PHANTASMS AND IDOLS: TRUE PHILOSOPHY AND WRONG RELIGION IN HOBBES

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1. Introduction

Errors in philosophy, Hobbes was convinced, were not merely an academic affair, but would through the education of divines at the universities eventually reach the common people, be it only under the guise of religious tenets, and kindle in them an inclination to resist their sovereign's orders. A case in point is the common belief in spirits, demons and the like. These are believed to tell people what they should do, absolutely regardless of the sovereign's orders, and thus constitute a source of civil disobedience and anarchy. In order to stamp out this danger, Hobbes must not only demonstrate that there are no such things as spirits, but in addition explain the origin of that widespread belief in them. He also must explain why this erroneous doctrine was taken over into Christian religion, and finally show that the Biblical texts invoked in favor of that doctrine, can all of them be fully understood on the basis of his own philosophy, i.e., without recourse to such dubious entities. In fact, it is in the interest of the state to stamp out, in harmony with Hobbesian philosophy, this belief which threatens to introduce a source of authority removed from state control and therefore potentially instigating civil war.

The first step of the argument pertains to the theory of cognition. Cognition, For spirits and the like entities are constructs of our mind, the basis of which consists in the phantasms present in us. Indeed, cognition depends, Hobbes maintains, on the having of phantasms. First of all we are thus to understand the true nature of the phantasm.

To begin with, a few words on terminology seem in order. Hobbes's English term «phantasm» of course has its ultimate roots in Aristotle's φαντάσμα. meaning that which comes about according to φαντασία[1]. Both terms are rendered by Latin authors, and therefore also in scholastic philosophy, either by the loanwords *phantasma/phantasia* or by the purely Latin words *imaginatio/imago*. In Hobbes, *phantasm* is quite common in his English

1. Aristotle, *De an.* III, 3 (428 a 1f.).

works, just as *phantasma* is in his Latin ones. In those Latin works, *phantasia* is also often used (a few times with explicit reference to the Greek origin of this term)[2], but in his English works he prefers *fancy*. Now two things are noteworthy in this respect: First, that the more old-fashioned «phantasy» occurs only once throughout Hobbes's English works, namely in the early *The Elements of Law* written in 1640, where it is applied to the type of imagination remaining after sense (EW IV, 9). That is to say that Hobbes uses it here in one of its classical scholastic acceptations, in which it designates a faculty located between sense and intellect. But also in *The Elements of Law* Hobbes's official term for that faculty is *fancy* (EW IV, 55f.). In *The Elements of Law* the term *phantasm* in turn is reserved for afterimages such as remain «before the eye after a steadfast looking upon the sun» or «that appear before the eyes in the dark» (EW IV, 11f. and 62). A second element worth of note in this context is that in his later works Hobbes generally runs together *phantasm* and *fancy*, so that they become interchangeable terms[3].

Moreover, he expands the meaning of these terms in such a way as to comprehend not only all kinds of images, but even all kinds of presentations in general. According to Hobbes, everything occurring in the mind is a phantasm (or fancy respectively). This clearly testifies to a terminological development. But it should be noted that also this later use of these terms can appeal to Aristotle, in whose view the phantasm «as such and with regard to itself», i.e., the act of presenting, and the phantasm as «appearance of something else» are just two aspects of one and the same phenomenon[4]. And φαντασία, Aristotle says, is not a specific mental activity, such as sensing, judging, rational knowledge or intellectual insight, but rather «a kind of motion» occurring in beings that have sense[5].

However, this change of terminology does not of necessity involve a change of doctrine. For from his earliest works onward Hobbes applies a great number of equivalents for *phantasm* and (its equivalent) *fancy*[6]. These terms are equated not only, as one may easily expect given the scholastic tradition,

2. Cf. OL I, 323; OL III, 8,- Hobbes's works are quoted from the edition by William Molesworth, EW designating the *English Works* and OL the *Opera Latina*. Volume numbers are in Roman, page numbers in Arabic numerals. The abbreviation DM refers to Hobbes's *De Motu* (published as *Critique du De Mundo de Thomas White. Introduction, texte critique et notes par Jean Jacquot et Harold Whitmore Jones*, Paris 1973); page references are to this edition. In general, the titles and data of Hobbes's works will not be mentioned, as they are irrelevant to our purpose; we will suffice to give the relevant reference.

3. Thus Hobbes himself translates his own term «fancy» both by «phantasma» (OL III, 6, 12) and «phantasia» (OL III, 8).

4. Aristotle, *De mem.* 1 (450 b 24f.).

5. *De an.* III, 3: «ἡ δὲ φαντασία κίνησίς τις δοκεῖ εἶναι» (428 b 11).

6. For a list almost identical with the one given here, cf. Yves Charles Zarka, "Le vocabulaire de l'apparaître: Le champ sémantique de la notion de *phantasma*", in Yves Charles Zarka (ed.), *Hobbes et son vocabulaire*, Paris 1992, 16. In general, this scholarly article should be consulted as a most valuable background to our own discussions.

with *image*[7] and *imagination*[8]. In harmony with the etymological derivation of φαντάσμα from the verb φαίνεσθαι («to appear»), Hobbes gives as parallels to *fancy* and *phantasm* also terms such as *appearance* (=the act of appearing)[9] and *apparition* (=that which appears)[10]. In addition he identifies them with *idea*[11], *thinking*[12], *figment*[13], *representation*[14] and the scholastic notion of the *species*[15]. Given the fact that all these terms are equivalent to *fancy* and *phantasm*, it will not come as a surprise to see Hobbes identify also one of these alternative terms with the other without reference to the intermediary term *phantasm*. In this respect the pairing of *idea* and *image* is probably most common in him[16]. But the terms which we have enumerated, are in addition identified with new ones not mentioned thus far. Most prominent among these are the identifications of *idea* with *conception* (=the act of conceiving)[17] and *concept* (=that which is conceived)[18], but also with *notion*[19]. Many of these terms are brought together in Hobbes's early *The Elements of Law*, where he states: «This imagery and representations […] is that we call our cognition, imagination, ideas, notice[20], conception or knowledge» (EW IV, 3). This makes it clear that Hobbes's overall intuition remains the same throughout his career,

7. Cf. DM, 117 («imago sive phantasma»); OL I, 377 («imaginem, id est, phantasma»); OL III, 484 («juxta phantasma vel imaginem»); OL III, 512 («phantasma, nimirum […] imago»). Cf. also EW VII, 84: «fancy or image».

8. Cf. DM, 351 («phantasma […] dici solet imaginatio»); OL III, 9 («imaginatio sive phantasma»); «imaginations» at EW III. 93 is translated at OL III, 84 as «phantasmata». Hobbes identifies of course imagination and image: «the imaginations […]; that is to say, […] ideas, or mental images» (EW III, 673).

9. Cf. DM, 119 («apparentia, phantasma»); DM, 128 («apparentiarum sive phantasmatum»). Cf. also EW III, 4: «fancy; which signifies appearance».

10. Cf. EW III, 649 («phantasms, which is […] apparitions»); EW IV, 308 («apparition or phantasm»); OL III, 6 («apparitio […] sive phantasma»).

11. Cf. OL I, 17 («ideae sive phantasmatis»); OL I, 22 («idea sive phantasma»); OL I, 377 («ideam sive imaginem, id est, phantasma«); OL III, 29 («ideam, sive […] phantasma»); OL III, 484 («juxta phantasma vel imaginem»); OL III, 512 («phantasma, nimirum idea»).

12. DM, 380: «cogitationem sive phantasma».

13. Cf. DM, 119 («apparentia, phantasma et figmentum«); OL I, 15 («figmenta […] et phantasmata»). Note here, too, Hobbes's identification of the act and its object: «Fictiones sive […] Figmenta» (DM, 351).

14. DM, 125: «phantasma sive repraesentatio».

15. DM, 146: «phantasmata sive species».

16. Cf., e.g., OL IV, 259 («ideam sive imaginem»); DM, 420 («speciem sive imaginem sive ideam»); EW III, 93 («an idea, or image»); OL I, 54 («idea sive imago»).

17. EW III, 17, EW V, 397 (both times «idea or conception»); EW VII, 100 («conceptions and ideas»).

18. OL II, 88 («ideam sive conceptum»); OL I, 59 («conceptus sive idea»). The English expression «no idea or *conception*» (EW III, 17) is translated by Hobbes himself as «idea neque *conceptus*» (OL III, 20).

19. OL I, 68: «notio sive idea».

20. Again, *notice* is to *notion* as the act is to its object.

notwithstanding a certain variation in his terminology. At all events, that which he came to call the phantasm, played a basic role in his theory of knowledge, as it is Hobbes's comprehensive term for what knowledge is about.

A last element to be mentioned is that among other *novatores* in seventeenth century philosophy, the widespread scholastic term «phantasm» is, for the very reason that it is part of the scholastic vocabulary, far less popular than it is in Hobbes. Descartes, one knows, prefers the term «idea», Gassendi in turn «perception» or «apprehension», which latter term is also the one used by Hobbes's friend Kenelm Digby.

2. Phantasms as the Source of Cognition

To Hobbes, it is a fact beyond all doubt that we continually experience certain phantasms or appearances that reach us through our senses. However, in order to find out their cause, «ratiocination is needed» (OL I, 59): this is a matter of philosophy or science (the knowledge of causes), and more specifically – because our senses are bodily organs – of that part of philosophy called physics or natural philosophy (OL I, 66; EW I, 75). Now philosophy teaches us that «the imagination proceedeth from the action of external objects» (EW IV, 54), i.e., of real bodies[21] that work upon our own body. Now interaction between bodies takes place by way of motion and transfer of motion. Thus in the external body there exists only motion, and through the effect this motion has on us, the body in question enters into a relation with us, and this is what it means to produce a phantasm in us (DM, 116). «All the effect of a body upon the organs of our senses is nothing but fancy» (EW VII, 84). Hobbes illustrates this by reference to a person listening to another person's speech: the speaker's voice «is the same thing with the hearing and a fancy in the hearer, though the motion of the lips and other organs of speech be his that speaketh» (EW IV, 312). The difference of phantasms derives in part from different motions present in the external object, but more importantly from the structure of of our senses which are touched by the object's motion. Only with regard to the first aspect can the phantasm in a limited sense be called an *image* of the object (DM, 116; OL III, 475). But in general it will certainly not simply mirror the nature of this external body[22].

Now it is a basic tenet of Hobbes's philosophy that motion can generate nothing but motion. Also the phantasm itself, because it is produced by motion

21. Cf. EW VII, 28: the cause of sense is «always in a real body».

22. I say «in general», given the fact that there are at least two phantasms which, notwithstanding their subjective nature, faithfully picture some feature really present in the object: space, which is our phantasm of a body's magnitude (DM, 117), and time, which is the image of a body's motion (OL I, 125; EW VII, 84). For magnitude and motion are the only two accidents of bodies present not only in our fancy, but in bodies themselves.

coming from the object, cannot be but motion imprinted on our own body. «All fancies are motions within us», Hobbes declares (EW III, 11), and «the phantasm is nothing but motion in the brain» (DM, 350). Arriving from outside, this motion will inevitably have an inward direction. Yet given the specific consistency of our body which in the heart possesses a source of internal motion of its own, this inward motion will, according to the laws of motion of necessity, cause a reaction in the opposite direction. Now the most admirable thing in the world, an item utterly inexplicable to Hobbes, is that this backward or outward motion *appears* to us, not as motion, but rather as a phantasm[23]. Thus the phantasm can be defined as «the reaction of the sensory apparatus» (OL I, 395) or, more precisely, as arising from that reaction (OL I, 318, 396). The decisive element in this process is, however, that this outward motion «is not felt as motion, but as phantasm» (DM, 162). It appears not as that which it is, but rather as that which it is not.

Two diametrically opposed aspects of the phantasm can therefore be distinguished. On the one hand, it is, as Hobbes likes to call it, «motion in the brain» (DM, 350). In this respect it is a reality or something that genuinely exists. For motion is a real occurrence in real bodies. On the other hand, it does not appear as such, but as containing sensible qualities. Under its first aspect it is an act taking place in a subject, our real body, whereas under the second aspect it has a content that appears to us. Now to appear is not to be, and by consequence the phantasm in this second respect, i.e., taken as such, is not something real and existing, but rather a non-being and nothing at all. Phantasms, Hobbes says, «may be considered […] either as internal accidents of our mind […], or as species of external things, not as really existing, but appearing only to exist» (EW I, 92). In the first respect they are *entia;* in the second they are *non-entia*. In this sense, «phantasms are not, but only seem to be somewhat» (EW III. 394). The fact that these apparently conflicting determinations are but different aspects of one and the same thing goes a long way to explain, why Hobbes cannot but run together the act («fancy») and its content or object («phantasm»).

Fancy or phantasm being the general name for all mental experiences, it is but logical that Hobbes, according to whom all such experiences derive from sense perception, declares time and again that «all sense is fancy» (EW VII, 28, cf. 84)[24]. With regard to the object that causes it, sense is fancy originating «when the object is present» (OL I, 322), i.e., as long as it continues to act upon us (DM, 327); with regard to other types of phantasms depending on it, sense is «*original* fancy» (EW III, 3). However, this presence of the object does not mean that the object itself was given to sense; rather, each time «the object is one thing, the image or fancy is another» (EW III, 2f.), and they co-

23. Cf. EW I, 389: «Of all the phenomena or appearances which are near us, the most admirable is apparition itself, το; φαίνεσθαι; namely, that some natural bodies have in themselves the patterns almost of all things».

24. Cf. also EW III, 2: «this seeming or fancy is that which men call sense».

incide as little as cause and effect ever will. In sensing, sensible qualities are given, not objects. In the object there is motion; in us we experience qualities. In the process of sensation, the objects are the source of action; sense on the contrary is passion (DM, 350). So all our cognitive activity will always be about phantasms, not things, and in this sense it makes little difference for cognition whether things exist or not (OL I, 82). Light, color, sound and the like are not objects seen and heard, but only phantasms present in us (OL I, 319).

Just as «fancy» and «phantasm» are often applied by Hobbes in the broad sense of having mental experiences in general (and, to begin with, sense perception), so also are, as we have seen, their Latin equivalents «imagination» and «image». But in accordance with widespread scholastic terminology[25], Hobbes uses «imagination» also in a restricted sense for the faculty that comes next after sense: «after the object is removed or the eye shut, we still retain an image of the thing seen, though more obscure than when we see it. And this is it, the Latins call imagination» (EW III, 4:). True, in principle he would prefer the Greek φαντασία (latinized as «phantasia» and rendered in English as «fancy»), because, Hobbes says, it «signifies appearance, and is as proper to one sense as to another» (EW III, 4). By consequence it is the better and more appropriate term. Images, on the other hand, are «proper to things visible» (OL III, 8), and therefore one must first stretch this term so as to comprehend the phantasms of all others senses, before one can call «imagination» the capacity to keep «the phantasm remaining after the object is removed or past by» (EW I, 396). Still, if in this way one acquiesces in scholastic terminology, there remains a capital difference between scholastic doctrine and Hobbes: in Hobbes, sense and imagination are not different faculties of the soul, but different names applied to one and the same event according to different ways of considering it. One and the same motion present in us, if the present action of the object on our body is taken into account, is called sense; if this object is no longer present, this very same motion is called imagination proper (DM, 327). After all, according to the principles of motion, any motion, once produced, will continue undiminished, no matter whether the cause of that motion is still around or not. The presence or absence of the object therefore does not somehow change the internal nature of the motion; it only puts it in a different relation to its source or object.

This much, however, is clear, that there can be talk of imagination only *after* there has first been sense. For only after it has been produced, will a motion exist and continue to exist. In this sense, imagination «proceedeth from sense» (EW IV, 61). «All fancies are motions within us, relics of those made in the sense» (EW III, 11). Nevertheless, the law of the conservation of motion

25. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, qu. 78, art. 4: the «phantasia sive imaginatio» keeps and preserves the «forms» received through sense as in a store-house. The source of this view is Boethius, *Consolatio philosophiae*, V, 4: sense has to do with «figure in some underlying matter», imagination with «figure without matter».

does not imply an endless continuation of the phantasm. For this law fully applies only in ideal circumstances, i.e., in case no countermovement occurs. But the phantasm is motion in certain parts of the body which mutually cohere and therefore also are in mutual friction. Moreover, new objects uninterruptedly act upon our senses and make them move in a way different from the earlier one, which is to say that we have an input of new phantasms all the time. As a result, the given phantasm, when no longer supported by the direct action of the object, will inevitably diminish. With an expression taken over from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* («imagination is a kind of feeble sensation»)[26], Hobbes therefore describes imagination as «decaying sense» (EW III, 4) or «a diluted and vanishing phantasm» (OL III, 8). As compared with sense, it is «weak» (EW III, 5) or at least «weaker» than sense (DM, 327; OL III, 8), «dwindling or weakened sensation» (OL I, 323). Because of their dependence on sensation, the sequence of imaginations is the same with the original sequences of «neighboring» sensations, such that in the course of time so many different sensations will have followed a given one that also in imagination almost any phantasm can follow any given one (DM, 352; EW III, 11).

Still, imaginations may be ranged under different heads according to the degree of their distance from original sense. Closest to it are *afterimages* which, as we said above, are the only phenomena to receive «for distinction-sake» in the early *The Elements of Law* the name of «phantasms» (EW IV, 12). Examples of afterimages are «a spot before the eye that hath stared upon the sun or fire» (EW VII, 27). Also «from being long and vehemently attent upon geometrical figures, a man shall in the dark […] have the images of lines and angles before his eyes» (EW III, 6). These afterimages are «strong imaginations» (EW IV, 62) producing a «great impression» (EW III, 6) in us, because they are images persevering immediately after the object has ceased to act, i.e., when the image is not yet worn down and has not yet grown obscure. So it is difficult to distinguish them from genuine sensations. Nevertheless, they «are of the regiment of fancy, without any body concealed under them, or behind them, by which they are produced» (EW VII, 27).

Another type of imaginations of relevance here are *dreams* which are «the imaginations of them that sleep» (EW III, 6; OL I, 323)[27]. In sleep the animal spirits pervading our body retreat from the outskirts to the interior parts and

26. *Rhet.* I, 11: «ἡ δε θαντασία ἔστιν αἰσθήσις τις ἀσθενής» (1370 a 28f.). On this issue, as well as on the scholastic background of Hobbes's doctrine of imagination in general, see Cees Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism. The Late Aristotelian Setting of Thomas Hobbes' Natural Philosophy*, Leiden - Boston - Köln 2002, pp. 89-97.

27. This classical scholastic notion of the phantasm is the one still present in Hobbes's *Short Tract:* «By a Phantasma we vnderstand the similitude or image of some externall Obiect, appearing to vs, after the Externall obiect is remoued from the Sensorium; as in Dreames» (III.P.2; Thomas Hobbes, *Court traité des premiers principes,* ed. Jean Bernhardt, Presses Universitaires de France 1988, p. 40). The notion of «phantasma» in the *Short Tract* would deserve a treatment of its own which, however, lies outside the scope of the present article.

therefore do not transport any longer the motions that come in from the objects. So in dreams there can occur nothing new; only the phantasms which are already there, being no longer suppressed by fresh ones, will more clearly come to the fore.

In this dependence on the contents of earlier sense experience, dreams do not markedly differ from *fictions*, such as the imagination of «castles in the air, chimeras, and other monsters» (EW IV, 11). The only mental activity involved in their make-up is that we bring together parts that were given to us in different contexts before. Thus we feign a golden mountain from our earlier experience of gold and of mountains. However, fiction and dream differ insofar as in feigning we are conscious of the fact that we are but producing fiction. This is, e.g., the poet's case who deliberately produces fiction. People mistaking their fictions for realities are clearly out of their senses. In dreams, on the contrary, things always and of necessity appear to us as «strong and clear, as in sense itself» (EW IV, 9). This is why in dreaming we are not aware of the fact that we dream. In the imagination itself there is no noticeable difference, say, between a tree seen and a tree dreamt of (OL I, 52), so that often we take dreams to be veridical experiences. Fancy here is «the same waking, that dreaming» (EW III, 2). In order to distinguish between them, additional reflection is needed, such as attention to context and the coherence of the different imaginations. Dream sequences often are illogical and do not fit in with the rest of our imaginations; sense perception on the contrary does. So if dreams seem to cohere with real life, i.e. if «we observe not that we have slept», we may be deceived by them, «which is easy to happen to a man full of fearful thoughts; and whose conscience is much troubled; and that sleepeth, without the circumstances, of going to bed, or putting off his clothes, as one that noddeth in a chair» (EW III, 8).

Now it is clear that not everybody and in all circumstances will apply the circumspection necessary for distinguishing between mere imaginations and genuine sense perception. As said, the content of these mental images also does not allow for such a distinction. To this we are to add another general fact concerning phantasms, namely, that they arise only when the motion coming in from the object is reflected and takes an outward direction. This is why all phantasms seem «to exist outside» (OL I, 331), to be «some external thing» (DM, 350) and «to lie beyond the organ» (OL I, 318). By consequence phantasms seem to be «absolutely independent from the mind» (OL I, 82). They present themselves to us as if they were the things themselves (OL I, 66). People who do not sufficiently reflect on the origin and nature of phantasms – in one word, almost everybody – cannot but believe that our phantasms, which in fact are but accidents of our own body, are «external substances» (EW III, 96). This makes Hobbes state that «it is by nature instilled in all living creatures that at first blush they think a given image to be the thing seen» (OL II, 7). And this natural prejudice is so strong that, e.g., regarding the nature of light not only common people, but even the philosophers of the past (i.e., the writers on optics) did not manage «to conceive of those images in the fancy and in

the sense otherwise than of things really without us» (EW III, 637f.).

This is a feature common to all phantasms and which applies to perception as well as to dreams. The error this involves will be most tempting in the case of dreams, because in dreams we are completely unaware of their internal origin and thus consider them in a way no different from other strong and clear phantasms, viz. those of sense which we are naturally inclined to take for external things. People therefore cannot but tend to think that the voices they hear in their dreams are not phantasms, «but things subsisting of themselves, and objects without those that dreamed» (EW I, 402). Dream phantasms, that is to say, are turned into idols.

True, in a most general sense of the term «idol» is just another word for «phantasm». Where the latter means that which appears, the former (a Greek word, too) signifies more narrowly that which is seen (EW III, 649). Examples of idols are things seen «in a looking-glass, in a dream» (EW III, 382; OL I, 329) or «the effects of glasses, how they multiply and magnify the object of our sight» (EW VII, 79); in short, «the idea or image of a thing, not the thing itself» (OL III, 512). As the matter of fact, this is how already Aristotle himself uses the term εἴδωλον[28]. But in a narrower sense (developed only by the early Christian authors), the meaning of «idol» is restricted to religion: an idol is a statue or picture of some heathen god, such as «the idol Moloch» (EW III, 447) or «the idol Rimmon» (EW III, 493). The starting-point of such representations of gods is always an idol in the first sense of the term, namely «an idol, or mere figment of the brain» (EW III, 150). In such «idols of the brain» (EW III, 382, 640) or «of the fancy» (EW IV, 308) the figure of a god is conceived. Idolatry begins when such phantasms are taken to be entities having a certain influence on us and on our lives.

3. Phantasms as Idols

This is in fact how the belief omnipresent among common people (and philosophers) in spirits, ghost, specters, fairies, goblins, sprites and the like came into the world. To begin with, this error (or, better, ignorance) concerning the nature of phantasms lies at the base of «the greatest part of the religion of the Gentiles in time past, that worshipped satyrs, fauns, nymphs, and the like» (EW III, 9). «The Gentiles did vulgarly conceive the imagery of the brain, for things really subsistent without them, and not dependent on the fancy» (EW III, 389). Now, the persons they saw in their sleep, were of necessity colored and figured, but could not be touched (EW III, 382) and therefore were by them called spirits[29]. Because of their dimensions on the one hand and

28. Cf. e.g., *De div. per somnum:* «παραπλήσια συμβαίνει τὰ φαντάσματα τοῖς ἐν τοῖς ὕδασιν εἰδώλοις» (464 b 8f.; «dream images are almost similar to images reflected in water»).

29. The term «spirit» has two main significations in Hobbes, meaning «either a subtle,

their perceptual instability on the other[30] they were believed to be «bodies and living creatures, but made of air, or other more subtle and ethereal matter» (EW III, 637). These «aerial living bodies» (EW III, 66) they considered to be gods (EW IV, 292) or demons (EW III, 387). «Almost all nations worshipped specters, i.e. phantasms, calling them, probably out of fear, demons» (OL II, 352). The voices which the heathens of old heard in their dreams they took to be the voices of these gods, and according to what they demanded of them, they considered them to be good or evil demons. As a matter of fact, «there is almost nothing that has a name, that has not been esteemed amongst the Gentiles, in one place or another, a god, or devil» (EW III, 99): so all-comprehensive was this demonology which had grown out of the misinterpretation of the ontological status of phantasms.

A noteworthy element in this context is that also Greek philosophy, and especially Aristotle, perhaps because motivated by Greek folk belief as laid down by the important Greek poets[31], taught the existence of such immaterial entities. True, he did not call them demons and the like, but subsumed them under such in fact meaningless philosophical names as «abstract essences, and substantial forms» (EW III, 672).

Jewish religion as laid down in the Bible is free from that erroneous and superstitious belief. Yet after the Jews had come in contact with Greek culture, they, too, «without any thing in the Old Testament that constrained them thereunto, had generally an opinion, (except the sect of the Sadducees,)» that there were such spirits (EW III, 389). Instead of demons, they spoke, however, of «angels» good or bad (EW III, 387). These they conceived to be permanent entities from time to time sent by God to men for making known his will, his punishments, his promises, etc.

fluid, and invisible body, or a ghost or other idol or phantasm of the imagination» (EW III, 382). Though the first meaning of this term, according to which spirits are «substances which work not upon the sense, and therefore <are> not conceptible» (EW IV, 62), is the one most often used by Hobbes, we will here limit our considerations to its second meaning. It should, however, be clear that these two meanings are not mutually exclusive. For the basic meaning of «spirit» is «a body natural, but of such subtilty, that it worketh not on the senses; but that filleth up the place which the image of a visible body might fill up. Our conception therefore of spirit consisteth of figure without colour» (EW IV, 60f.). This seems to contradict the affirmation that spirits do have figure and color, though they do not offer resistance to touch. But the definition of spirit as a substitute for the image of a *visible* body makes it clear that by spirit is to be understood the - colorless - objective substance to which the colored image or phantasm is wrongly attributed, as if it were an accident of it.

30. Phantasms, as we saw above, «do not remain, but disappear» (OL III, 475), according as they are superseded by new ones. Also the gentiles «saw that they vanish easily» (DM, 127) and therefore did not think of them as stable bodies of the usual kind.

31. Hobbes does not give a specific reason for Aristotle's belief in entities (intelligences) separated from matter. But in view of the fact that he accuses Aristotle's political philosophy to have been modelled after the actually existing political situation of his time (EW III, 202), it could that be his opinion regarding this issue in Aristotle was not so much different. Now Hobbes is convinced that in Greece belief in demons had been spread mainly by «the poets, as principal priests of the heathen religion» (EW III, 638).

It is not clear to which degree the different Jewish sects could according to Hobbes have played a role in the process of taking over those, in last resort, heathen views into the Christian Church. At all events, given the fact that not only many early converts, but also the church's leaders often had a general Greek cultural background and more specifically a Greek philosophical training, this erroneous doctrine managed to find refuge also in the Church. Even today, Hobbes says, we err «by introducing the demonology of the heathen poets, that is to say, their fabulous doctrine concerning demons, which are but idols or phantasms of the brain, without any real nature of their own distinct from human fancy» (EW III, 605). In addition, in later time «Greek demonology was left in the Church» through its accepting the Aristotelian philosophical «doctrine of separated substantial essences and forms» (OL III, 499). What had been a kind of superstition among the uneducated ones, gained an air of respectability even among the scholars.

The effect of all this was that Christians, not unlike certain Jews before them (EW III, 473), followed the old heathen practice of fabricating material idols in the sense of simulacra produced by craftsmen (OL IV, 383). These idols, «painted, carved, moulded, or moulten in matter» (EW III, 649), were not so much meant to be faithful images and true copies of the phantasms in their minds, but rather loose representations of them. There was therefore «little regard to the similitude of their material idol to the idol in their fancy» (EW III, 650). This is probably why early converts to Christianity who from their heathen past owned idols and who because of «the immoderate esteem, and prices set upon the workmanship of them» preferred «to retain them still in their houses», could simply rebaptize these idols, making, e.g., «that an image of the Virgin Mary, and of her son our Saviour, which before perhaps was called the image of Venus, and Cupid» (EW III, 659f.). For similarity did not matter, and so a man could easily worship in the idol «any fancy of his own, which he thinketh to dwell in it» (EW III, 656): in his heathen time a heathen god, in his Christian period a saint or other figure of the New Testament. The idol or statue was thus considered to be like an «animate body, composed of the matter and the phantasm, as of a body and soul» (EW III, 651). Idols were treated as if they were living persons, and in fact living persons of some superior kind.

4. The Political Inadmissibility of Idols

It is but a consequence of this that, with regard to these idols, people considered it reasonable and legitimate to behave in the same way they used to behave vis-à-vis their own superiors: they felt the need to worship and obey them, because they were afraid of their – unknown, and therefore potentially infinite – power either to hurt them or to do them good. This kind of idolatry is widespread among people and almost inevitable to anyone ignorant of the causes of phantasms (OL II, 352). «They that make little, or no inquiry into

the natural causes of things […], are inclined to suppose, and feign unto themselves, several kinds of powers invisible; and to stand in awe of their own imaginations; and in time of distress to invoke them; as also in the time of unexpected good success, to give them thanks» (EW III, 93), «as if they had limitless power to help and to harm them» (OL III, 475). Thus people easily attribute to these gods created out of their own fancy, a power higher than that which their lawful sovereign possesses, whose power never extends beyond the sum of the power of his subjects. It is not difficult to imagine what will follow from such views: in case of conflict, people will always give preference to the supposed commands they receive through the voices or the (self-proclaimed) representatives of these idols, above those of their own sovereign. As far back as the time of Moses, Hobbes states, that «if the people had been permitted to worship and pray to images (which are representations of their own fancies), they had had no further dependance on […] Moses […]; but every man had governed himself according to his own appetite, to the utter eversion of the commonwealth and their own destruction for want of union» (EW III, 646). The disastrous political consequences of this worship of idols, i.e., of self-construed phantasms, are obvious.

It is here that philosophy steps in. True, its general demonstration that the subject of all phantasms, including those of sense, is (some part of) our body, and not the object – a demonstration first given by Hobbes already in the opening chapters of his first work on political philosophy, *The Elements of Law* (EW IV, 4-8) – will hardly convince many people. Not ordinary human beings, because it runs counter to their natural instinctive beliefs; not philosophers, because they have imbibed Aristotelian (and scholastic) doctrine to the opposite. But true, i.e., Hobbesian philosophy is, to begin with, in a position to point out certain phenomena that make it clear even to the most unschooled mind that phantasms are not accidents of the objects, but downright nothing. Thus it is clear even to the meanest understanding that we are right to call a man seeing himself in a mirror, a substance (a *hypostasis*, as the Greeks have it), but his image which he sees in the mirror or in water, a phantasm (OL III, 497; EW IV, 308). In fact, it would be nonsense to call a person or a star one thing and the image of this person or of the stars in the river another thing, namely their ghosts (EW III, 638). Another fact well-known from experience is that certain glasses multiply a given object, for example a shilling, into many shillings, «and if you set a mark upon it, you will find the mark upon them all». Now just looking through a glass cannot make objects «really more than they are». By consequence these appearing objects are so many phantasms, «mere nothings» (EW VII, 79), as opposed to the true object that underlies them all. In general, everybody knows that the same object such as a tower «appears sometimes greater, sometimes lesser, sometimes square, sometimes round […]; but the true magnitude and figure of the thing seen is always one and the same, so that the magnitude and figure which appears, is not the true magnitude and figure of the object, nor anything but phantasm» (EW I, 59f.).

In short, phantasms are continuously changeable, even if the object remains

unchanged, and so they cannot be part of this object (EW III, 648f.). Moreover, all people know that the image of a thing is often in one place, whereas the thing is in another. You may see the sun reflected upon the water, but will know that it is truly up there in heaven, and if you look there you will see a shining surface of a given diameter, but will know that the real sun is in fact many times greater than the phantasm you see.

However, more important both regarding common people and scholars than such examples is the fact that the correct philosophical view of the ontological zero status of phantasms, once it has been reached by merely natural means, will function as an eye-opener for our interpretation of the Bible. It is accepted theological doctrine that in understanding God's word «we are not to renounce our senses, and experience; nor […] our natural reason» (EW III, 359). Hobbes wholeheartedly subscribes to this. For how could a word, even that of God, mean anything to us if we did not understand it, i.e., if we did not bring along our faculty of understanding? True, Hobbes also concedes that many Biblical sayings are above our understanding, which is to say that we should not try to examine them. But most Biblical texts are open to rational scrutiny, and it is in this instrumental function of an enlightened reason that philosophy plays a decisive role in establishing a correct theology free from any admixture of heathen philosophy – a mésalliance time and again castigated by Hobbes as detrimental to political stability.

An important case in point is that only the doctrine of the non-existence of phantasms makes us see that it is explicitly confirmed by St.. Paul, who says that «an idol is nothing» (1 *Cor*. 8:4): a verse Hobbes for this very reason quotes or at least alludes to many, many times[32].

This is but an exemplification of the general fact that the Bible in fact agrees with true philosophy on this issue throughout; all theological interpretations to the contrary must therefore be deemed influenced by that corrupting heathen philosophy which under the name of scholasticism has crept mainly into Catholic theology and was in part upheld also by Protestant theologians who had failed to carry Reformation to its utmost goal of banning from Christianity all remnants of «gentilism».

Philosophy comes to the rescue of political peace mainly in questions regarding an individual's supposed direct contact with God. There cannot be any doubt, Hobbes agrees with the New Testament (Acts 5:29), that we are to obey God more than man. But philosophy not only shows that no individual can prove the truth of a claim of his to have received a direct message, i.e., an immediate revelation from God. More importantly, it can positively show that no such claims will ever hold. God speaks to a given person either in dreams or visions or by sending a supernatural messenger, an angel. Now regarding dreams we have already seen that they are phantasms, the immediate cause of which is not to be attributed to some supernatural entity; rather, they wholly

32. E.g., EW III, 150, 382, 645; OL III, 457, 481, 512, 515, 537, 563; EW IV, 308; EW V, 211; EW VII, 79.

depend on prior phantasms present in our sensory apparatus. Now visions, too, are nothing but dreams (EW III, 361). So if somebody claims divine supernatural inspiration for the announcements he pretends to make in the name of God, there is no reason at all to believe him. Rather, if he did not simply misunderstand his own dreams, it is likely that he succumbed to that all too human aspiration for power over other people, and found this claim of direct inspiration a most convenient trick to satisfy his aspirations. In sum, «visions and dreams, whether natural or supernatural, are but phantasms» (EW III, 658). True, often such a would-be prophet genuinely believes himself what he preaches. But again this only shows that he is ignorant of the origin of dreams and visions. In other words, he is unaware of the fact that to say that God has «spoken to him in a dream, is no more than to say he hath dreamed that God spake to him» (EW III, 361). However this may be, there is no reason at all for other people to accept such claims, no matter which private person will issue it.

But, Hobbes's most extensive application of the results of his philosophy to his understanding of the Bible, concerns the Biblical notion of angels functioning as God's direct messengers to certain people chosen by God for this very purpose. In a first step, Hobbes excludes the doctrine of angels from philosophy (OL I, 9) and declares that they are no fit subject for investigations by means of natural reason (OL II, 412), because «neither good nor bad angels can be conceived or comprehended by our imagination» (DM, 312). They are «spirits» in the sense of entities that cannot work on our senses and therefore cannot produce any phantasm in us. They are, in other terms, messengers incapable of delivering any message at all. For humans, that is to say, there is no reason to believe in the existence of such entities. This is, however, not to reject a study of the relevant Biblical texts concerning angels on the base of Hobbes's own philosophy, in order to see how they can make sense. For that which cannot conceived or understood regarding angels is not their nature as such, but rather their nature as understood by traditional theology based on Aristotelian philosophy. According to Hobbes, it is indeed outright meaningless to call them immaterial entities or incorporeal spirits.

With regard to angels, Hobbes treats the Old and the New Testament separately. In the Old Testament, by «angel» is meant anything that makes known God's «extraordinary presence […], especially by a dream, or vision» (EW III, 388). This implies of course that angels must be phantasms, and not «real and permanent substances» (OL III, 564). The difference between an ordinary phantasm and an angel must, then, lie in this, that God's extraordinary presence consists in producing «supernatural phantasms»[33], i.e., phantasms not originating in previous sense experience, but directly brought about by God by way of some «extraordinary operation» (EW III, 394). Nevertheless, we are to stick to the fact that «visions and dreams, whether natural or supernatural, are

33. This expression is to be found, e.g., at EW III, 389, 392f., 658; OL III, 13, 286,306, 564.

but phantasms» (EW III, 658). And regarding the origin of phantasms, we know of but one explanation. Talk of a supernatural causation of phantasms therefore is to remain an empty possibility that cannot be filled by any means accessible to reason. An individual's protestation that some of his phantasms were of supernatural origin cannot be verified. For more often than not we are not aware of the origin of our dreams and of those voices we hear in our dreams. Whoever lacks sufficient natural philosophy regarding the origin of dreams will therefore be inclined to attribute his dreams to some divine inspiration. But subjective ignorance of the cause is not the same thing as a supernatural cause. So the distinguishing character of angels in the Old Testament is to be looked for neither in the unverifiable origin of certain phantasms nor in the specific content of some given dream – after all, anybody may dream anything –, but rather in this, that certain phantasms have a special signification. An angel is an image in the fancy meant «to signify the presence of God» (EW III, 389). This is of course a matter of interpretation. Only if we understand a dream as signifying God's special presence may we call it an angel of God. Correspondingly no prophet ever had dealings with angels in the sense of existing things, but rather with his own phantasms, which he understood as signs sent by God. Now one should not overlook the fact that in Hobbes the sign relation is a non-necessary relation. Concluding from the sign to the thing signified is always a fallible process which gains a certain reliability only through accumulated experience. But it goes without saying that in the case of an extraordinary sign relation such an accumulation is excluded by the very nature of that which is signified. All affirmations about a prophet's communications with angels must therefore be judged with great reservations. For in all cases a natural understanding of the meaning of his phantasms would have been more – natural.

However this may be, nobody will ever by rights be in a position to plead that some angel sent by God had visited him and through him commanded mankind to do (or to forbear to do) certain things in the same way the prophets of the Old Testament had been told by God's angels to demand or to forbid certain things to be done. For there are no such messengers in God's retinue, who from time to time would be dispatched by their boss to talk to certain people about certain affairs of importance for them or, by preference, for other people.

Having thus neutralized the Old Testament reports on angels, Hobbes applies a different strategy regarding the New Testament. «The many places of the New Testament, and our Saviour's own words, and in such texts, wherein is no suspicion of corruption of the Scripture, have extorted from my feeble reason, an acknowledgment, and belief, that there be also angels substantial, and permanent», he grudgingly concedes (EW III, 394). But he insists that nothing said about angels in the New Testament allows us to conceive them as «ghosts incorporeal». Rather, they «can be moved from place to place» and therefore must «take up room» (EW III, 388) and have dimension – «and whatsoever hath dimension, is body». «To me therefore it seemeth», Hobbes

concludes, «that the Scripture favoureth them more, that hold angels and spirits for corporeal, than them that hold the contrary» (EW IV, 62). Angels «are spirits corporeal, (though subtle and invisible)» (EW III, 644).

Is this to capitulate? Certainly not. For «the proper signification of spirit in common speech is […] a subtle, fluid, and invisible body» (EW III, 382)[34]. Examples of such spirits are air, wind, the ether, and the «vital and animal spirits» (DM, 312; EW III, 382, 388). To call them spirits, is not to place them in a category of entities beyond bodies. But they are not angels either. In order to come to grips with the latter, it is necessary to give a more strict definition of «spirit», according to which this term means a most fine, transparent and untouchable body[35]. But that is to say that spirits do not work on any of our senses (EW IV, 60f.) and are «therefore not conceptible» (EW IV, 62). Hobbes's concession of spirits as real substances in the New Testament clearly cannot be cashed out in rational terms. Therefore here, too, only the second meaning of the term «spirit» is left, according to which it signifies «the images that rise in the fancy in dreams, and visions» (EW III, 388). And this is exactly the meaning the term «angel» had also in the Old Testament. Altogether there is therefore little reason for believing in the existence of messengers directly sent from God to individuals who then could in God's, i.e., in their own, name preach doctrines contrary to public peace and to the laws promulgated by the sovereign.

Hobbes was aware of the fact that in many questions he held a minority position not shared by most common people nor by the great majority of philosophers. However, this does not undermine his conviction that it is only his own philosophy which, when duly taught at the universities and through a well-taught clergy influencing society at large, will guarantee stable peace. On the one hand, recourse to empirical fact such as the conviction of the overwhelming majority of men is not a valid counterargument to his rational conclusions, precisely because it is not an argument at all. Even if all the world were to build houses on sand, «it could not thence be inferred, that so it ought to be» (EW III, 195). On the other hand, Hobbes states in a comparable case (concerning the general conviction of the immortality of the soul, which rests on the conception of the soul as a spirit-like entity of its own), that it is in fact this so-called majority position which is that of a negligible minority only. For the views of the common people who are more intent on making a living, acquiring riches, honors and the like, are not based on any reflection of their own at all and therefore do not count as well-established doctrine. And this is true also of the vast majority of the philosophers; they simply repeat the tenets of their masters, in whose words they swear. Altogether therefore only a small handful of philosophers, the very founders of those philosophical schools or

34. Cf. also EW IV, 309: «Spirit is thin, fluid, transparent, invisible body».

35. One should remember that according to Hobbes fluid things are «those, whose parts may by very weak endeavour be separated from one another» (EW I, 425f.), i.e., which offer no resistance to touch.

sects, does count (OL III, 525). Now all of them without exception were heathens and had in turn, as said before, inherited their wrong opinion from the popular heathen poets. Altogether there is therefore little reason to be afraid of an unequal battle opposing Hobbes to the rest of the world. Rather, Hobbes may be confident to have won this battle in advance.