

Kody W. Cooper, *Thomas Hobbes  
and the Natural Law* (Notre Dame, IN:  
University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).

Review by Jackson Sawatzky

Challenging the widely held view that Hobbes is an atheist, Kody W. Cooper claims that Hobbes's political theory is rooted inextricably in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of natural law. While there are clear departures from the Thomistic tradition in Hobbes's civil philosophy, Cooper suggests that Hobbes is not advancing an a-religious, a-theistic political theory but is working consciously in the Thomistic-Aristotelian paradigm of natural law, a paradigm from which his own view emerges by way of modification. What is novel in Hobbes's view, according to Cooper, is not the rejection of the Aristotelian-Thomistic belief that human person is a political animal, not the incapacity of reason to discover a common good, and not the assertion that the commonwealth, as the constructive effort of persons, is thereby independent of theistic design. The novelty, in Cooper's view, is that Hobbes thins out the essential core of goods that Aquinas takes to

be common to all human beings—which include bodily life and health, family and childrearing, friendship, knowledge, and religion—to bodily life and health alone (110, 112). Working within this modified Thomistic perspective, Hobbes then attaches to the pursuit of bodily security, via the laws of nature, as the compelling commands of God, the necessity of willing peace and reciprocity. The thrust of Cooper's argument is that once recognized as working in a stripped-down, natural law paradigm, interpretive difficulties dissolve, and Hobbes's theism emerges as an integral part of his political theory.

Given that Cooper's thesis puts him at odds with much of the secondary literature, this book is as concerned with reading the text properly as it is with showing that received interpretations are false. A breakdown of (a selection of) sub-theses is: that Hobbes believes we can know by natural reason that God exists (34); that Hobbes has embedded in his writings elements of each of Aquinas's five arguments or ways that reason judges that God exists (35); that the only way to make sense of Hobbes's statements that there are evil persons in the state of nature is through a theistic framework, because evil presupposes breach of law and God secures the laws of nature as commands *in foro interno* (75); that Hobbesian moral and civil science depends on a human nature that we can know, and that God, as the creator and designer of humankind, provides the ultimate foundation for human nature (91); that, as for Aquinas, reason has the ability to apprehend certain goods as objectively desirable and so, for Hobbes, does reason grasp that life is a good to be pursued (96, 100); that God's creation of persons as rational beings is sufficient to endow the dictates of practical reason with a legal character (157, 60); that the necessity to pursue the end of life or the means of life does

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not have the force of law for the atheist (162, 178–179); and that “the normative value of proper biological functioning is lawlike, for Hobbes” (211).

While Cooper presents a thought-provoking and thorough account, one cannot help wishing, on a critical note, that there was more textual evidence, especially since Cooper’s claim is not less than that the most celebrated and influential scholarly interpretations of Hobbes’s natural law theory are “misleading and even fundamentally incorrect” (2). While Cooper’s claims are not without evidence, his arguments tend to focus either on disproving secondary literature or on showing that Hobbes held similar views to Aquinas. Cooper finds as significant points of similarity that Hobbes “retains the Aristotelian-Thomistic distinction between the merely apparent good and the genuine or real good” (98); that Hobbes expresses only the view that beatitude is not available in this life when he denies that there is a *summum bonum*, a point that “is actually in complete agreement with Aquinas” (108); that Hobbes’s borrowing “is manifest in his theory of persons as makers of the commonwealth, [which] takes over the Aristotelian-Thomistic principle of mimesis” (183); that, “strikingly,” Hobbes insists, as does Aquinas, “on the need for positive law to enforce the demands of natural law” (192); that Hobbes’s conclusion “that human aptitude for society must be acquired through discipline and instruction by right reason” is the Thomistic position (194); and that “Aquinas and Hobbes are in agreement that peace through commonwealth is reasonable and necessary for human happiness or flourishing” (197). Cooper suggests that Hobbes’s postulate of natural reason, that we endeavor to preserve our lives, is functionally equivalent to Aquinas’s *synderesis* as the first indemonstrable principles of moral reasoning (109).

While, of course, no one can prove the provenance of these beliefs, it would strengthen Cooper’s case substantially if he could show that the parallels he finds, many of which involve relatively commonplace philosophical thoughts, are actually borrowed from natural law authors, that these beliefs are not similar only by accident, or that beliefs Hobbes held in common with Aristotle and Aquinas were borrowed from Aquinas. While a lot of effort is spent highlighting these similarities, it does little to show that Hobbes must have taken natural law seriously, that only natural law theorists can interpret Hobbes properly, or that, setting aside his personal beliefs, Hobbes’s political theory cannot be reformulated on the basis of natural philosophy alone.

Overall, this book will appeal to any who are searching for a thorough and consistent reading of Hobbes as a natural law theorist, and it is especially valuable for highlighting the interpretive commitments that are involved in taking Hobbes’s theism seriously. While this book is unlikely to persuade interpreters who already disagree, Cooper does show, compellingly, that it is possible to interpret Hobbes consistently and without contradiction as working consciously in the tradition of natural law.