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Experience and Definitions in the Hobbes-Bramhall Debate on Liberty

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In his exchanges with Bramhall on liberty, Hobbes provides an argument for his understanding of liberty, a "proof" from experience, which appears to be obviously flawed. According to Bramhall, Hobbes is making a basic mistake: he's assuming that what's in our minds serves as a legitimate basis for a conclusion about liberty. But close attention to the exchanges related to this argument shows this assessment to be too hasty, because despite first appearances, the dispute between Hobbes and Bramhall regarding this argument is not really about experience. Instead, the dispute amounts to a deeper disagreement about the nature of definitions, how we acquire them, and how we should use them. I argue that when we interpret Hobbes as holding that the definitions of the terms in the debate, such as 'liberty,' need no demonstration because they are "explications of our simplest conceptions," his argument from experience makes better sense and reveals, even in its main points of contention, the coherence of the argument with his most fundamental philosophical commitments regarding method, materialism, and language.

Keywords: Hobbes; Bramhall; definitions; experience; liberty; freedom; method

1. Introduction

In their exchanges on liberty, Thomas Hobbes and John Bramhall disagree about nearly every aspect of the nature of liberty and its relation to necessity.[1] They

1. Hobbes and Bramhall initially discussed the topic of liberty at the Marquess of Newcastle's home upon his invitation in Paris in 1645. Hobbes and Bramhall sent Newcastle a series of written statements on their positions at his request afterwards, which neither Hobbes nor Bramhall intended to be published. But after a copy of Hobbes's manuscript, *Of Liberty and Necessity*, was published in 1654 without his permission, Bramhall followed in 1655 with *A Defence of True Liberty*

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disagree about whether determinism is true; whether determinism is compatible with liberty; what it is to be a free agent; whether conceiving of the will as a faculty is coherent; whether the understanding determines the will or action, and so on. Bramhall endorses a scholastic Aristotelian view that is incompatibilist and voluntarist, in which a faculty conception of the will is central.[2] Hobbes, in contrast, is a committed determinist, holds a view of liberty that is compatibilist, and famously rejects conceiving of the will as a faculty (e.g., EW 5:174).[3]

Because of the fundamental disagreement in both the substantive content of their views on liberty and the psychological and metaphysical commitments underlying those views, in their exchanges Hobbes and Bramhall often seem, as one commentator has put it, "reduced…simply to asserting [their] own contrary position[s]."[4] But at one key point, in *Of Liberty and Necessity*, Hobbes offers an argument for his understanding of liberty and associated notions ("the argument from experience," as I will call it),[5] which he characterizes as the only possible "proof" of his views:

> For my first five points; where it is explicated, first, what spontaneity is; secondly, what deliberation is; thirdly, what will, propension, and appetite is; fourthly, what a free agent is; fifthly, what liberty is: there can no other proof be offered but *every man's own experience*, by reflecting on himself, and remembering what he useth to have in his mind, that is, what he himself meaneth, when he saith, an action is spontaneous, a man

from Antecedent and Extrinsical Necessity, to which *Of Liberty and Necessity* was initially a critique. Hobbes published *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* in response to Bramhall's *Defence* in 1656, and Bramhall followed with his *Castigations of Mr Hobbes* in 1658. For more on the background of their exchanges, see Chappell (1999: ix–x).

2. See Pink (2016: 171–183) on the Scholastic framework and account of freedom that Bramhall adopts and that Hobbes challenges.

3. I use the following abbreviations in this paper: *AW = Thomas White's De Mundo Examined* (i.e., *Anti-White*, also known as *De Motu*); *DC* 1655 = the Latin edition of *De corpore*; EW = Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 11 volumes, ed. by Sir William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1839–1845); *L = Leviathan*; and OL = Thomas Hobbes, *Thomæ Hobbes malmesburiensis opera philosophica*, 5 volumes, ed. by Sir William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1839–1845). I cite *L* (Part I) by chapter and paragraph number, *De corpore* by chapter and section number, EW and OL by volume and page number, and *DC* 1655 by page number. For discussions of Hobbes's account of liberty and the ways in which it departs from Bramhall's presuppositions and commitments, see Pink (2016: 183–194) and Russell (2011).

4. Vere Chappell characterizes Bramhall in this way (1999: xxii), but I think the characterization holds true of Hobbes at times as well.

5. Joshua M. Wood calls early modern arguments that take our experience of voluntary action to be evidence of the possession of free will the "argument from experience" (2014: 502–503). I use the term more generally to refer to any argument that uses experience (of any sort) as support for the attribution of freedom to human beings.

> deliberates, such is his will, that agent or that action is free. (EW 5:389, my emphasis)[6]

Hobbes then goes on to detail what the terms mean, and as one might expect, his explanations accord with his philosophical views.

Bramhall understandably objects:

> Now at length he comes to his main proofs; he that hath so confidently censured the whole current of Schoolmen and Philosophers of *nonsense*, had need to produce strong evidence for himself. So he calls his reasons…*demonstrative proofs*. All demonstrations are either from the cause or the effect, not from private notions and conceptions which we have in our minds. That which he calls a demonstration, deserves not the name of an intimation. (EW 5:390–391)

As Bramhall underscores, Hobbes's argument looks obviously problematic. Reflecting on ourselves and remembering what we mean when we use terms might accurately reveal what is in our minds ("private notions and conceptions"). But if, as Bramhall assumes, by 'proof' Hobbes means 'demonstration,' it is unclear how what is in our minds alone could serve as the starting point of a demonstration. Furthermore, if what we mean by terms is an essential part of the argument, the prospects for common understanding between Hobbes and Bramhall, let alone agreement, are dim. After all, the meanings of the key terms in the debate—'liberty,' for example—are precisely what is at issue.

Two years later, in *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, Hobbes refers to the argument from experience but then elaborates:

> I have said … that to define what spontaneity is, what deliberation is, what will, propension, appetite, a free agent, and liberty is, and to prove they are well defined, there can be no other proof offered, but every man's

6. When Bramhall and Hobbes responded to one another, they included the passages they were responding to in each other's works. So, Hobbes's *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* consists in his earlier *Of Liberty and Necessity*, Bramhall's *Defence of True Liberty*, and responses to Bramhall's *Defence*. See Chappell (1999: xxxi–xxxiv) for the relationships between the texts and EW. Though EW 4 contains *Of Liberty and Necessity* on its own, quotations from Hobbes and Bramhall's exchanges that I focus on in this paper are drawn from the version found in Hobbes's *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* in EW 5. Quotations from *Elements of Law* are drawn from EW 4. Quotations from *De corpore* are from EW 1, unless otherwise specified. Quotations from *Leviathan* are from the Malcolm edition, Hobbes (2012). Quotations from *AW* are from Hobbes (1976); the original Latin text is from Hobbes (1973).

> own experience and memory of what he meaneth by such words. For definitions being the beginning of all demonstration, cannot themselves be demonstrated, that is, proved to another man; all that can be done, is either to put him in mind what those words signify commonly in the matter whereof they treat, or if the words be unusual, to make the definitions of them true by mutual consent in their signification. (EW 5:396–397)

Hobbes here provides an additional part of the argument: one's own experience reveals definitions of terms such as 'liberty,' and definitions cannot be demonstrated or proved to anyone else. Though this elaboration raises many questions, one thing is clear: Hobbes intends his views on definitions to at least explain, if not bolster, the argument from experience.

I have two aims in this paper. The first is to show that this dispute between Hobbes and Bramhall on experience is proxy for a deeper, foundational disagreement about definitions and their relation to language, the world, and common usage of terms (§§2, 3, and 5). Hobbes's theory of definitions and his method have received significant attention in the literature on his views on the nature of science, his political philosophy, and the relationship between them.[7] But his theory of definitions has been little discussed in the context of his exchanges with Bramhall on liberty.[8] I'll argue that, on the issue of experience in the context of the argument from experience, Hobbes and Bramhall are not merely talking past each other, nor simply asserting their own positions on the nature of liberty without argument but, instead, disagreeing fundamentally on the nature of definitions, how we acquire them, and how we should use them. This paper, thus, brings to light a largely undiscussed disagreement located in the exchanges between Hobbes and Bramhall—one that extends beyond the issues of liberty and necessity to their broader philosophical views.

The second aim of the paper is to assess Hobbes's argument from experience in light of the significance of his theory of definitions in the argument. I

7. Recent literature on Hobbes's theory of definitions and method includes Adams (2014; 2019) and Hattab (2014; 2021). See fn 10, below, for citations to the literature regarding method and Hobbes's conception of science.

8. Paul Russell characterizes Hobbes's "philosophical task" in the exchanges with Bramhall as "provid[ing] an alternative set of real and true definitions of the terms involved in this context… in light of his own purely materialistic metaphysical commitments" (2011: 428). Martine Pécharman discusses definitions in the Hobbes-Bramhall exchange in the context of Hobbes's logic (2016). Thomas Holden discusses the issue of the proper definition of 'author' and Hobbes's understanding of proper definitions in the context of Hobbes and Bramhall's discussions of whether God's being the deterministic cause of sin would thereby make him the author of sin (2023: 108–111). In this paper, I seek to go beyond the discussions in these works by showing that Hobbes not only offers an alternative set of definitions in his exchanges with Bramhall but also an alternative understanding of the nature of definitions, and by showing the significance of this understanding in their argument about the meanings of the central terms involved in the dispute about liberty.

show, in §§4 and 5, that what is central to the argument is Hobbes's view that definitions of the key terms in the debate need no demonstration. I present three potential explanations of the claim (§4) and argue that of the three, Hobbes's view that the relevant definitions are "explications of our simplest conceptions" is the most applicable and promising (§5). This explanation provides a defense against Bramhall's main objection to the argument, that experience reveals only what is in our minds, not the starting points of a proof (§6). The explanation also brings to light a different weakness in the argument from experience, Hobbes's assumption of the veracity of the conceptions we acquire by sense, while providing a defense of further aspect of the argument, his invocation of common usage in support of his own definitions (§6).

2. Hobbes on Language, Ideas, and Proper and Faulty Definitions

Definitions play a central role in Hobbes's method and his understanding of the nature of science and knowledge more generally. But, as one influential scholar has remarked, "the nature and role of definitions in demonstration" is "one of the most vexed issues in the interpretation of Hobbes's scientific methodology."[9]

I will not engage in the substantial disputes about definitions in Hobbes's scientific method here (though I will discuss related issues in §4).[10] My objective in this section is to provide, as background, the less controversial basics of Hobbes's views on definitions and their relationships to language and ideas, found largely in *De corpore*. It is clear that Hobbes has these views in mind in his discussions of liberty with Bramhall because at one point in their exchange (EW 5:371), Hobbes refers Bramhall to the fourteenth and fifteenth articles of chapter six of *De corpore*, where he summarizes his understanding of what definitions are and enumerates their "properties" (*De corpore* 6.15 / EW 1:84).[11]

For Hobbes, language, and "names" in particular, serve as "marks" and "signs" of our thoughts, both of which "are necessary for the acquiring of philosophy" (*De corpore* 2.3 / EW 1:15). Because our memory is imperfect, we need "marks, namely, sensible things taken at pleasure, that, by the sense of them,

9. Gauthier (1997: 512).

10. See Kneale and Kneale (1962), Martinich (1995; 1997; 2005), McNeilly (1968), and Miller (1999) for conventionalist interpretations of Hobbes's philosophy of science. See Gauthier (1997) and Adams (2014) for arguments against these views.

11. Helen Hattab points out serious interpretive problems that arise, at least in part, from taking EW 1 as an accurate translation of *DC* 1655 (2014: 467–472). Though I largely quote from EW 1, I emend the translation where there is any philosophical significance and note the emendations.

such thoughts [*cognitiones*] may be recalled to our mind as are like those for which we took them" (*De corpore* 2.1 / EW 1:14 / *DC* 1655:7). And in order to communicate those thoughts to others, we need signs of our thoughts, "by which what one man finds out may be manifested and made known to others" (*De corpore* 2.2 / EW 1:14).[12]

Definitions "explicate" the names that serve as signs of our thoughts or ideas:[13]

> Now, seeing definitions … are principles, or primary propositions, they are therefore speeches; and seeing they are used for the raising of an *idea* [*ideam*] of some thing in the mind of the learner, whensover that thing has a name, the definition of it can be nothing but the explication [*explicatio*] of that name by speech. (*De corpore* 6.14 / EW 1:83 / *DC* 1655:51)

In other words, definitions express in language the thought or idea that a name signifies and thereby "raises an *idea* of some thing in the mind" of a hearer.[14]

From this passage alone, one might think that Hobbes holds that the definition of a name is a proposition that expresses in language whatever thought or idea happens to occur in the mind of the person who hears the name. But Hobbes's understanding of definitions is normative—he holds that definitions are either "right" (what I will call "proper") or "faulty."[15] Proper definitions don't raise just any idea in the minds of those who hear a name. Hobbes says of "names such as *body*, *matter*, *quantity*, or *extension*, *motion*, and whatever is common to all matter" that they "are well enough defined, when, by speech as short as may be, we raise in the mind of the hearer perfect and clear ideas or conceptions of the things named (*De corpore* 6.13 / EW 1:81). Because proper definitions

12. See Duncan (2011; 2016) on Hobbes's account of signification. See Ott (2018: 359–365), for a discussion of the relation involved in signification not only in Hobbes but in early modern philosophy more broadly. Hobbes at times says that names signify the things they name, but at others, that names signify ideas (see Duncan [2011] on this). Since he consistently holds that definitions raise ideas in the mind of the hearer of the name the definition explicates, I will discuss signification in this context in terms of ideas.

13. Marcus Adams references the etymology of 'explicate' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to help illuminate Hobbes on this, where explication relates to the "unfolding" or "opening up (what is wrapped up)" (2014: 43, fn 29). More recently, he has argued that Hobbes intends thought experiments, such as the "annihilation of the world" thought experiment in *De corpore* 7–8 and the "state of nature" thought experiment in *Leviathan*, to help us gain explications of our simplest conceptions (2019: 8–13).

14. 'Thought' (*cognitio*) refers the general category of mental items. Hobbes often uses 'idea' and 'conception' synonymously (*De corpore* 6.13, *DC* 1655:50, as well as "ideam sive conceptum" from *De homine* (OL II, 88)), and ideas and conceptions are not the result of purely intellectual activity but are understood as deriving from sense perception. See Sacksteder (1978: 37–38) for a detailed analysis of Hobbes's understanding and usage of 'conception.'

15. Hobbes uses the terminology of a "right definition" in his exchange with Bramhall, as I show in Section 3. I discuss his *De corpore* characterization of a "faulty definition" in this section, below.

raise perfect and clear ideas of the things named in the minds of those who hear them, a "property of a definition" is that it:

> takes away equivocation, as also all that multitude of distinctions, which are used by such as think they may learn philosophy by disputation. For the nature of a definition is to define, that is, to determine the signification of the defined name, and to pare from it all other signification besides what is contained in the definition itself; and therefore one definition does as much, as all the distinctions (how many soever) that can be used about the name defined. (*De corpore* 6.15 / EW 1:84)

In raising perfect and clear ideas of the things named, a proper definition fixes on a determinate idea and distinguishes that idea from others. Because of this function of proper definitions, according to Hobbes, they are more effective in clarifying terms than distinctions, which were commonly used by the scholastics and Bramhall (as I will discuss in the next section).

Some definitions, Hobbes thinks, fail to raise in the mind of the hearer a clear idea of the named thing. In these cases, all we conceive in our minds are the sounds of the words. Hobbes calls these cases of "nonsense" or "absurdity" in *Leviathan*:[16]

> Words whereby we conceive nothing but the sound, are those we call *Absurd, Insignificant*, and *Non-sense*. And therefore if a man should talk to me of a *round Quadrangle*, or *accidents of Bread in Cheese*; or *Immateriall Substances*, or of *A free subject*; *A free-will*; or any *Free*, but free from being hindered by opposition, I should not say he were in an Errour, but that his words were without meaning; that is to say, Absurd. (*L* v.5 / Hobbes 2012: 68)

Many of the examples Hobbes presents here involve two juxtaposed names, such as 'round' and 'quadrangle.' These cases of absurdity or nonsense occur when names, when put together, are contradictory or inconsistent. Of this kind of case, Hobbes explains:

> when men make a name of two Names, whose significations are contradictory and inconsistent. … For whensoever any affirmation is false, the two names of which it is composed, put together and made one, signifie

16. See Duncan (2016) for a detailed account of absurdity. Stewart Duncan initially distinguishes two main interpretive options for understanding Hobbes's discussions of absurdity, absurdity as the contradictory and absurdity as the false (2016: 66), but I take the contradictory to be a case of falsehood, as I think Duncan would find congenial to his final view.

> nothing at all. For example, if it be a false affirmation to say *a quadrangle is round*, the word *round quadrangle* signifies nothing; but is a meere sound. (*L* iv.21 / Hobbes 2012: 60)

When two juxtaposed names are contradictory or inconsistent, what results is a false affirmation, which corresponds to no idea at all and is thus "insignificant"—literally, a failure of signification.[17] More generally, when a proposed definition that explicates a name in speech amounts to a contradiction, it must be false and cannot signify clear ideas in the mind.[18]

In *De corpore,* Hobbes calls definitions that raise no clear idea in the mind of the listener "faulty" (*inepta*):

> When a master is instructing his scholar, if the scholar understand all the parts of the thing defined, which are resolved in the definition, and yet will not admit of the definition, there needs no further controversy betwixt them, it being all one as if he refused to be taught. But if he understand nothing, then certainly the definition is faulty [*inepta*]; for the nature of a definition consists in this, that it exhibit a clear idea of the thing defined; and principles are either known by themselves [*per se nota*], or else they are not principles. (*De corpore* 6.15 / EW 1:84 / *DC* 1655:52)

Proper definitions allow those who are instructed in the definition to obtain a clear idea of what is being defined. Faulty definitions, in contrast, result in a lack of understanding: no clear idea is raised in the mind of the learner. On this view of the nature of proper definitions, there seems to be no room for dispute about definitions: a definition is either proper and raises a clear and perfect idea of what is signified or faulty and signifies no idea, and in that case, we conceive of nothing but the sound of the words.[19]

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17. Stewart Duncan takes this passage, in contrast with my interpretation, to be explained by Hobbes's view that names signify objects (2011: 171). On his interpretation, the reason that 'round quadrangle' is an insignificant compound name is because there is no thing named by 'round quadrangle.' But this passage could be consistent with the view I put forward that 'round quadrangle' is insignificant because though 'round' and 'quadrangle' individually signify ideas, there is no clear idea signified by 'round quadrangle,' and so the words, as Hobbes says, are "meere sounds." I take this, in contrast with Duncan, to be consistent with the passage from *L* v.5, where also Hobbes characterizes as "insignificant" "Words whereby we *conceive* nothing but the sound" (Hobbes 2012: 68, my emphasis).

18. Hobbes's example of this in his exchange with Bramhall is the Molinist conception of a free agent, which I discuss in the next section. Hobbes also ties absurdity explicitly to contradiction in *Elements of Law*, where he says "when from his conclusion a man may, by good ratiocination, derive that which is *contradictory* to any evident truth whatsoever…such a conclusion is called *absurdity"* (EW 4:24), and in *L* xiv.7 (Hobbes 2012: 202).

19. I defer potential explanations of this aspect of Hobbes's view until §4.

3. The Dispute between Bramhall and Hobbes on Proper Definitions

With the relevant background on Hobbes's views on language, ideas, and definitions in place, I turn now to identifying differences in Bramhall's and Hobbes's understandings of proper definitions, which appear at key points in their discussions about liberty.

3.1. Bramhall's Scholastic Characterizations of a "Right Definition" and Hobbes's Critiques

At the start of their published exchange, Bramhall clarifies what his operative notion is not: "by *liberty*, I do neither understand a liberty from sin, nor a liberty from misery, nor a liberty from servitude, nor a liberty from violence" (EW 5:56). He then situates his notion in relation to common scholastic notions:

> But I understand a liberty from necessity, or rather from necessitation; that is, an universal immunity from all inevitability and determination to one; whether it be of *exercise* only, which the Schools call a liberty of *contradiction*…; or whether it be a liberty of *specification and exercise* also, which the Schools call liberty of *contrariety*. (EW 5:56)[20]

Bramhall here uses distinctions to set the stage for his presentation of his understanding of "true liberty" (EW 5:66).

Hobbes dislikes this strategy. He summarizes Bramhall's discussion thus:

> In the next place he maketh certain distinctions of liberty, and says, he means not liberty from sin, nor from servitude, nor from violence, but from necessity, necessitation, inevitability, and determination to one. It had been better to define liberty, than thus to distinguish; for I understand never the more what he means by liberty. And though he says he means liberty from necessitation, yet I understand not how such a liberty can be, and it is a taking of the question without proof. For what else is the question between us but whether such a liberty be possible or not? (EW 5:56)

20. The Scholastic distinction between freedom of contradiction and freedom of contrariety stems from the distinction between the exercise and the specification of an act of a power of the rational soul, found, for instance, in the *Summa theologiae* (Aquinas 1947: II.I. q.9, a.1, resp.). Exercise, or contradiction, has to do with the power to choose or not to choose; specification, or contrariety, has to do with the power to choose one among a number of perceived alternatives.

Hobbes suggests that two problems result from Bramhall's presentation. As we have seen above, because proper definitions raise clear and perfect ideas of what is named in the minds of the listeners, Hobbes thinks providing a definition is more effective in making clear one's own notion than using distinctions. Here, Hobbes says Bramhall's distinctions don't help him understand what Bramhall means by 'liberty.' Furthermore, in claiming about his notion of liberty that it is a liberty from necessity, Bramhall, Hobbes holds, is assuming what is at issue between them "without proof."

When putting forward his own understanding of liberty, Hobbes defines the term: "I conceive liberty to be rightly defined in this manner: —Liberty is the absence of all the impediments to action, that are not contained in the nature, and in the intrinsical quality of the agent" (EW 5:367). Bramhall, of course, denies that Hobbes's definition is the correct definition of liberty. More fundamentally, though, Bramhall objects to what he takes Hobbes to be assuming about what criteria a "right" or proper definition should satisfy:

> How that should be a right definition of liberty, which comprehends neither the genus nor the difference, neither the matter nor form of liberty, which doth not so much as accidentally describe liberty by its marks and tokens; how a real faculty or the elective power should be defined by a negation, or by an absence, is past my understanding, and contrary to all the rules of right reason which I have learned. Negatives cannot explicate the nature of things defined. (EW 5:368)

Bramhall here implies that there are several ways one may provide a proper definition, none of which he says is true of Hobbes's definition of liberty. Bramhall first puts forward the standard scholastic conception of definition according to which a definition provides the genus, which specifies what kind of thing the *definiendum* is, and the difference (*differentia*), which uniquely identifies the *definiendum* within the genus.[21] Another way a definition may properly specify its *definiendum* is by providing the matter and form, which captures the essence of something, rather than "accidentally describing" it.[22] Third, Bramhall also suggests that one cannot properly define something real by expressing it in terms of a negation or absence.

21. This standard Scholastic conception of definition traces back to Aristotle, for example in *Posterior Analytics* II.13 (1994: 64–68).

22. This seems to reference the view that a definition signifies its essence, which on the Aristotelian scholastic conception, is the matter and form. See, e.g., Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, Chapter 2 (2014: 16–21).

Hobbes allows that the first conception of a proper definition is adequate:

> I confess the rule is good, that we ought to define, when it can be done, by using first some more general term, and then by restraining the signification of that general term, till it be the same with that of the word defined. And this general term the School calls *genus*, and the restraint *difference*. (EW 5:370–371)

And he claims, in opposition to Bramhall's critique, that his definition of liberty satisfies this conception:

> But it is to little purpose that he requires in a definition so exactly the genus and the difference, seeing he does not know them when they are there. For in this my definition of liberty, the genus is absence of impediments to action; and the difference or restriction is that they be not contained in the nature of the agent. (EW 5:371)

Hobbes here renders his definition of 'liberty' into the language of the traditional scholastic genus-species conception of definitions. This, he thinks, is akin to resolving a name into its most universal parts: in *De Corpore*, where he says that if we have names that are compounded conceptions, "the definition is nothing but a resolution of that name into its most universal parts…so that definitions of this kind always consist of *genus* and *difference*" (*De corpore* 6.14 / EW 1:83).[23]

Hobbes rejects the second conception of a proper definition, which requires providing the matter and form: "Matter is body, that is to say, corporeal substance, and subject to dimension ... . But it is impossible that matter should be part of a definition, whose parts are only words" (EW 5:371). This critique, relying on Hobbes's materialism, would be rejected out of hand by Bramhall. But Hobbes provides a different critique of the scholastic conception in *De corpore* 2.5, which relies not on his materialism, but on his views about language and signification:

> But seeing names ordered in speech (as is defined) are signs of conceptions [*signa sunt conceptuum*], it is manifest that they are not signs of the things themselves; for that the sound of this word stone should be the sign of a stone, cannot be understood in any sense but this, that he that hears it collects that he that pronounces it thinks of a stone. And, there-

23. Martine Pécharman argues that in his response to Bramhall, Hobbes is not endorsing a particularly scholastic conception of definition, but instead understanding 'genus' and 'difference' as "names more or less general" (2016: 27). She sees this as part of Hobbes's more general project of providing a "nominalist reductionist reinterpretation" of "scholastic realist terminology" (2016: 28), not "to introduce a new anti-Aristotelian logical lexicon" (2016: 30).

> fore, that disputation, *whether names signify the matter or form*, or composite [*compositum*], and other like subtleties of the metaphysics, is kept up by erring men, and such as understand not the words they dispute about. (EW 1:17 / *DC* 1655:10, emended, my emphasis).

In the passage above and Hobbes's other official statements about signification,[24] names signify conceptions or ideas, not the objects themselves. It follows, on this view, that there is no reason to uphold Bramhall's requirement that definitions provide the matter and the form, which are features of things themselves.

As for the third point, that a negation cannot constitute a proper definition of something real, Hobbes dismisses it, mockingly:

> If the word defined signify an absence or negation, I hope he would not have me define it by a presence or affirmation. Such a word is liberty; for it signifieth freedom from impediments, which is all one with the absence of impediments, as I have defined it. And if this be contrary to all the rules of right reason, that is to say, of logic, that he hath learned, I should advise him to read some other logic than he hath yet read, or consider better those he did read when he was a young man and could less understand them. (EW 5:371–372)

Hobbes here provides no justification for his rejection of Bramhall's third requirement, but instead recommends Bramhall revisit his understanding of logic. But Hobbes's view on the relation between definitions, names, and conceptions discussed in §2 illuminates why Hobbes thinks Bramhall's position is preposterous. Recall that Hobbes holds that definitions take away equivocation by explicating in language the idea of which a name serves as a sign. Hobbes disagrees with Bramhall's understanding of liberty as "a real faculty or the elective power" (EW 5:368), and in his view, there is no principled reason for why a definition formulated in terms of absences or negations would fail to fix on a determinate idea. Indeed, the definition of 'motion,' one of Hobbes's paradigm examples of a definition in *De corpore*, involves a privation, a kind of absence: "he that conceives *motion* aright, cannot but know that *motion is the privation of one place, and the acquisition of another*" (*De corpore* 6.6 / EW 1:70).

24. Stewart Duncan argues that there's a general pattern to Hobbes's discussions about the signification of names: that when he's presenting his theory of signification, names signify ideas, but outside of this context, names signify the things they name (2011). See Abizadeh (2015) for arguments against this view.

3.2. Hobbes's Criteria of a "Right Definition"

Hobbes proposes two criteria for a proper definition at different points in his exchanges with Bramhall. In his response to Bramhall's characterizations of a proper definition, Hobbes initially suggests that a right definition is that which supplies a clear and constant meaning:

> A right definition is that which determineth the signification of the word defined, to the end that in the discourse where it is used, the meaning of it may be constant and without equivocation. This is the measure of a definition, and intelligible to an English reader. (EW 5:370)

This proposal is consistent with his account in *De corpore* of the properties of a definition, where, as we have seen, he says a definition "takes away equivocation" (*De corpore* 6.15 / EW 1:84).

In *Of Liberty and Necessity*, Hobbes had suggested a seemingly distinct criterion of a proper definition: that the proposed definition not imply a contradiction. He critiques the Molinist definition of a free agent on these grounds:[25]

> I hold that ordinary definition of a free agent, namely, that a free agent is that, which when all things are present which are needful to produce the effect, can nevertheless not produce it, implies a contradiction, and is nonsense; being as much as to say, the cause may be sufficient, that is necessary, and yet the effect not follow. (EW 5:385)

Hobbes's critique here is confusing. He seems to be equating necessary and sufficient conditions, but the Molinist definition is making a claim only about what is necessary.[26] Indeed, Bramhall takes offense at Hobbes's charge: Bramhall says he is only following the scholastic definition, and "doth [Hobbes] think that all these spake nonsense: or had no more judgment than to contradict themselves in a definition? He might much better suspect himself than censure so many" (EW 5:385). Regardless of the soundness of Hobbes's reasoning, it is clear that Hobbes thinks that the problem with the Molinist definition is that it implies a contradiction.

25. Francisco Suárez provides an influential formulation in his *Metaphysical Disputations* 19.4.1: "a free cause is one which, given that all the things required for acting have been posited, is able to act and able not to act" (1587/1994: 314).

26. Vere Chappell points out that Hobbes holds that a necessary cause is a necessitating cause, not a necessitated cause (1999: xvi). And by "all things which are needful to produce the effect" he may mean conditions which are individually necessary and jointly sufficient. On this interpretation, he wouldn't be making the logical mistake the natural reading of the passage suggests. Thanks to Nick Jolley for clarification on this point.

Hobbes's views on the relationships between definitions, language, and conceptions discussed in §2 illuminates this criterion of a proper definition. This is a case of the kind of absurdity where a proposed definition, by amounting to a contradiction, must be false and cannot signify any ideas in the mind. Hobbes might have in mind this kind of absurdity when he says in *Leviathan*:

> When men speak such words, as put together, have in them no signification at all; but are fallen upon by some, through misunderstanding of the words they have received, and repeat by rote; by others, from intention to deceive by obscurity. And this is incident to none but those, that converse in questions of matters incomprehensible, as the Schoole-men. (*L* viii.27 / Hobbes 2012: 122)

The Scholastic writings on free will is one example Hobbes specifically notes of this kind of absurdity, where "their words are without any thing correspondent to them in the mind" (*L* viii.27 / Hobbes 2012: 122).[27]

I have shown that while Hobbes rejects two of the scholastic conceptions of definitions that Bramhall puts forward, he accepts one common understanding of proper definitions, the genus-species conception, because it doesn't differ substantively from his understanding of definitions as resolving names into their most universal parts. But, more fundamentally, Hobbes's responses to Bramhall and his own positive criteria of a proper definition reveal the underlying significance of his view that the function of proper definitions is to signify clear ideas, as put forward in *De corpore* and *Leviathan*.

4. Why Definitions Need no Demonstration: Three Hobbesian Explanations

One additional aspect of Hobbes's theory of definitions needs clarification before we are in a position to assess the strength of the argument from experience. Recall that in Hobbes's elaboration of the argument, he makes a claim about the nature of definitions:

> Definitions being the beginning of all demonstration, cannot themselves be demonstrated, that is, proved to another man; all that can be done, is either to put him in mind what those words signify commonly in the

27. Hobbes provides as other examples of "any one chapter concerning any difficult point" from Scholastic texts "the Trinity; the Deity; the nature of Christ; Transubstantiation" (*L* viii.27 / Hobbes 2012: 122).

> matter whereof they treat, or if the words be unusual, to make the definitions of them true by mutual consent in their signification. (EW 5:397)

Definitions are "principles, or primary propositions" (*De corpore* 6.14 / EW 1:83), the starting points of demonstration, which Hobbes explains as "a syllogism, or a series of syllogisms, derived and continued, from the definitions of names, to the last conclusion" (*De corpore* 6.16 / EW 1:86). Demonstrations are truth-preserving, so if the principles we begin with are true, then the conclusions we arrive at will also be true: Hobbes says, "if true definitions were premised in all sorts of doctrines, the demonstrations also would be true" (*De corpore* 6.16 / EW 1:87). But definitions, as Hobbes says in the passage above "cannot themselves be demonstrated" and in *De corpore*, "need no demonstration" (*De corpore* 6.12 / EW 1:81). The fundamental issue for making sense of why Hobbes holds that the argument from experience constitutes a demonstration is, then, on what grounds Hobbes might hold that definitions need no demonstration.[28]

On one view in the early modern period, principles need no demonstration because they are self-evident, made known to us through a special mental faculty responsible for providing us with access to their truth.[29] What Hobbes says, at times, might seem sympathetic to this view. His stated rationale for why principles need no demonstration is that "they are known by nature [*sint nota naturae*]" (*De corpore* 6.12 / EW 1:80 / *DC* 1655:49), where this is just what we say when things are "manifest of themselves [*manifestae…per se*]" (*De corpore* 6.5 / EW 1:69 / *DC* 1655: 43).[30]

But this is not Hobbes's view. In his discussions of definitions, he provides several distinct explanations for why a definition needs no demonstration. But, as I will show, only one of these explanations is a plausible candidate for making

28. On standard scholastic views on demonstration, tracing back to Aristotle, an explanation of why definitions need no demonstration is unnecessary. Definitions, as first principles, are indemonstrable truths, and thus, nothing further needs to be said. Thanks to Monte Johnson and Sam Rickless for their emphasis on and discussion of this point. But this is not Hobbes's position: he provides different rationales for why definitions need no demonstration, as I go on to discuss in the rest of this section. Furthermore, even if on such views on demonstration, there is no further explanation of why first principles need no demonstration, those views provide explanations of how one acquires knowledge of the first principles, which may tacitly function as part of an explanation of why they need no demonstration (as seen in my discussion of the self-evidence view in the next paragraph). See Longeway (2021: §7) on this.

29. What Descartes says at times suggests he holds this view, although because "primary notions" of a certain kind (metaphysical ones) conflict with our preconceived opinions, it takes substantive philosophical work to see that they are self-evident. See Descartes's remarks in the Second Replies on this (1984: 111).

30. McNeilly characterizes Hobbes as holding a self-evidence theory in *De corpore* on the basis of this passage, but he says that Hobbes provides no illumination of how we know these principles (1968: 62–63). See Gauthier (1997: 513–514) and Adams (2014: 41–43), for arguments against McNeilly's view.

sense of the argument from experience. In the rest of this section, I will briefly survey Hobbes's explanations and, in conjunction with §5, argue that the third explanation, his view of definitions as "explications of our simplest conceptions," is the best candidate for making sense of why definitions involved in the discussions about liberty need no demonstration.

4.1. Definitions Are True by Agreement

Hobbes, at times, says that definitions are true in virtue of the agreement of the speakers who use the defined terms. In *De corpore*, he says, "the truth of the first principles of our ratiocination, namely definitions, is made and constituted by ourselves, whilst we consent and agree about the appellations of things" (*De corpore* 25.1 / EW 1:388).[31] In his elaboration of the argument from experience, he says that in cases of "unusual" words, "all that can be done…is to make the definitions of them true by mutual consent in their signification" (EW 5:385).

Though there are thorny issues involved in making sense of these statements in other contexts,[32] this account can be quickly dispatched as an explanation for why the definitions of terms involved in debates about liberty need no demonstration. There is no reason to hold that Hobbes takes the terms in the debate about liberty to be "unusual." Both Bramhall and Hobbes assume that they are using a common set of terms with meanings about which they can argue and disagree. Hobbes at times even refers to the ordinary usage of terms in the dispute, for example, 'spontaneity,' which he characterizes as a word "in common use" (EW 5:92).[33] It is improbable that Hobbes would consider words "in common use" to be "unusual."[34]

4.2. Generative Definitions

In *De corpore*, Hobbes gives another explanation of why some definitions need no demonstration. There are certain names, he says, "that signify things as have some conceiveable cause," things such as "*such a body*, *such and so great motion*, *so great magnitude*, such figure, and whatsoever we can distinguish one body

31. See also (*De corpore* 3.9 / EW 1:37).

32. See fn 10 for references to the literature in the debate about conventionalism in Hobbes's philosophy of science. See Hoekstra (2006: 32–37) for discussion and critique of a conventionalist interpretation of Hobbes's political philosophy.

33. In that passage, Hobbes also discusses the ordinary usage of the terms 'will' and 'appetite' (EW 5:93).

34. As to whether Hobbes is accurate in characterizing his views as aligned with ordinary usage as evidenced by non-philosophical English dictionaries of his day, see Gellera (2020).

from another by" (*De corpore* 6.13 / EW 1:81). Definitions of things which we conceive to have some cause need no demonstration because the definitions are "generative." Generative definitions provide instructions for constructing what the definition is of:

> Definitions of things, which may be understood to have some cause, must consist of such names as express the cause or manner of their generation, as when we define a circle to be a figure made by the circumduction of a straight line in a plane, etc. (*De corpore* 6.13 / EW 1:81–82)

The definition of a circle explains how to construct the figure itself: we take a straight line and rotate it around a fixed point in a plane. It is because we have "maker's knowledge" of the truth of definitions such as this one that they need no demonstration. For generative definitions, we "make the truth of our definitions by our ability to carry out the operations they require," as David Gauthier puts it."[35]

This explanation of why definitions need no demonstration would not be helpful for terms involved in the dispute between Hobbes and Bramhall. Terms such as 'liberty,' 'spontaneity,' 'free agent,' and so on, differ in at least two significant ways from Hobbes's examples of names that have generative definitions. First, unlike the names Hobbes gives as examples, they are general and do not specify particular instances, which seems to be one marker of names that have generative definitions as opposed to those that do not (as I will discuss shortly).[36] Second, terms involved in the dispute about liberty do not refer to the kinds of things that can be constructed.[37]

4.3. Definitions as "Explications of Our Simplest Conceptions"

Hobbes mentions a second kind of definition in *De corpore*, definitions of "things of which we can conceive no cause at all," for example, "*body*, or *matter*, *quantity*, or *extension*, *motion*, and whatsoever is common to all matter" (*De corpore* 6.13 / EW 1:81). Hobbes explains that names of this sort:

35. Gauthier (1997: 514). See Gauthier (1997) for the fullest statement and defense of this interpretation.

36. Generative definitions are about particulars in the sense that when we construct what the definition is of, we need to consider a particular thing in the construction. In the example of the circle above, in order to construct a circle, we need to consider a particular line that we then rotate in a plane around a fixed point.

37. This may mark the difference between *scientia* (geometry and civil philosophy) and domains that don't constitute *scientia* for Hobbes. See Adams (2019: 14–19) on this.

> are well enough defined, when, by speech as short as may be, we raise in the mind of the hearer perfect and clear ideas or conceptions [*conceptus*] of the things named, as when we define motion to be *the leaving of one place, and the acquiring of another continually*; for though no thing moved, nor any cause of motion be in that definition, yet, at the hearing of that speech, there will come into the mind of the hearer an *idea* of motion clear enough. (*De corpore* 6.13 / EW 1:81 / *DC* 1655:50)

Definitions of this kind, in contrast with the first, are not of particulars ("no thing moved"), and it seems to be on this basis that they are not generative. In contrast with the definition of a circle, for which we must consider rotating a particular straight line to generate a circle, the definition of motion does not require us to consider any particular thing as being in motion.[38] The truth of these kinds of definition, therefore, needs another explanation.

Definitions of things of which we conceive no cause like body, motion, and the like are true because they "are nothing but the explication of our simplest conceptions [*conceptuum nostrorum simplicissimorum explicationes*]" (*De corpore* 6.6 / *DC* 1655:44). For Hobbes, a "conception" is not the result of purely intellectual activity.[39] Instead, we arrive at conceptions through sense perception. Hobbes often uses 'conception' along with 'imagination,'[40] 'phantasm' (*De corpore* 2.9 / EW 1:20), and 'idea,'[41] where all three latter terms are understood as deriving from sense perception.[42] In a passage at the beginning of *Leviathan*, Hobbes explicitly connects 'conception' with sense perception: "The Originall of [all appearances], is that which we call SENSE; (For there is no conception in a mans mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense)" (*L* i.2 / Hobbes 2012: 22). And in his earlier *Elements of Law*, Hobbes says that conceptions are produced by our senses (EW 4:28). Though Hobbes does not detail the mechanism by which we acquire these simplest conceptions, his examples make clear that we acquire them somehow through sense

38. I agree here with Marcus Adams: see his discussion of Hobbes on this point and more broadly on definitions of this kind in *De corpore* (2014: 43–49).

39. See Sacksteder (1978: 37–38), for a detailed analysis of Hobbes's understanding and usage of 'conception,' as well as informative discussions of Hobbes on 'imagination,' 'sense,' 'fancy,' and 'idea.'

40. In *Human Nature*, Hobbes uses 'conception' in his definition of imagination: "Imagination being, to define it, conception remaining, and by little and little decay from and after the act of sense" (EW 4:9).

41. See above quote, EW 1:81, as well as "*ideam sive conceptum*" from *De homine* (OL II, 88).

42. "IMAGINATION therefore is nothing else but sense decaying, or weakened, by the absence of the object" (*De corpore* 25.7 / EW 1:396); "a phantasm is the act of sense, and differs no otherwise from sense than *fieri*, that is, being a doing, differs from *factum esse*, that is, being done" (*De corpore* 25.3 / EW 1:392); see the thought experiment of the man remaining after the annihilation of the world (*De corpore* 7.1 / EW 1:91–92).

experience of bodies. As we've seen, he generally characterizes many of them as "whatsoever is common to all matter," and it is through our interactions with bodies that we then acquire the simplest conceptions of body, matter, motion, place, and so on.

Hobbes thinks that upon hearing names of this sort, clear ideas straightforwardly arise in the mind of the listener (*De corpore* 6.13 / EW 1:81–82). Definitions of these kinds of names, as first principles, are in this sense "manifest of themselves" (*De corpore* 6.5 / EW 1:69) or "known by nature":

> And seeing teaching is nothing but leading the mind of him we teach, to the knowledge of our discoveries [*inventorum cognitionem*], in that track [*vestigia*] by which we attained the same with our own mind; therefore, the same method that served for our discovery [*fuerat investigandi*], will serve also for demonstration to others saving that we omit the first part of method which proceeded from the sense of things to universal principles, which, because they are principles, cannot be demonstrated; and seeing they are known by nature, (as was said above in the 5th article) they need no demonstration, though they need explication. (*De corpore* 6.12 / EW 1:80–81, modified / *DC* 1655:49)[43]

Hobbes says earlier in *De corpore* that that "the method of teaching" is "of demonstration" (*De corpore* 6.10 / EW 1:79). So, demonstration consists in leading others down the same mental path ("the track") that we ourselves took when we learned what the causes of any given effect were, what Hobbes calls "the method of discovery [*inveniendi methodo*]" (*De corpore* 6.10 / *DC* 1655:49). But Hobbes clarifies that the first part of demonstration, the path from sense to definitions, cannot be demonstrated, and indeed needs no demonstration, because definitions are "nothing but the explication of our simplest conceptions" (*De corpore* 6.6 / *DC* 1655:44), those basic conceptions we acquire through sense experience.

5. Illuminating the Argument from Experience

In this section, I aim to illuminate the argument from experience. I first show the interpretive promise for the argument from experience of the third candidate explanation, definitions as explications of our simplest conceptions. This view clarifies the exchanges between Hobbes and Bramhall related to the argument

43. I follow Martinich on Hobbes (1655/1981) in his translation of Part 1 of *De Corpore* (*Computatio sive Logica*) in translating *inventire* and its associated cognates as "to discover" rather than "to invent," which might wrongly imply that Hobbes thinks that we simply make up, without any basis, what we come to understand through the method of discovery.

from experience. Further, it highlights significant differences between Hobbes and Bramhall on how our minds connect with extra-mental reality, where the possibility of error arises, and their stances toward the common usage of terms. I suggest that these interpretive benefits (combined with the considerations from §4) make the proposed account the most promising explanation of why definitions involved in the discussions of liberty need no demonstration.

Here, again, is Hobbes's initial statement of the argument from experience:

> There can no other proof be offered but every man's own experience, by reflecting on himself, and remembering what he useth to have in his mind, that is, what he himself meaneth, when he saith, an action is spontaneous, a man deliberates, such is his will, that agent or that action is free. (EW 5:389)

On the interpretation I have proposed, proper signification occurs, in contrast with nonsense or absurdity, when names such as 'liberty' and the like (just like names such as 'body,' 'matter,' 'motion,' and 'place') signify conceptions we have acquired from sense experience, which their definitions then explicate.

What Hobbes says later in the same paragraph suggests he might hold this underlying view of the relation between language and conception:

> To those that out of custom speak not what they conceive, but what they hear, and are not able or will not take the pains to consider what they think, when they hear such words, no argument can be sufficient; because experience and matter of fact are not verified by other men's arguments, but *by every man's own sense and memory*. For example, how can it be proved that to love a thing and to think it good are all one, to a man that does not mark his own meaning by those words? Or how can it be proved that eternity is not *nunc stans*,[44] to a man that says those words by custom, and never considers how he can conceive the thing itself in his mind? (EW 5:390, my emphasis)

Hobbes here distinguishes between those whose speech reflects "what they conceive" and those who, instead, speak "what they hear" out of custom. For the latter, no argument can convince them because the only way to make sure that what one says corresponds to a clear idea in one's mind is by one's "own sense and memory." As examples, in this passage Hobbes refers to claims about the identity between 'loving something' and 'thinking it good' and the distinction

44. 'Nunc stans' literally translated is "standing present." Hobbes is referring to a notion of eternity as present (tensed) instant outside time.

between 'eternity' and '*nunc stans*.' To someone who holds that eternity is *nunc stans,* the opposite cannot be proven because they do not inspect whether their words correspond to a conception in their own minds.

One central difference, then, between Hobbes and Bramhall is whether it is sense or reason that allows us access to the "true nature of things." Bramhall objects to the argument from experience as follows:

> The true natures of things are not to be judged by the private *ideas*, or conceptions of men, but by their causes and formal reasons. Ask an ordinary person what *upwards* signifies, and whether our antipodes have their heads upwards or downwards; and he will not stick to tell you, that if his head be upwards, theirs must needs be downwards. And this is because he knows not the formal reason thereof; that the heavens encircle the earth, and what is towards heaven is upwards…. I might give a hundred such like instances. He who leaves the conduct of his understanding to follow vulgar notions, shall plunge himself into a thousand errors; like him who leaves a certain guide to follow an *ignis fatuus*, or a will-with-the-wisp.[45] So [Hobbes's] proposition ['That which a man conceives in his mind by these words, "spontaneity", "deliberation", etc., that they are.'] is false.[46] (EW 5:391)

Bramhall identifies the "private ideas or conceptions of men" with "vulgar notions" and the ideas of "ordinary persons." He thinks there's no reason that an ordinary person would understand the causes and formal reasons that underlie the meanings of terms, even everyday terms such as 'upwards.' Reason, not sense, allows us to access those causes and thereby the true natures of things, and so it is by reason that we determine the proper signification of words: he says, "Whether we hear such words or not, is matter of fact; and sense is the proper judge of it: but what these words do, or ought truly to signify, is not to be judged by sense but by reason" (EW 5:391–392).

Hobbes, in contrast, thinks that the relation between the world and our minds, mediated by sense, is unproblematic, at least for the category of simplest

45. *Ignis fatuus* or "will-with-the-wisp" (more commonly, 'will-o'-the-wisp') is an atmospheric light seen floating at night over marshy ground thought to be due to the ignition of gas produced by organic decay. Appearing in European folklore, *ignis fatuus* would often lead travelers astray by drawing them in one direction, vanishing when approached, and then appearing in another location. See the Oxford English Dictionary entry for '*ignis fatuus*.'

46. The proposition that I provide here is Bramhall's own characterization of Hobbes's initial statement of the argument from experience in *Of Liberty and Necessity* from earlier in the passage (EW 5:391).

conceptions.[47] For Hobbes, the gap between language and our conceptions is the primary locus of error:

> Naturall sense and imagination, are not subject to absurdity. Nature it selfe cannot erre: and as men abound in copiousnesse of language; so they become more wise, or more mad than ordinary…. For words are wise mens counters, they do but reckon by them; but they are the mony of fooles, that value them by the authority of an *Aristotle*, a *Cicero*, or a *Thomas*, or any other Doctor whatsoever, if but a man. (*L* iv.13 / Hobbes 2012: 56–58)

Language, on Hobbes's view, is a double-edged sword. Without it, we cannot reason properly (*De corpore* 2.1 / EW 1:13),[48] but used improperly, language makes us "more mad than ordinary" and "fools."[49] When we speak properly, our language corresponds to the conceptions we've acquired from sense (and memory). Hobbes thinks we go wrong when our speech fails to signify any conception. This may happen when we parrot back what we've heard others say without realizing that we lack any conception of what we are saying. He says, of Bramhall:

> The ground of all his errors in philosophy…is this; that he thinketh, when he repeateth the words of a proposition in his mind, that is, when he fancieth the words without speaking them, that then he conceiveth the things which the words signify: and this is the most general cause of false opinions. For men can never be deceived in the conceptions of things, though they may be, and are most often deceived by giving unto them wrong terms or appellations, different from those which are commonly used and constituted to signify their conceptions. (EW 5:299–300)

This view of the error to which language makes us susceptible underlies Hobbes's response to Bramhall's claim that "the true natures of things are not to be judged by the private ideas or conceptions of men, but by their causes and formal reasons" (EW 5:391):

47. For some of our ideas, such as secondary qualities, Hobbes doesn't hold that we should simply accept what they seem to represent. See Adams (2023) and Leijenhorst (2007).

48. Hobbes also puts forward this view in *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*. There he claims that language, not differences in deliberation, is what makes human beings better at reasoning than "beasts" (EW 5:95).

49. See Philip Pettit (2009) on other, more far-ranging benefits and problems that the "invention of language" (2009: 25) has led to.

> What will he answer, if I should ask him, how he will judge of the causes of things, whereof he hath no idea or conception in his own mind? It is therefore impossible to give a true definition of any word without the idea of the thing which that word signifieth, or not according to that idea or conception. Here again he discovereth the true cause why he and other Schoolmen so often speak absurdly. For they speak without conception of the things, and by rote, one receiving what he saith from another by tradition, from some puzzled divine or philosopher, that to decline a difficulty speaks in such manner as not to be understood. (EW 5:397)

It is clear from this response that for Hobbes, we have access to the nature of things by possessing accurate conceptions of those things. The error Bramhall—and the members of the Scholastic tradition he adopts—makes is that he simply repeats definitions of terms without realizing the words correspond to no conceptions in his mind, and thus, he speaks without any understanding of the true natures of things.[50]

Though Hobbes thinks that language is a possible significant source of error, the passages discussed show that main kind of error he has in mind results from using language in ways that rely on tradition or the authority of men alone. Hobbes thinks that common usage, the way ordinary people use terms, reflects proper definitions. This is another point of disagreement with Bramhall, who, as we saw, holds that common usage of terms is not an accurate guide to the definitions of those terms, because he doesn't think that an "ordinary person" (EW 5:391) understands the causes and formal reasons that underlie the meanings of even everyday words like 'upwards.'

Hobbes suggests that departures from common usage is where error can creep in: he says, "[men] may be, and are most often deceived by giving unto [the conceptions of things] wrong terms or appellations, different from those which are commonly used and constituted to signify their conceptions" (EW 5:299–300). This, we've seen, is Hobbes's diagnosis of the primary error of Bramhall and other Scholastics—departing from common usage, they speak "by rote," "receiving what he saith from another by tradition" (EW 5:397), not realizing that their words correspond to no conceptions in their own minds.

Hobbes explicitly connects definitions to common usage in his elaboration of the argument from experience. [51] After his claim that definitions cannot be dem-

50. The question naturally arises of how to check whether or not we have a conception corresponding to the words. Marcus Adams states that, according to Hobbes, "meditation" allows us to see this. He cites Hobbes's discussion of those who "by their own meditation, arrive to the acknowledgment of one Infinite, Omnipotent, and Eternall God, chose rather to confess he is Incomprehensible, and above their understanding" (*L* xii.7 / Hobbes 2012: 168), rather than acknowledging that they have no corresponding conception (Adams 2019: 7).

51. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for emphasizing this point.

onstrated, he says for words other than those that are "unusual," "all that can be done, is…to put him in mind what those words *signify commonly* in the matter whereof they treat" (EW 5:397, my emphasis). The reason why this is appropriate is because common usage properly manifests the signification of ordinary names. Earlier in *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity and Chance*, as support for his understanding of terms in the debate, Hobbes specifically mentions "the common people, on whose arbitration dependeth the signification of words in common use" (EW 5:92).

6. A Re-Assessment of the Argument from Experience

I have proposed that Hobbes can hold that experience constitutes a legitimate proof of the nature of liberty (and associated notions) because in virtue of having sense experience, we acquire the simplest conception of liberty. By reflection and memory, we see that 'liberty' and other names in the debate correspond to clear conceptions in our minds, which we explicate through proper definitions. Reflection and memory can also show us that our claims about liberty and our definitions do not correspond to any conceptions but are mere words that we repeat on the basis of tradition or custom alone.

6.1. How Might Liberty Be One of Hobbes's Simplest Conceptions?

On this interpretation of the argument from experience, the plausibility of the argument hangs on the plausibility of the view that liberty is one of the simplest conceptions we acquire from sense experience. If, for the sake of argument, we grant Hobbes his own examples of simplest conceptions and his definition of liberty, this view turns out to be less farfetched than it might seem at the start.

Key examples of simplest conceptions in *De corpore* include body, place, and motion. He says of the latter two:

> He who rightly conceives of *place* [*locum…recte concipit*], cannot be ignorant of this definition, *place is that space which is possessed or filled adequately by some body*; and so, he that conceives *motion* aright, cannot but know that *motion is the privation of one place, and the acquisition of another*. (*De corpore* 12.6 / EW 1:70, modified / *DC* 1655:44)

If simplest conceptions are those that we acquire in virtue of having any sense experience, it makes sense, on Hobbes's view, that body, place, and

motion are paradigm cases. Hobbes holds that the cause of our sense perceptions are external bodies impinging on us, which thereby cause motions in our bodies that appear to us as colors, sounds, odors, and the like (*L* i.4 / Hobbes 2012: 22–24).[52] Whenever we have any sense experience whatsoever, what we are sensing, ultimately, are bodies changing places—that is, bodies in motion.

Liberty, then, understood in Hobbes's sense in his debate with Bramhall, could likewise be a conception we acquire through sense experience. The clearest formulation of the definition of 'liberty' that would align with this account is one he provides in *Leviathan*: "LIBERTY, or FREEDOME, signifieth (properly) the absence of Opposition; (by Opposition, I mean externall Impediments of motion)" (*L* xxi.1 / Hobbes 2012: 324).[53] If we acquire the simplest conceptions of bodies, motion, and place in virtue of having sense experience, though Hobbes does not say this, presumably on the same basis, we could also acquire the conception of liberty. Since the definition of liberty contains within it an explicit reference to motion, it seems plausible that the conception of liberty derives from conceptions of body, motion, and place. Hobbes claims that when liberty is not understood in his sense, people misapply the terms: "when the words *Free*, and *Liberty*, are applyed to any thing but *Bodies*, they are abused; for that which is not subject to Motion, is not subject to Impediment" (*L* xxi.2 / Hobbes 2012: 324).

This understanding of the connection between liberty and other simplest conceptions highlights the connection between Hobbes's definition of liberty and his broader metaphysics. If, as according to Hobbes's materialism, all things are bodies in motion, and motion is the ultimate *explanans*, it makes sense that that liberty too is construed in terms of motion, as the absence of impediments to motion. An implication of Hobbes's definition is that liberty is something not only rational beings possess, but even "Irrationall, and Inanimate creatures" (*L* xxi.1 / Hobbes 2012: 324) such as birds and rivers (EW 5:40–41). Bramhall takes this feature to be a problem for Hobbes's understanding of liberty, calling it "a brutish liberty" (EW 5:40) and "a ridiculous liberty" (EW 5:41). But as an indi-

52. See Leijenhorst (2007) for discussion of Hobbes's understanding of sense perception and the ways in which his understanding challenges traditional scholastic views.

53. Hobbes offers different definitions of liberty, as many have discussed, but the *Leviathan* formulation of liberty "in the proper sense" (*L* xxi.6 / Hobbes 2012: 328) aligns with the target definition in his debate with Bramhall: "Liberty is the absence of all the impediments to action, that are not contained in the nature, and in the intrinsical quality of the agent" (EW 5:367), where 'action' is understood broadly to include the motion of inanimate objects, such as water, Hobbes's main example (EW 5:367–368). The literature on liberty in Hobbes's political philosophy is vast and the issues in play lie beyond the scope of this paper. See Skinner (1990) and Pettit (2005) for influential discussions of Hobbes's various definitions of liberty in the context of his political project.

cation of the coherence of Hobbes's views on liberty with his metaphysics as a whole, it is a virtue of his view.

6.2. How Are the Simplest Conceptions Guaranteed to be Veracious?

I've argued that it's not implausible that by Hobbes's own lights, liberty is one of the simplest conceptions. On this interpretation, Hobbes has the resources for a response to Bramhall's objection to the argument from experience. Bramhall's objection amounts to a metaphysical concern, that "private notions and conceptions which we have in our minds" (EW 5:390) bear no connection to "the true natures of things" (EW 5:391), and it's because of this lack of connection between our minds and reality that conceptions are not the proper starting point of a demonstration. But if liberty is indeed a Hobbesian "simplest conception," as I've suggested, the conception of liberty is not causally isolated from extra-mental reality. Anyone can, in principle, acquire the simplest conception of liberty simply in virtue of interacting with the bodies that make up all of reality.

A different problem—an *epistemic* problem—with the argument from experience emerges. Why would the simplest conceptions we gain by sense experience of bodies be guaranteed to be veracious? As I have discussed, in contrast with Bramhall, Hobbes seems to assume that at least in the case of our simplest conceptions, sense experience unproblematically allows us to acquire "perfect and clear ideas or conceptions of the things named" (*De corpore* 6.13 / EW 1:81). Though the view that we acquire ideas by sense experience is plausible and by no means unique to Hobbes, nowhere does Hobbes explain how those ideas are guaranteed to accurately reflect the nature of reality, which would seem to be a key issue in an argument conceived as a proof of the nature of liberty.[54]

Perhaps this oversight simply highlights Hobbes's preoccupation with providing causal explanations of sense perception and other mental phenomena compatible with the mechanical philosophy and his materialism.[55] In *De corpore*, Hobbes says that sense "in the sentient, can be nothing else but motion in some of the internal parts of the sentient; and the parts so moved are parts of the organs of sense" (*De corpore* 25.2 / EW 1:390). His discussions of sense perception and other significant aspects of human psychology—imagination, dreams, appetites, and aversions—in *Leviathan* too focus on mental phenomena not from a first-person perspective, but in terms of motions in the body. If Hobbes's main objective is to explain how mental experience arises rather than what it is like, and all

54. Thanks to Jacob Zellmer for helpful discussion on the difference between Bramhall's objection and what I am calling the epistemic problem.

55. See Gert (1996) and Leijenhorst (2007) on this.

of mental experience is reduced to matter in motion, then the gap between what is and how things seem to us might easily drop out of the account.[56]

6.3. Why are Hobbes's Definitions the Proper Definitions?

Even if we grant Hobbes the preceding two points—that liberty is one of the simplest conceptions everyone can acquire through sense experience and that those conceptions are veracious—on what basis can he hold that his own definitions properly explicate them?[57]

As I've discussed, Hobbes holds that common usage properly reflects the signification of words that are not "unusual." Since 'liberty' and other terms involved in the debate are not unusual, we should turn to common usage, which, he argues, supports his definitions of the terms. Hobbes highlights common usage explicitly in defense of his definition of 'spontaneity,' one of the terms listed in the argument from experience. In the following passage from *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, parts of which I quoted earlier, Hobbes argues that common usage of 'spontaneity' aligns with his understanding of the term:

> I desire the reader to take notice, that the common people, on whose arbitration dependeth the signification of words in common use, among the Latins and the Greeks did call all actions and motions whereof they did perceive no cause, spontaneous and αυτοματα [automatic]: I say, not those actions which had no causes; for all actions have their causes; but those actions whose causes they did not perceive. So that spontaneous, as a general name, comprehended many actions and motions of inanimate creatures; as the falling of heavy things downwards, which they thought spontaneous, and that if they were not hindered, they would descend of their *own accord*. (EW 5:92–93)

Hobbes points out that ordinary people use the term 'spontaneity' in the same way he does—to refer to actions and motions of which no cause is perceived and therefore applicable not only to animate but also inanimate things. This

56. Cees Leijenhorst's diagnosis is that Hobbes thinks causal dependence, not representation, is the relevant relation between mind and world: "Hobbes consistently tries to explain 'appearance' itself, the wondrous phenomenon that our ideas represent the world in terms of causal dependence on the world of matter in motion. In other words, Hobbes tries to reduce intentionality to a mechanical phenomenon" (2007: 93).

57. I am grateful to anonymous reviewer for this journal for emphasizing this problem for the argument from experience and suggesting the following general line of response.

is important to clarify because if the term were reserved for actions that lack causes, common usage would conflict with his views about necessity and its relation to liberty.

In the earlier *Of Liberty and Necessity*, Hobbes also invokes common usage in his discussion of his definition of liberty. After presenting his definition (how he "conceive[s] liberty to be rightly defined" (EW 5:367)), Hobbes gives examples to show that common usage—what "is said," what "men never say," and what "we say"—supports his definition:

> Liberty is the absence of all the impediments to action, that are not contained in the nature, and in the intrinsical quality of the agent. As for example, the water is said to descend freely, or to have liberty to descend by the channel of the river, because there is no impediment that way; but not across, because the banks are impediments. And though water cannot ascend, yet men never say it wants the liberty to ascend, but the faculty or power; because the impediment is in the nature of the water and intrinsical. So also we say, he that is tied wants the liberty to go, because the impediment is not in him, but in his bonds; whereas we say not so of him that is sick or lame, because the impediment is in himself. (EW 5:367–368)

The example of the river shows that 'liberty' is ordinarily used just as his definition would suggest: when there is an absence of impediments to action (where 'action' is understood generally as 'motion') but not when the impediments are intrinsic to what is acting. Hobbes's second example of the tied-up man highlights the difference in usage when the impediments are external to an agent vs. internal to him: we commonly use 'liberty' only when the impediments are not in the nature of the agent.[58]

In *Thomas White's De Mundo Examined* (*Anti-White,* also known as *De Motu*), written around the same time as his initial exchange with Bramhall, Hobbes also refers to common usage in his explanation of his understanding of liberty.[59] In a section titled "The true definition of 'free'," Hobbes points out how people use the term 'free' (*liberum*):

58. The first paragraph of Hobbes's *Leviathan* discussion of liberty (*L* xxi.1) proceeds in much the same way: he presents his definition of 'liberty,' then gives examples of both inanimate objects and rational agents to show that we ordinarily use the term in ways that accord with that definition. Immediately following, Hobbes characterizes his definition of liberty as "this proper, and generally received meaning of the word" (*L* xxi.2 / Hobbes 2012: 324).

59. Though Hobbes did not authorize *Anti-White* for publication, the passage that follows is worth discussing because of its contemporaneity with the Hobbes-Bramhall debate and its close resemblance to Hobbes's discussions in the passages from *Of Liberty and Necessity* and *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*.

> Among inanimates, that is called [*dicitur*] free which is in no degree hindered from doing whatever, from its own nature, it can do. Hence a river runs freely that is prevented from flowing neither by its banks nor by any obstacle. Nor are those who speak thus [*Neque tamen…qui sic loquuntur*] unaware that water runs down by force of its own gravity, i.e. by natural necessity; they acknowledge therefore, that liberty is opposed not to internal necessity but to an external impediment. Likewise also those who allow a man liberty of action are well aware that there are some things that he cannot will (such as those that seem the worst to him) and some that he cannot avoid desiring (such as those things which seem the best that have been done for him); they do not deny, however, that he acts freely and by free-choice [*libere et per electionem agere*]. But of free-choice, as of everything else, there exists some cause, and this is a necessary one; yet he who necessarily chooses nonetheless chooses because of that fact, unless we also say that a stone, because it falls of necessity, does not fall. (AW 33.2)[60]

This passage mirrors aspects of the discussions of 'liberty' and 'spontaneity' in Hobbes's exchanges with Bramhall: Hobbes adduces the example of the river to show that people use 'free' (*liberum*) as the absence of impediments to action, but only when those obstacles are external. The example of the man, in turn, shows that common usage of 'liberty of action' (*libertas agendi*) does not conflict with Hobbes's view on necessity and its relation to liberty.

The interpretation I have developed, that liberty is one of the simplest conceptions we acquire from sense experience, explains why common usage reflects the proper definition of 'liberty.' If everyone, simply by interacting with the bodies that constitute reality, can acquire a perfect and clear conception of liberty, it would follow that the way people use the term would reflect that conception. It's only when someone, in the grips of tradition or the authority of men, such as "an Aristotle, a Cicero, or a Thomas, or any other Doctor whatsoever" (*L* iv.13 / Hobbes 2012: 58) or "some puzzled divine or philosopher" (EW 5:397), eschews common usage that the words they repeat are not proper definitions but "words whereby we conceive nothing but the sound, … those we call Absurd, Insignificant, and Non-sense" (*L* v.5 / Hobbes 2012: 68).

7. Conclusion

Bramhall initially seemed to rightly excoriate Hobbes's argument from experience. How could what one means by 'liberty' be the starting point of a legitimate

60. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for references to *Anti-White.*

argument for claims regarding the nature of liberty, let alone the beginnings of a "proof"?

I have argued that what is key to making sense of Hobbes's argument from experience is not his notion of experience, but his theory of definitions. When the significance of definitions in the argument is recognized, the argument, if not ultimately persuasive, at least makes sense, by Hobbes's own lights. Furthermore, the interpretation of the argument I defend, that the definitions in the debate are explications of our simplest conceptions and thereby need no demonstration, reveals, even in its main points of contention, the coherence of the argument with Hobbes's most fundamental philosophical commitments regarding method, materialism, and language.

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