

VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2019

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



**Michael Anton:**  
**In Praise of Tucker Carlson**

**William Voegeli:**  
**Socialism for Dummies**

**Christopher Caldwell:**  
**Hungary vs. Liberalism**

**Larry P. Arnn:**  
**Andrew Roberts's Churchill**

**Joseph Epstein:**  
**The P.C. Menace**

**Martha Bayles:**  
**Cold War Movies**

**John Fonte:**  
**Reihan Salam's Melting Pot**

**Mark Helprin:**  
**Memo from Harvard Admissions**

**David Gelernter:**  
**Up from Darwinism**

A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95  
IN CANADA: \$8.95



9 2 >

Book Review by Loren Rotner

## THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

*Hobbes's Kingdom of Light: A Study of the Foundations of Modern Political Philosophy,*  
by Devin Stauffer. University of Chicago Press, 336 pages, \$50



**A**S THE AUTHOR OF *LEVIATHAN*, THOMAS Hobbes was one of the preeminent founders of modernity, with a lasting impact on the natural rights tradition and social contract theory. He sketched in the 17th century a powerful psychology of liberal democracy that still expresses itself in Americans' everyday opinions. But what, according to Hobbes, were the deepest purposes of his own project?

In *Hobbes's Kingdom of Light*, Devin Stauffer gives the strongest account of his subject's ambition, focusing especially on his attempt to transform all human opinion of politics, morality, science, and theology in the direction of radical, amoral, materialist individualism. At each stage of the argument, Stauffer, an associate professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin, attempts to reconstruct how Hobbes himself approached the problem

of grounding his commitment to rationalism in defensible premises. Though at points Stauffer criticizes Hobbes, siding with ancient thinkers like Aristotle and Plato, this riveting and accessible new book shows how one might dwell in an ambitious philosopher's thought without succumbing to it.

**B**ECAUSE HOBBS famously claimed to be the founder of political philosophy proper, Stauffer spends a good amount of time explaining why he believed all prior attempts to be fallacious. On the moral-political side, Hobbes maintained that the ancients depended far too much on common opinion as their starting point. Although common opinion often preaches selflessness and virtue, this creates the illusion that acting altruistically or virtuously will make men happy, a possibility Hobbes famously denied.

Instead, he emphasizes human frailty and vulnerability in order to teach men to act cautiously and preserve themselves. Fear of death, he believed, could serve as a much more stable basis for politics and morals than love of the good or noble. "If," as Stauffer aptly puts it, "Aristotle defined the virtues as...means between extremes of the various passions, Hobbes presents them...in the simpler sense of means to an end that they should serve." That end, unequivocally, is peace.

Besides dismissing classical morality's role in politics, Hobbes objects even more strongly to Aristotle's claim that there exist "abstract essences" apart from bodies, thereby leaving "open a door through which his followers, led already by the natural human propensity to believe in incorporeal spirits, could travel in their search for philosophic support for their religious beliefs." Philosophy famously be-

---

came a handmaid to theology—a “vain” nonsense to Hobbes, puffed up by “fabulous traditions”—which “intensified political conflict” and “rendered philosophy servile and corrupt.” He blames Aristotle for not inoculating his teaching against appropriation and exploitation by medieval Scholastics like Thomas Aquinas.

**W**HY WAS HOBBS SO HOPEFUL THAT he could remake the world and overcome Scholasticism? Invigorated by contemporaries like Francis Bacon and Benedict Spinoza, his co-conspirators in launching modernity, Hobbes believed that what he saw as the errors of Scholasticism did not inhere in the things themselves, but in the understanding of them—their use and application. Men would have to be made to understand reality as Hobbes saw it, stripped of vanity or hope, in a kind of naked honesty: nature is anarchic, death is the end, and men are always contriving to escape it. Out of this bracing realization, a new political and moral epoch of everlasting peace and prosperity could be established. Hobbes’s project, though rooted in pessimism, was essentially humane.

The fundamental problem he confronted, and famously attempted to ameliorate, is the tension between spiritual and temporal authorities. In the age of Christendom, men were induced to care more for the fate of their everlasting souls than for their mere existence. By exposing the apparently irrational, unjust, and cruel teachings of Biblical morality, Hobbes teaches men to concern themselves with what is certainly good—preserving themselves in this world—rather than any notions of moral purity.

His account, however, fails to confront the possibility that God’s ways may be inscrutable, mysterious, and meant as a test of human faithfulness. Stauffer helps us see the heart of Hobbes’s most radical thinking on religion. For Hobbes, human claims to revelation depend always upon fallible interpretations of highly contingent, extraordinary experiences. Not only does the Bible recognize false prophets, but it admits that men cannot

judge purported revelations or prophecies by their reason alone. Because men lack a complete understanding of natural causes, human credulity interprets certain phenomena as supernatural. For Stauffer, Hobbes launched an ambitious project to create a scientific moral order skeptical about causes, more accepting of mystery, and immune to the “discovery” of miracles.

**H**OBBS NEVER MADE AN ATTEMPT to understand morality on its own terms by examining the complex relationship between moral opinion and purported religious experiences. Stauffer argues that Hobbes was deaf to any idea of conscience, obligation, a desire for justice, and especially love or charity. Yet he was in his own way a committed moralist. To see why, Stauffer ably reconstructs the basis of his muddled morality. In his famous “state of nature,” men are aware of, even obsessed with, their own fragility and vulnerability. No one would blame them—oppressed as they are by so many ever-present dangers—for conquering would-be predators or stealing their neighbor’s land in order to secure their own safety. In his prior work, *De Cive (On the Citizen)*, Hobbes writes as if, like a stone falling downwards, men cannot *help* but act for the sake of their own preservation. As Stauffer points out, however, he does so little to establish that the fear of death, and the continuance of mere life, is our deepest, most compelling need, that one wonders why men have a right—even if rational—to act in any manner they so choose in order to satisfy that need.

As Hobbes’s apparently amoral psychology has it, all men seek what is good, and the good that draws them is the power to obtain some future pleasure or avoid pain. The category of power takes pride of place for him. Power grants us a fleeting, temporary relief that makes us even more aware of how vulnerable we are. What Hobbes cannot do, according to Stauffer, is substantiate his judgment that the fear of death is morally good or neutral, and vanity bad or evil. He supposes that those motivated by the fear of death, as opposed to the desire for glory, enlarge their power only

so far as their security requires. It is the glory-seekers—the vain and proud who live for the contemplation of their own power—whom Hobbes blames for destabilizing the state of nature because they attempt, unnecessarily, to dominate all.

He never provides a rational basis for this view. He simply asserts through the force of his rhetoric that men are driven by their passions, not their reason. Stauffer exposes Hobbes’s lack of precise thinking when it comes to distinguishing true needs versus irrational desires. Perhaps he does not attempt to distinguish them because he denies any standard of human happiness. Nevertheless, his “confidence that a rational morality can be built on amoral premises kept him from probing the question of the true character of his premises, and thus from seeing that they are in fact amoral.”

**A**LTHOUGH HOBBS APPROPRIATED HIS predecessors’ “natural law” language, his natural laws don’t inspire much devotion or self-control. He believed he was returning men to what it is they naturally need, rather than to what it is they think they want. He foresaw an age in which educated people would laugh off claims to miraculous experiences, and would read the Bible “figuratively” in support of a morality consistent with Hobbesianism. The success of his project seems more impressive than ever.

Or does it? Stauffer makes us wonder what the ancients and Scholastics would have said about modernity. Are men today really more concerned with their security, more self-centered, more incredulous about causes—supernatural and otherwise—than they had been in previous centuries? Can religion be explained away by psychology? Or are we simply avoiding key questions that all serious men and woman need to answer? There are few books that better sustain serious doubt about modernity, or take it as seriously, as *Hobbes’s Kingdom of Light*.

*Loren Rotner is special assistant to the president and assistant director of strategic initiatives at St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland.*

The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE  
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to  
the *Claremont Review of Books*

*“Issue after issue, the *Claremont Review*  
brings intellectual clarity, philosophical  
wisdom, and a deep commitment to  
the ideals of the American Founding  
to bear on our most important public  
challenges. It is indispensable.”*

*—Yuval Levin*

Subscribe to the *CRB* today and save 25%  
off the newsstand price. A one-year  
subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America's premier  
conservative book review, visit  
[www.claremont.org/crb](http://www.claremont.org/crb)  
or call (909) 981-2200.

CLAREMONT  
REVIEW OF BOOKS  
1317, W. FOOTHILL  
BLVD, SUITE 120,  
UPLAND, CA  
91786

NON PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
PERMIT NO. 504  
UPLAND, CA