179–80/CSM II.126). The image in the mind is a conception of a man—that is, it purports to represent some really existing body, as it was perceived in and copied from sense experience. It is a veridical representation insofar as it really was copied from sense experience of a real man. Hence, the question can be raised as to whether it is or is not the “likeness of a man,” that is, of a real man. What he says about the idea of a chimera is meant to underscore this point: “When I think of a chimera, I am aware of an idea or image; and I can be in doubt as to whether it is the likeness of a non-existent animal which is capable of existing, or one which may or may not have existed at some previous time” (AT VII.179–80/CSM II.126). The idea of a chimera purports to be an idea of a real animal, and one could doubt whether or not this is so.

But the case is different, Hobbes says, with our mental representations of angels. When “I think of an angel,” he claims, “what comes to mind is an image, now of a flame, now of a beautiful child with wings” but he is positive that this idea “has no likeness to an angel, and hence that it is not the idea of an angel” (AT VII.180/CSM II.126–27). Because angels are not the sort of beings that one could encounter in sense perception, no sensory representation of an angel is possible, and no idea or conception of angels is possible either. Thus the question of whether or not angels exist cannot be settled in the same way one would settle the question of whether or not a man or chimeras exist. In the case of the latter two, one would go look. The conception of a chimera on Hobbes’s account is an image-like mental representation purporting to be of an animal with certain properties, as a portrait purports to represent the sitter. To settle the question of its existence, one would try to put one’s sense organs in a position to be stimulated in such a way that would be productive of a perceptual representation of the same sort—to find a “like” animal. But one cannot possibly have sensory experiences as of an angel, because angels are not the sort of thing one could sense. Hence no idea could be the “likeness” of an angel, because it could not be copied from sense perceptions of an angel.
We have no ideas of angels in that sense, to be sure. “But,” Hobbes argues, “I believe that there are invisible and immaterial creatures who serve God,” on the basis of scriptural authority (presumably), “and we give the name ‘angel’ to this thing which we believe in, or suppose to exist [though] the idea by means of which I imagine an angel is composed of the ideas of visible things” (AT VII.180/CSM II.127, my emphasis). The object of the belief that angels exist is a “supposed being,” that is to say, a being that we suppose to exist, falling in the extension of ‘angel.’ We believe in angels, and (if Hobbes is sincere) we may rest confidently in the belief that angels exist. The existence of angels, again, is not established by sense experience, and it is not established by valid deductive argument. They are, rather, posited on the basis of faith, to be the objects of our belief that there are invisible executors of God’s will; we acknowledge that angels exist because we have it on good authority. Hence, though we do not have sense experience of angels and though we have no demonstration of their existence, because we accept on authority the truth of the proposition ‘there are invisible and immaterial creatures who serve God’s will’, we commit ourselves to supposing the existence of angels. The truth of the proposition ‘there are immaterial creatures who serve God’s will’ presupposes the existence of angels. Those who accept the authority of the Bible acknowledge the existence of angels by way of names used in propositions.

Moreover, despite the fact that there is no idea of an angel, the mind has the capacity to use surrogate ideas—images “composed of the ideas of visible things”—as tokens, to aid us in thinking about angels. Note that although there are no ideas or conceptions of angels, Hobbes does not say here, or elsewhere, that there are no mental representations of angels at all. We can think about angels, and we can believe that they are the invisible ministers of God’s will. It is just that thinking about an angel is not the same thing as raising an idea of an angel in the corporeal imagination. Believing angels exist is not the same thing, in other words, as believing that winged babies exist; it is to believe the proposition ‘there are invisible ministers of God’s will.’ There is indeed a great difference between imagining—having an image in the corporeal imagination—and conceiving in the mind. Like Descartes, Hobbes allows that there are non-
imagistic mental representations. His disagreement with Descartes concerns the nature of this power, the nature of these non-imagistic mental representations, and whether or not the human mind requires a special faculty, besides the imagination, to account for it.

With this discussion of the contrast between conceptions of men and chimeras on the one hand, and our thoughts about angels on the other, notice that Hobbes has prepared us for an explication of the distinction between “imagining” and “conceiving in the mind, that is, using a process of reasoning to infer that something is, or exists.” He illustrates this distinction by showing us how we come to know that God exists, to conceive of God in the mind, without having an idea of God. To imagine is to have an image of a thing, purporting to represent some real body, of which we can have some sensory perception. To reason is to calculate by linking names with the verb ‘is’; thus, pure reason tells us nothing about the natures of the things named by the names we use. And so we are now in a position, Hobbes thinks, to appreciate how it is that we can come to infer that something exists on the basis of “a train of reasoning,” yet nonetheless have no idea of the thing we suppose to exist. Accepting the truth of a proposition, we can posit the existence of a being, of which we have no idea, and can use ideas of other things as proxies.

At this point, Hobbes gives a version of the HCAP, which ties his points about mental representations and the capacity to posit the existence of beings of which we have no ideas (by giving it a name and relying on proxy ideas) together with the point that reasoning is a certain kind of activity—calculating with names. As it was in the case of angels, to whom we give a name, though having no conception of them, so “[in] the same way we have no idea or image corresponding to the sacred name of God. . . . [T]here is no idea of God in us” (AT VII.180/CSM II.127). He continues,

A man born blind, who has often approached fire and felt hot, recognizes that there is something which makes him hot; and when he hears that this is called ‘fire’ he concludes that fire exists. But he does not know what shape or colour fire has, and has absolutely no
idea or image of fire that comes before his mind. The same applies to a man who
recognizes that there must be some cause of his images or ideas, and that this cause must
have a prior cause, and so on; he is finally led to the supposition of some eternal cause
which never began to exist and hence cannot have a cause prior to itself, and he
concludes that something eternal must necessarily exist. But he has no idea which he can
say is of that eternal being; he merely gives the name or label ‘God’ to the thing he
believes in, or acknowledges to exist. (AT VII.180/CSM II.127; my emphasis)

The analogy between a blind man who reasons his way to the positing of a thing called ‘fire’ and
the person reasoning backward from cause to cause, “finally led” by this reasoning to the
conclusion that there is an eternal cause called ‘God,’ is quite telling. It also occurs in the
statements of the HCAP in both Leviathan and Human Nature. There are several lessons we are
meant to draw from the analogy. One of them has to do with the construction of surrogate
conceptual content. The other, more relevant to the present discussion, concerns inferring by a
train of reasoning that a thing, of which there is no idea or image, exists.

In all three of these places in which he invokes the analogy between the blind man’s
belief in the existence of fire and the HCAP-reasoner’s belief that there is a God, an aspect
Hobbes emphasizes is the blind man’s coming to understand how to use the name ‘fire.’ In
Leviathan, the role of contextually-dependent ostensive learning is especially prominent: “[this
blind man] hearing men talk of warming themselves by the fire, and being brought to warm
himself by the same, may easily conceive and assure himself there is somewhat there, which men
call fire and is the cause of the heat he feels, but cannot imagine what it is like” (Lev. xi.25). The
blind man comes to understand that, although he cannot see the source, something warms him.
He understands the word ‘warm’ and feels the warmth of the fire. On this basis, he comes to hold
the expression ‘there is some $x$ (I know not its nature), such that $x$ warms me’ as true. But to hold
such an expression as a truth is to acknowledge that there really is some object of which the
expression is true.25 The blind man is surrounded by his fellow language-users. He is brought before the fire. He hears others use the word ‘fire’ to speak about this $x$ such that it causes warmth. Thus he comes to view ‘fire’ and ‘the $x$ such that $x$ is the cause of warmth’ as co-designating expressions. Hence, the blind man comes to suppose or posit the existence of a “somewhat there, which men call fire.” ‘Fire’ names that object satisfying the expression ‘$x$ is the cause of warmth in me.’ Because ‘there is an $x$ such that $x$ is the cause of warmth in me’ is true and the object named by ‘fire’ satisfies the expression ‘$x$ is the cause of warmth in me,’ the blind man understands that fire exists, though without the benefit of images.

The main point of the analogy is to show us that Hobbes thinks that the name ‘God’ is for the HCAP-reasoner what the name ‘fire’ is for the blind man: a name which, though not raising to the mind any conception or image of the thing on which it is imposed, nevertheless is treated as the name of some real thing. Observing the manifold of phenomena, which she assumes to be the effects of prior causes, and naturally compelled to hold firm to the idea that every phenomenon must have some cause, the right-ratiocinating natural philosopher works her way backward through the chain of causes. But, wearied, she gives over, coming at last to the belief that there is some first cause of all. Let us quasi-formalize this as follows:

$$FC: \text{There is some (unique) } x \text{ such that } x \text{ is the first and eternal cause of all things.}$$

Holding $FC$ as true commits one to the existence of some being to satisfy the formula; otherwise, it is not true. The natural philosopher understands $FC$. But by the HCAP she is compelled as a

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25 Hobbes defines truth extensionally: “A true proposition is that, whose predicate contains, or comprehends its subject, or whose predicate is the name of every thing, of which the subject is the name; as man is a living creature is therefore a true proposition, because whatsoever is called man, the same is also called living creature” (De corpore iii.7; see also Human Nature v.10, Lev. iv.11, Anti-White xxx.17 fol. 346v). As I interpret him, this is a semantic definition of truth. In this I am in partial agreement with R. M. Martin, “On the Semantics of Hobbes,” 205–11. Martin, however, confuses naming and signifying (as is pointed out by Isabel C. Hungerland and George R. Vick, “Hobbes’s Theory of Language, Speech, and Reasoning,” 17–18). ‘True’ is, on Hobbes’s account, a metalinguistic predicate—a name of “speeches” (i.e. of sentence-tokens). A token of a given sentence type ‘S is P’ is true iff the objects named by ‘P’ fall in the extension of the objects named by ‘S.’ For a critical discussion of this interpretation, see Willem R. de Jong, “Did Hobbes Have a Semantic Theory of Truth?,” 63–88.
psychological necessity into the belief the $FC$ is true; hence, our natural philosopher finds it *psychologically impossible* to refrain from positing or supposing that something satisfies $FC$. That thing satisfying $FC$ is designated by the expression ‘the $x$ such that $x$ is the first and eternal cause of all things.’ The being designated by that expression is also designated by the name ‘God.’ So ‘God’ and the expression ‘the $x$ such that $x$ is the first and eternal cause of all things’ are co-designating. ‘God’ thus names a supposed being. That supposed being, that theoretical posit, is the unique first and eternal cause of all things, the being satisfying $FC$. It gets the name ‘God.’ In this way it is possible that “a man may *conceive there is a cause of* [the admirable phenomena], which men call God, *and yet not have an idea or image of him in his mind*” (Lev. xi.25, my emphasis). Thus we can come to conceive of God by way of propositions, or “to discursively conceive as existing an entity called God.”

A being’s supposed existence is no bar to its actual existence. Supposed beings, as it turns out, pervade Hobbes’s system. According to the account of so-called “concrete names” in *De corpore*, “concrete is the name of any thing which we suppose to have a being, and is therefore called the subject, in Latin *suppositum*, and in Greek ὑποκέιμενον [sic]; as body, moveable, moved, a cubit high, hot, cold, like, equal, Appius, Lentulus, and the like” (*De corpore* iii.3). The use of such names carries existence assumptions with it—that there is something designated by the name. Logic and language presuppose a non-empty domain of discourse. Concrete names stand at the ground floor of theory building. A concrete name is introduced and imposed upon a supposed being for the sake of recalling ideas of that being. But concrete names do not name mere bundles of sensations and ideas. Concrete names denote *hypokeimena*—extra-mental substances supposed to “stand under” the names as their “support.” For example, in explicating the concept of a *hypostasis*, Hobbes says that when “you

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27 For Hobbes’s definitions of names as marks, see *De corpore*, ii.4; *Human Nature*, v.2; *Lev*. iv.3; *Anti-White*, xxx.15–16, fols. 345–46.
28 The word ‘ὑποκέιμενον’ (*hypokeimenon* or *hypokeimenon*), means “substance,” but it also has a few other telling uses, relevant to our purposes, such as “to be submitted or proposed to one” or “to be assumed as a hypothesis.” My thanks to Voula Tsouna and Michael Augustin for helping me to confirm this point.
see something you call white, you impose that name on the substance or underlying body, say, a piece of marble, although your vision cannot penetrate to the substance of the marble, or of any other being” (Appendix, i.65). The name ‘white,’ he continues, “is a name of a body subsisting by itself, not of the color, and is imposed because of some definite appearance . . . [a] phantasm, which seems, indeed, to be something, but really is nothing” (Appendix, i.65). Seeing a white piece of marble, we give the name ‘white’ to the marble because of the way it appears to us, that is, white. We know these appearances “cannot be without some cause and foundation, viz., that white cannot be unless under the appearance there stands some substance which is its cause” (Appendix, i.65). The cause of the white appearances is the thing designated by the concrete name, and this is the subject or “to on huphistamenon or hupostan and hupostasis” or “ens, subjectum, suppositum, substantia, basis, and fundamentum,” and as “hupostasis [it] is opposed to the phantasm as the cause to the effect, i.e., relationally” (Appendix, i.65).29

Although the introduction of a concrete name presupposes a denotation for the name as its semantic support, the act of imposing a name upon a supposed being does not of itself generate the concept of substance. The distinction between appearances and the causally efficacious substances, underlying and represented by the mere phenomenal appearances, is discursive. Our “vision cannot penetrate” to the substance of any being, yet we understand that substances exist by the exercise of reason in the investigation of causes. The following passage nicely illustrates one way in which someone could come to understand and to discursively conceive of the bearer of a concrete name as a substance, or hypostasis, and the appearances as appearances of the underlying substance, by showing us why a natural philosopher might come to the conclusion that light “is a phantasm, not an existing thing” (Appendix, i.13):

For example, if you place between your eye and a candle a glass whose surface consists of many planes arranged in a certain way, many candles will appear to you. We know,

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29 The transliterations of the Greek in Appendix are due to the translator, Edwin Curley.
nevertheless, that there is only one real candle, and therefore, that all the others are merely phantasms, idols. . . . Still, not one of them is more truly a candle than the others, insofar as they appear. But the true candle, which was posited in the beginning, is not any one of those appearances only, but the thing itself, and the same cause of all those images. And for that reason Aristotle distinguishes it from a phantasm by the term *hupostasis*, as if the thing itself lay hidden under the image. (*Appendix, i.13*)

The true candle is “posited in the beginning” of the train of reasoning, at the imposition of the concrete name ‘candle’ upon the candle, the luminous body that is supposed to exist as the support of the name. It is easy to imagine that before one became a savvy mechanistic natural philosopher, one naïvely believed that the supposed being, the thing designated by ‘candle,’ is one and the same with the candle-appearances. However, the experiment (and many others like it) demonstrates that the candle cannot be identical with any of the candle-appearances present in immediate sense experience, for they are many and equally real “insofar as they appear,” but the posited being upon which ‘candle’ is imposed is only one thing. Thus, “for that reason” the posited body upon which ‘candle’ is imposed receives the name ‘hypostasis.’ The experiment shows us that, given the supposition that the candle exists (a supposition made by the imposition of the concrete name), the candle in itself must be distinct from the candle as it appears to the senses. The train of reasoning ends with the recognition of the candle as a substance. Thus our “vision cannot penetrate to the substance” of the candle, but such superhuman perspicacity is unnecessary. Granted that we understand the terms ‘cause’ and ‘effect,’ we understand that substance is the body that supports and causes the appearances; the appearances are the sensory representations of the underlying being. The term ‘substance’ finds a use in our language for the sorts of considerations discussed in *Appendix* i.13. By considering this experiment and others like it, natural philosophers begin to correct the “great deception of sense” (*Human Nature* ii.10)—the first step is acknowledging the deception, and this requires a distinction between appearances and the things themselves. That is, one must recognize that the object of the senses
is some body “specifically different” (to borrow a phrase) from the phantasm by which it is registered in the conscious mind. The use of concrete names always presupposes that there is a non-empty domain of discourse, but our theories about the objects in the domain change as we go about our investigation of them. The term ‘substance’ becomes useful when we transition from a naïve understanding of objects to a discursive understanding of objects, informed by our best science.

We are now in a better position to see how the HCAP can produce a belief that God exists, in the absence of ideas or conceptions of God. The discursive belief that the HCAP produces in the first cause is just a special case of the belief in substance. In the Third Set of Objections, Hobbes says that “by the term ‘God’ I understand a substance; that is, I understand that God exists (though my understanding does not come from an idea but from reasoning)” (AT VII.186/CSM II.131). He repeats this claim that ‘God exists’ and ‘God is a substance’ are equivalent in several places. For example, according to Hobbes, the proposition ‘God is’ simply means that “God is a being [Deus est ens] or [in Greek] ho on, i.e., something real, and not a mere phantasm, such as what is called a spectre, or like the demons the Gentiles worshipped” (Appendix i.4, translator’s interpolations) and when someone asserts ‘God is,’ that person “wishes to be understood as if he had said God is something real, not a figment of the mind, a hypostasis, not a phantasm”(Lev. OL xlvi.16). To believe that God exists is just to believe that God is a real being, distinct from mere fictions and phantasms, namely, a substance. Just as the natural philosopher understands that the extra-mental bodies in the world are substances on the basis of reason, so she is able to understand the sense of FC and, thus, that God is, even though she is incapable of forming any idea of God. Hobbes tells us in An Historical Narration Concerning Heresy that the sense of ‘being’ in ‘God is’ is the same as the sense of ‘being’ in ‘man is,’ and that humans are real, extra-mental beings in the same sense that God is a real, extra-mental being:
The first principle of religion in all nations, is, that God is, that is to say, that God is really something, and not a mere fancy. . . . In which sense a man is a thing real; for I can consider him to be, without considering any other thing to be besides him. . . . [E]ssence, deity, humanity, and such like names, signify nothing that can be considered, without first considering there is an ens, a god, a man &c. So also if there is be any real thing that is white or black, hot or cold, the same may be considered by itself; but whiteness, blackness, heat, coldness, cannot be considered unless it be first supposed that there is some real thing to which they are attributed. These real things are . . . entia, subjecta, substantiae . . . [or] τὰ ὄντα ὑποκειμένα [sic], ὑποστάμενα. (Heresy, 393–94)

The sense in which proposition ‘God is’ is true, in other words, is the same as the sense in which ‘man is’ is true. According to his theory of predication, the copula ‘is’ in a proposition such as ‘man is a living creature’ expresses metalinguistic information about the extensions of the component terms of the proposition: “man is a living creature . . . is a proposition, for this reason, that he that speaks it conceives both living creature and man to be names of the same thing” (De corpore, ii.3).30 Hobbes argues that ‘is’ is a sign of judgment, not a concrete name; there is no property of being or existence. A person uttering ‘man is a living creature’ merely expresses the predicative judgment that anything in the extension of ‘man’ (any objects to which the term ‘man’ applies, if there are any), is also in the extension of ‘living creature.’31 On the other hand, the proposition ‘man is,’ in which the copula is a “substantive verb” (Lev. OL xlvi.16), does express an existential judgment, “for this is what ‘Man is’ means, and is equivalent to saying: ‘Of the bodies constituting the universe, at least one is man’” (Anti-White, xxviii.5, fol.317v). The proposition ‘man is’ expresses a second-order judgment—that the extension of

30 The order of the names flanking ‘is’ matters. ‘Man is an animal’ expresses a different predicative judgment from ‘animal is man.’ Hobbes’s oft-cited claims that the copula is in principle superfluous (e.g. De corpore iii.2) is tantamount to the claim that the syntax of the expression signifies the predicative judgment. Hobbes’s theory of predication is not the ham-fisted “two name” theory attributed to him by, e.g. Peter Geach, Reference and Generality, 60 and Logic Matters, 289 and also by A.P. Martinich, translator’s commentary to Computatio, sive, Logica, 365–66.

31 See Hobbes, Lev. iv.11, xlvi.16 and 17, Lev. OL xlvi.16, and 17. Cf. Anti-White, xxviii.5
‘man’ is non-empty. Given the theoretical distinction between substances and their appearances, the proposition ‘man is’ signifies that the objects designated by ‘man’ are in the extension of ‘substance’: beings which are (discursively) conceived of as the underlying causes of the accidents (corporeity, life, rationality) for which we impose the name ‘human’ upon a thing.

In this respect the HCAP-derived belief in God is similar to the belief in garden-variety material substances. It is this understanding of extra-mental bodies as hypokeimena, beings supposed as the semantic support of concrete names and as causal support for appearances, that underwrites the discursive acknowledgement of God’s existence. It is precisely because we understand how to use the words ‘substance,’ ‘appearance,’ ‘cause,’ and ‘effect,’ as they apply to mundane sublunary bodies, that we can understand the proposition ‘God is’ on the basis of reasoning. That is, we understand discursively that God is the first and eternal cause—a hypostasis of everything:

The word *substance*, in Greek ὑπόστασις, ὑποσταν [sic], ὑποσταμενον [sic], signify the same thing, namely, a ground, a base, any thing that has existence or subsistence in itself; anything that upholdeth that which else would fall, in which sense God is properly the hypostasis, base, and substance of the world, having subsistence not only in himself, but from himself; whereas other substances have their subsistence only in themselves, not from themselves. (Answer, 308)

Just as we understand substances as that which “upholdeth” concrete names—as the ὑποκείμενον to τὸ φαίνεσθαι, related as cause and effect—so we understand that God is a substance, the ὑποκείμενον of the world, the ultimate cause of all of τὸ φαίνεσθαι.

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32 Hobbes, *De corpore*, xxv.1
Thus far I have argued that according to Hobbes the natural scientist comes by the HCAP to posit the existence of a first cause and to believe in a real substance, a supposed being standing as semantic support under the name ‘God.’ But one might raise the following worry. Not all supposed existents are supposed equal; often when Hobbes discusses theoretical posits, he makes it clear that he thinks of them as non-existent, useful fictions. For example, although his discussions of substance make it clear that Hobbes would happily allow that individual, extra-mental substances really exist, in *De corpore* he makes the following comments about the terms ‘*materiā prima*’ or ‘first matter’:

> And as for that matter which is common to all things, and which philosophers following Aristotle, usually call *materiā prima*, that is, *first matter*, it is not any body distinct from all other bodies, nor is it one of them. What is it? A mere name; yet a name which is not of vain use; for it signifies a conception of a body without the consideration of any form or other accident except only magnitude or extension, and aptness to receive form and other accident. (*De corpore*, viii.24)

This discussion of concept of “*materiā prima*” (which I take to be equivalent to “material substance generally,” “accidentless body,” or “substance as such”) takes a decidedly deflationary line, and Hobbes goes on in that same passage to emphasize that “*materiā prima* is nothing.”³³

He also discusses theoretical posits in *De corpore* ii.6, and there he makes similar comments regarding the names ‘future,’ ‘impossible,’ ‘nothing,’ and ‘less than nothing.’ Of ‘future,’ for example, he says that “this word *future* is a name, but no future thing has yet any being, nor do we know whether that which we call future, shall ever have a being or no” (*De

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corpore, ii.6), and so it does not name any real thing. Yet the name is significant and useful, for “seeing we use in our mind to knit together things past with those that are present, the name future serves to signify such knitting together” (De corpore, ii.6). Hobbes repeats this claim across his writings. In Leviathan he says that “the future” is “but a fiction of the mind, applying the sequels of actions past to the actions that are present” (Lev. iii.7). In Human Nature he claims that although “[no] man can have in his mind a conception of the future, for the future is not yet,” nevertheless, “of our conceptions of the past, we make a future” (Human Nature, iv.7), and he tells a similar story in Anti-White.34 The point is the same in each case. There is no idea of the future, strictly speaking, because we could not have any perceptual contact with nonexistent events. Yet out of ideas, which are representations of past and presently occurring sense experiences, we “make,” “knit together,” or construct a surrogate conception to aid us in our deliberations and reasoning about the future. The future is a construct, a useful fiction. The name ‘future’ names nothing at all; ideas in the imagination are of past perceptual experiences and are mixed together with present experiences, creating ideas that go proxy for, but are not conceptions of the future. As a concrete name, however, the word ‘future’ still purports to denote an entity. Names are marks constructed for the sake of recalling ideas of the things upon which they are imposed. There being no future, and no ideas of the future, there is no real thing upon which the name could be imposed. Yet we go on playing the name-game, using the name as if it designated a real thing, and we raise our constructed, “knitted-together” surrogate ideas, in lieu of genuine ideas of the future.

The future is a useful fiction, but Hobbes is even more explicit in the case of ‘nothing’ and ‘less than nothing.’ In the case of the former, he says it is a name “which yet cannot be the name of anything”; nonetheless, it is still useful, “for when, for example, we substract 2 and 3 from 5, and so nothing remaining, we would call that substraction to mind, this speech nothing remains and in it the word nothing is not unuseful” (De corpore, ii.6). “And,” he continues, “for

34 Anti-White, xxx.11, fol. 342v. The account in Anti-White includes what seems to be an error theory. However, from Human Nature onward, Hobbes does not regard this fictionalizing as a mistake.
the same reason we say truly, *less than nothing* remains, when we would substract more from less” (*De corpore*, ii.6). Hobbes is quite clear that the affirmation ‘less than nothing remains’ is *true*, despite the fact that the name cannot denote anything, “for the mind feigns such remains as these for doctrine’s sake, and desires, as often as is necessary, to call the same to memory” (*De corpore*, ii.6). In mathematics, it is sometimes necessary and convenient for us to subtract a greater amount from a lesser. To accommodate, we can invent a name to keep track of this negative quantity, even though it does not exist and we cannot form a conception or idea of it. The name serves as a token, a placeholder in our reasoning. Hence, Hobbes holds that “every name has some relation to that which is named,” for every name is a mark purporting to designate some entity, and “though that which we name be not always a thing that has a being in nature,” nevertheless “it is lawful for doctrine’s sake to apply the word *thing* to whatsoever we name; as if it were all one whether that thing be truly existent or be only feigned” (*De corpore*, ii.6).

Hobbes’s account of natural science is non-realist and in fact bears a strong resemblance to “constructive empiricism.” He really has to hold a view like this, for on his account, reasoning can tell us nothing at all about the true natures of things. It is simply a calculus of names, beginning with apt definitions and yielding true propositions. Insofar as a scientific theory employs concrete names, the language of science is realist, for concrete names denote things “which we suppose to have a being,” and a proposition is true when the objects denoted by the subject term fall in the extension of the predicate (or would do so, should the beings supposed to exist actually exist). But this *semantic* realism does not much affect the nature or practice of science, for on Hobbes’s view the ultimate descriptive accuracy of scientific

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35See Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, 11–13 and 97–157. Van Fraassen distinguishes his view from those usually called “instrumentalist” or “positivist.” On these sorts of views, the language of a scientific theory is not (literally) truth-apt at all. On van Fraassen’s account, the realism/anti-realism debate is not about the semantics of scientific theories; rather, it is about the proper aims of natural science and the nature of theory acceptance: “Science aims to give us theories which are empirically adequate; and acceptance of a theory involves a belief only that it is empirically adequate” (*The Scientific Image*, 12). And so although empirical adequacy, rather than descriptive accuracy, is the goal of a scientific theory, “the language of science should be literally construed” (*The Scientific Image*, 10).
hypotheses or models is simply irrelevant to the aims of natural science. Given that the causal principles of natural phenomena are “placed in the things themselves by the Author of Nature,” they do not “impose upon us any necessity of constituting theorems”; consequently, the use of hypotheses in natural science is only “to show us the possibility of some production or generation” (*De corpore*, xxv.1).\(^{36}\) Since there are no phenomena that God cannot bring about in an infinite number of ways, there is a radical limit to our ability to know anything with certainty about the true nature of things. All genuinely scientific, certain knowledge is hypothetical; where we are ignorant of the true causes of things, such knowledge must remain hypothetical and conjectural.\(^{37}\) Even if we had stumbled upon the correct theory (a body of true propositions, with concrete names standing for extra-mental, unobserved substances, in fact denoting real substances), we would never be in a position to know it. Thus, although the language of science is truth-apt, the aim of science is not to tell us anything about the deeper natures of things, but only to provide us with the explanations that allow for the “salving of the phenomena of nature” (*De corpore*, xxvi.5, marginal header).\(^{38}\) Whatever science does, in Hobbes’s view it certainly does not allow us to carve reality nearer to the joints.

Sometimes, in the course of theory building, it may become necessary to deliberately “suppose” or “feign” the existence of some entities by introducing concrete names designating them, to aid in the construction of an explanatorily adequate theory. The *De corpore* discussion makes it very clear that this is exactly the role ‘*materia prima*’ is supposed to play in a scientific theory. ‘First matter’ is a “mere name,” but it is nonetheless a legitimate name. It is useful because it can help the natural philosopher solve particular problems:

\(^{36}\) See also Hobbes, *De homine*, x.5

\(^{37}\) Thus Hobbes’s scientific non-realism is in fact consistent with his definitions of philosophy in general (e.g. *De corpore* i.2, *Lev*. v.17, xlvi.1, and *Human Nature*, iv.1–2), which all appear to involve truth as a necessary condition of a good scientific theory. See also *De corpore* i.6 on the “end or scope of philosophy.”

\(^{38}\) Cf. Hobbes, *De corpore*, xxvi.4. Also relevant are the concluding remarks of *De corpore*: “The fourth part [of *De corpore*, on physics] depends upon hypotheses; which unless we know them to be true, it is impossible for us to demonstrate that those causes, which I have there explicated, are the true causes of the things whose productions I have derived from them” (xxx.15, my emphasis).
The physicist has a problem to solve. She is investigating whether liquid water or ice is the more fundamental (i.e. “first”). 39 To this end, she posits the existence of some third, intermediate phase, which in some sense underwrites the change. She comes to treat the proposition ‘there is some $x$ such that $x$ is some third matter between ice and water’ as a true theorem of her physical theory. She thus “feigns” the existence of some entity to stand in as the thing answering to the concrete name ‘the third matter between ice and water’ because of the convenience she expects to gain thereby. Likewise, the natural philosopher, investigating the nature of matter itself, might posit the existence of some substance, an underlying, formless, accidentless matter, underwriting the observed data for which she is trying to account.

Although the reasoning is parallel, the case of God and the HCAP is different in an important respect from cases like these. Cases like ‘prime matter’ are cases in which someone creates a useful fiction and feigns a supposed being as a theoretical posit self-consciously. ‘Prime matter,’ like ‘the third matter between liquid water and ice,’ is a name taken to designate a feigned being. Primary matter is given a provisional existential status in the philosopher’s theory; that status is revocable. If at any point another, a more expedient way to solve the puzzle, without the need to suppose the existence of a featureless fundamental matter underwriting all substantial changes were found, then the natural philosopher is prepared to throw out prime matter. The right-thinking natural philosopher does not believe that prime matter really exists in any deeper sense: the theory is not getting at the essential nature of things better than another theory, accounting for the data. The same holds for the future, the infinite, negative numbers, and

their ilk. Though perhaps laymen or “School-divines” may delude themselves into believing in the real existence of such beings, for the right-thinking natural philosopher the use of such names is effectively instrumental. They are placeholders in a theory, naming fictions of the mind, “feigned for doctrine’s sake.” It is convenient to have names that purport to refer to these things (that is how the name game works). However, it would be a mistake to believe that the things to which they purport to refer exist, just because the name is meaningful, significant, and useful.

God, however, is not a revocable posit. Our natural belief in the existence of a first cause of all is, as the foregoing discussion of the HCAP made clear, psychologically impossible to withhold. Human beings are animals motived by a special passion: curiosity. It is the love of causes that compels us into the profound investigation of natural phenomena. But the very activity of this investigation itself forces us to acquiesce in the belief that there is a first cause of all. It is not only “peculiar to the nature of man to be inquisitive into the causes of the events they see” (Lev. xii.2), but also “upon the sight of anything that hath a beginning, to think also it had a cause, which determined the same to begin” (Lev. xii.3). Humans are psychologically compelled to seek after causes and also to believe that for every event there was some antecedent cause. Thus, “the effects we acknowledge naturally, do include a power of their producing, before they were produced; and that power presupposeth some existent that hath such power” (Human Nature, xi.2, my emphasis). When this psychological process is not hijacked by neurotic anxiety, ignorance, and fear, we are driven by pure curiosity into a profound inquiry, from natural cause to cause. But “[o]f all discourse [of the mind] governed by the desire of knowledge, there is at last an end, either by attaining or by giving over” (Lev. vii.1); and though someone may thus proceed “continually by right ratiocination from cause to cause,” the flesh is weak, the human mind is finite, and “wearied will at last give over” at the belief that there is some eternal first

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40 It is true that Hobbes considered the nature of God philosophically problematic (see Gianni Paganini, “How Did Hobbes Think of the Existence and Nature of God?,” 286–303). But I am claiming that the philosopher must posit the existence of a first cause as a matter of psychological necessity not as a matter of theoretical necessity; hence, it should not be especially surprising that the belief is problematic from a theoretical perspective. My thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this potential source of confusion and for helping me to clarify the point.
cause of all. It is a natural and healthy inclination of the passions that drives us into a rational inquiry into causes, and which terminates, out of a psychological necessity, in the belief that there must be a first, eternal cause; it is a supposed existent, which the name ‘God’ denotes. For animals like us, God is a non-optional posit.⁴¹

Bibliography and Abbreviations


⁴¹ My thanks to Thomas Holden, Voula Tsouna, Michael Augustin, and Andrew Bollhagen for their invaluable comments on an early draft of this paper. Thanks also to the two anonymous referees for Journal of the History of Philosophy.


[*Computatio, sive, Logica*]


Third Set of Objections.” In CSM II.121–37/AT VII.171–96.


