Chapter Four
The Major Seventeenth-Century Advocates

Despite the appeal of mortalism to various English believers since the earliest days of the Reformation, there was no attempt at a systematic exposition of mortalist theology until Richard Overton's now well-known *Mans Mortalitie* appeared in 1644. We must, therefore, retrace our steps to examine more closely *Mans Mortalitie,* the first argued defence of English mortalism and a seminal work by any criteria, and then the writings of those who soon followed Overton: Thomas Hobbes the political and metaphysical philosopher, George Hammon the influential Baptist leader, John Milton the republican poet, and the empiricist philosopher and theologian, John Locke.[1] All were convinced mortalists, and on account of the extent of their writings or their own prominence, they may be regarded as the major mortalist spokesmen of the seventeenth century.[2] With the exception of Hammon, and perhaps Overton, the influence of these more prominent mortalist writers extended well into the eighteenth century, and even beyond. Their focussed and often detailed expositions defined mortalism more clearly and carried it forward for the consideration of future generations, thereby establishing a continuum in mortalist thought extending from Tyndale and Frith in the 1530s to Joseph Priestley in the 1780s and 1790s. With names like Hobbes, Milton, and Locke in its favour, mortalism could never again be dismissed as the aberrant

1. Locke has recently been redefined as a rational theologian whose "primary concern was Scripture and its interpretation", even a "Protestant philosopher" for whom there were "two sources of theology, nature and revelation", Nuovo, *John Locke,* xx, xxi. See also p. xxx, and on Locke's theology as a whole V. Nuovo, "Locke's Theology, 1694-1704" in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke* (Oxford, 2000).
2. Froom includes the Cambridge mathematician and classicist Isaac Barrow as a conditionalist. While Barrow's sustained opposition to the doctrine of eternal torment would have found favour with mortalists, it is doubtful that he entertained mortalism *per se.* For Barrow, *sheol* is the grave, death is "real destruction of life" and hell a doctrine that "hath made some persons desperately doubt the truth of the whole body of that religion whereof this is supposed to be a fundamental article" and "a great scandal to human reason", Isaac Barrow, *Two Dissertations, ad cal* with *Sermons and Fragments attributed to Isaac Barrow,* ed. J.P. Lee (1834), 203-4, 211; *The Works of the Learned Isaac Barrow,* II (1683), 399.

meandering of uninformed minds. With their assistance, it became a more credible alternative for those in the future as well as the present who might question the validity of the traditional eschatology.

Richard Overton and *Mans Mortalitie*

We have already alluded to Overton's *Mans Mortalitie* as a seminal work in the development and definition of mortalist thought. It was, in reality, more than that. It not only sowed the seeds which would later come to full fruition in the works of others perhaps better qualified and more respected than the radical sectary Overton, but was itself in all likelihood the fruit of seeds sown in earlier years when conditions had prevented their mature development. There is no doubt, of course, about the significance of *Mans Mortalitie* in its own time, or of its continuing influence in the seventeenth century, with several reprints or revisions before 1675.[1] Froom is quite correct when he says that the mortalist convictions expressed so forcefully in *Mans Mortalitie* "were not the passing whim of an enthusiast" but "the settled conviction of a careful student".[2] The eighteenth-century mortalist historian, Francis Blackburne, thought that *Mans Mortalitie* itself was somewhat "uncouth", but its author "a master of his subject".[3]

Overton himself is something of an enigma. Edwards says that he was a member of a Baptist church by 1646 and a "desperate Sectary",[4] and Whitley

1. Whitley mentions five versions, including a copy of a 1644 edition appended to an anonymous refutation published at Oxford in 1645, but omits the 1675 edition of the revision *Man Wholly Mortal* which first appeared in 1655, see *BB*, I, 16, 61. Wing, *STC,* gives a first edition of *Mans Mortalitie* in 1643, published in Amsterdam, and a 1674 edition of *Man Wholly Mortal* in addition to the 1655 and 1675 editions. Froom and Burns both state that a first edition of *Mans Mortalitie* appeared in 1643. It is more likely that 1643 is an old-style date, and that the first edition was published in 1644, new-style, with a re-print that same year. Williamson noted that on the title-page of the BL copy Thomason had deleted Amsterdam and written in its place "London", adding that it was "not uncommon"at the time for books published in London to be labelled Amsterdam "as a matter of caution", G. Williamson, 'Milton and the Mortalist Heresy', *SP,* 32 (1935), 556. Burns, *CM*, 155, is satisfied that the debate over the identity of R.O., the author cited on the title-page of all versions, has been settled in favour of Richard Overton, citing Perez Zagorin, 'The Authorship of Mans Mortalitie', *The Library,* 5th. Ser., V (1950-51), 179-82; Joseph Frank, *The Levellers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), 263-65; and D. M. Wolfe, "Unsigned Pamphlets of Richard Overton,1641-1649", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, XXI (1957-58), 167-201.
2. *CFF*, II, 167. Burns describes him as "a gifted and articulate propagandist", *CM*, 155.
3. Blackburne, *A Short Historical View of the Controversy Concerning an Intermediate State and The Separate Existence of the Soul Between Death and the General Resurrection* (1765), 49.
4. Edwards, *Gangraena*, III, 148.

claims him as a Baptist author throughout the 1640s and 1650s.[1] Burns believes he was a General Baptist and sees no reason to believe that he ever left the fellowship of General Baptists.[2] Others, however, contend that he was a Leveller, even a leader in the Leveller movement in the late 1640s.[3] These two views are not necessarily inherently contradictory. What is beyond doubt is the extent of his writings, largely of a political nature, particularly during the 1640s. He is conservatively described as a "pamphleteer" in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Whitley lists twenty-one works under his name between 1642 and 1655, only two of which, *Mans Mortalitie* of 1644 and its revision in 1655, are theological in content. The remainder are all political or socio-political tracts, attacking the government or advising it, arguing the causes of prisoners or the people, or the Leveller party. Given the nature of the times and his own clear preference for a biblical faith, it is a little surprising that his theological output was restricted essentially to one work. Perhaps there is some justification for Edwards's contention that others had a hand even in that.[4]

Mans Mortalitie was first published in Amsterdam by John Canne, the Independent theologian and minister of the exiled English Independents in Amsterdam, who may also have sympathised with mortalist views.[5] It was subsequently republished in London in 1655 as *Man Wholly Mortal.* The 1655 version was essentially a revision of the earlier version, "corrected and enlarged", and re-organised but with few additions of argument or substance. Apart from the title itself, the title-page is almost identical in both editions, and sets out the author's intentions with a few well-chosen phrases:

> A Treatise Wherein 'tis proved, both Theologically and Philosophically, that whole Man (as a rationall Creature) is a Compound wholly mortall, contrary to that common distinction of Soule and Body: And that the present going of the Soule into Heaven or Hell is a meer Fiction: And that at the Resurrection is the beginning of our immortality, and then Actuall Condemnation, and Salvation, and not before.[6]

1. *BB*, I, 12-39, 61.
2. *CM*, 124.
3. E.g., Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 37-8, 64-5; cf. *BB*, I, 34, 38-9.
4. Edwards, *Gangraena,* I, 27 (the second so numbered), where Edwards states that Clement Writer was reported to have had "a great hand" in the writing of *Mans Mortalitie.*
5. The first edition of *Mans Mortalitie* may in fact have been printed in London, Amsterdam being given as the place of publication as a ruse to confuse the authorities, McLachlan, *Socinianism,* 191. Canne's millenarianism is noted by Capp, *Fifth Monarchy Men*, 244.
6. *MM*, title-page. Whitley does not question the authorship of the 1655 revision, *BB,* I, 61. The title page of the 1655 *Man Wholly Mortal* substitutes the phrase "That as whole man sinned, so whole man died" for "that whole Man (as a rationall Creature) is a Compound wholly mortal".

This, together with the text itself, argues strongly against the conclusion that *Mans Mortalitie* was "one of the first frankly materialistic works of the century".[1] This assertion can only be allowed by imposing a strictly philosophical, metaphysical definition of materialism on what Overton himself claims is theologically and philosophically based. His work, as the title illustrates, was in fact more theological than philosophical and therefore, it would seem, more than materialistic since it presents man as a spiritual being with the possibility of an eternal future.

In attacking "the Hell-hatch'd doctrine of th'immortall soule"[2] Overton was not attempting to undermine religion or belief, or hope in the future, but rather what he considered to be a perversion of them all. Adam had been a real man living in a real world, as were his descendants, all of whom had been taken captive by alien ideas. The truth about man and human existence must be re-stated and defended. The "errour-leading doctrine"[3] of the soul's natural immortality must be shown for what it was, a distortion of the truth as originally revealed and recorded in Scripture, and a foundation for other false doctrinal assertions emanating from Rome, namely hell and purgatory. According to Scripture, "all hope of future life and being is in the Resurrection".[4] With reference to Christ's second coming, Overton says that believers will receive their "Crown of Righteousness. . .at that day". Consequently "none ever entred [*sic*] into Heaven since the Creation".[5] This does not sound much like philosophical materialism, nor can it be. Overton was a man of his time, a time when even the political process was circumscribed by religious belief and when it would shortly give way to an experiment in practical politics that would fall just short of a theocracy. *Mans Mortalitie* challenged the theological *status quo* in a way that Overton and others at the time challenged the political establishment. It was all part and parcel of a great urge to be free, free from the constraints of monarchy, papacy, prelacy and picked parliaments, and to be free man must understand himself, his origin and his destiny. Overton's main concerns, then, are the constitution of man as originally created, the nature of his existence in life and his condition in death, his future if that future is not guaranteed by natural immortality, natural procreation in relation to mortality and immortality, and the place of reason in arriving at a true understanding of the nature of the soul and human existence. All is to be understood and brought into balance in the light of the biblical text interpreted according to reason and internal consistency.

The Genesis account of human origins is crucial to a correct understanding of human nature and destiny. Although Adam was created immortal, he

1. Fisch, *Jerusalem and Albion*, 191.
2. This colourful phrase comes from one of Overton's supporters, *MM*, sig. A2 *v.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.,* 7.
5. *Ibid.,* 6.

became mortal by the Fall, and hence mortality, the capability and inevitability of dying, "is derivated to all Adam's posterity".[1] His original immortality did not exist because an immortal soul inhabited his mortal body, but on account of the fact that he existed as a complete entity endowed with life, but under threat of death if disobedient. His immortality was thus conditional. In the creative process, God imparted the breath of life to the lifeless body He had made, and man "became a living soul". "That which was formed or made of the earth, became a living soul, or creature, by breathing . . . the breath of life . . . That lifeless lumpe became a living soul", Overton says. And he adds an important rider, "that which was breathed before it was breathed, was not a living soul".[2] It was merely breath which, when infused into the body, caused a living soul, a man, to exist. Man is therefore a unity, "a creature whose several parts and members are endowed with . . . faculties, each subservient to other, to make him a living, rational creature".[3] He is "a compound" of breath and body, a unity, a totality, "wholly mortal", as a consequence of natural generation as well as original creation.

Death, then, is naturally that condition which is the opposite of life. It results from separation of breath from the body. When that happens death occurs, the person dies. He ceases to exist. The 'soul' is no more because the living person is no more. Death "returns man to what he was before he was, that is, not to be".[4] After death "man is voyd of actuall Being", "he absolutely IS NOT".[5] Man is not like a tree, which after being cut down may sprout again, but "totally fadeth and perisheth".[6] There is nothing within him that is inherently immortal or which survives the moment of death. "Anatomize man, take a view of all his lineaments and dimensions, of all his members and faculties, and consider their state severally, and all are transitory, even all that goeth to the subject man is corruptible",[7] Overton maintains. Biblical texts which assert man's mortality and explain his condition in death, include Job 14:1, 2; Psalm 103:15, 16; 146: 4; Ecclesiastes 3:19; 9: 4-6; John 3:13; I Timothy 6:14, 16; James 4:14.[8] The repeated and consistent emphasis within these and other biblical passages cannot be overlooked or their teaching denied.

Overton is particularly concerned that reason be allowed its rightful place in arriving at a true understanding of man, the soul, death and the future. He believes that the subordination of reason in the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of doctrine has contributed to the "ridiculous invention

1. *Ibid.,* 1, 2.
2. R[ichard] O[verton], *Man Wholly Mortal* (1655), 29, 30.
3. *MM*, 10.
4. *Ibid.,* 2.
5. *Ibid.,* 6, 7(emphasis in the original).
6. *Ibid.,* 4.
7. *Ibid.,* 13.
8. *Ibid.,* 4, 6.

of the soul", and "immortality after death".[1] It is self-evident that reason and understanding define man as a distinct and superior order of being. All the human faculties, notably "reason, consideration, science . . . distinguish man from a beast [and] are augmented by learning, education etc., lessened by negligence, idleness, etc., and quite nullified by madness". Man's ability to think cognitively, to reflect, to remember, "the fulness of man's faculties in full order. . . make him a living, rational creature . . . more excellent than the beasts".[2] This is the essence of his humanity. Yet these powers are not of themselves immortal, but occur as the result of man's existence as a unified entity. Reason does not constitute immortality or contribute to it. Rather, it enables man to understand himself and his mortality and grasp its significance.

It is particularly important for Overton that reason prevail in understanding human procreation in relation to the existence of the individual 'soul'. Overton holds that mortality rather than immortality is the logical consequence of the normal procreative process. That which is generated by mortal man in the course of the natural order cannot be immortal. "Mortal Adam must beget mortal children . . . For that which is immortall cannot generatively proceed from that which is mortall".[3] This logical conclusion in the wake of man's nature correctly understood, renders untenable the idea that the soul is infused at or immediately after conception, an idea which Overton regards in any case as fraught with philosophical and theological difficulties.[4] Man's essential wholeness and his ultimate dependence on Christ and the resurrection at the last day for eternal life is a more reasonable explanation of human being and human destiny than the traditional and highly speculative doctrine of the immortal soul.

Thus, man's hope for the future lies not within himself, but with God, and God's promises in Christ. The "going of the soul into heaven or hell" at death "is a mere fiction". It is contrary to reason and to revelation. "The place of glory for the dead saints is not yet, and shall not actually be till the dissolution of heaven and earth",[5] at the last day, with the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment. Resurrection itself is not "the addition of gross matter to life", as it would be if the traditional view were to prevail, but "the restoration of life from death".[6] This includes corporeality and rationality, "and is the beginning of our immortality". This is the biblical alternative, the "hope of future life, grounded upon the Resurrection". The last day seals "the end of our faith" and "the salvation of our souls".[7] Overton's Christocentric conclusion fairly

1. *Ibid.,* 9.
2. *Ibid.,* 9-11.
3. *Ibid.,* 33.
4. *Ibid.,* 33-5.
5. *Ibid.,* 23.
6. *Man Wholly Mortal,* 39.
7. *Ibid.,* 53.

represents the thnetopsychism he advocated with such conviction, and which would eventually be the dominant form of English mortalism:

> Thus, having found Mans Foundation to be wholly in the dust, from thence taken and thither to returne: Let this then be the use of all: That man hath not wherewith at all to boast. . . but is provoked wholy out of himself, to cast himself wholy on Jesus Christ with whom in God our lives are hid, that when he who is our life shall appear, he might also with him appear in glory, to whom be the honour of our immortality for ever, and for ever".[1]

Overton may have been an untutored pamphleteer from the swelling ranks of the radical left and his *Mans Mortalitie* unpolished and, in some eyes, "uncouth". He had nonetheless grasped the essentials of thnetopsychist mortalism well enough and his work remains as the first coherent expression of that mortalism in the English language.

Thomas Hobbes and the *Leviathan*

The notable change in recent years in the interpretation of Hobbes is due largely to a recognition, long overdue, of the significance of the religious content of *Leviathan* (1651). Letwin reminds us that more than half of the *Leviathan* is related to Christian doctrine and that "the rest is full of God and Scripture".[2] Commenting specifically on earlier interpretations of *Leviathan,* Geach speaks of the "obstacles" which he claims have hitherto hindered a correct understanding of Hobbes, commenting candidly that they consisted "mainly of calumny and ignorance",[3] and noting in his re-interpretation of Hobbes that the latter believed, among other things, that "men are mortal animals", and that "when a man dies, he rots and all his thoughts perish".[4] It

1. *MM*, 43.
2. S.R. Letwin, 'Hobbes and Christianity' in P. King (ed.), *Thomas Hobbes, Critical Assessments* (London and New York, 2000), IV, 150; originally published in *Daedalus,* vol. 105 (Winter, 1974). See also S.R. Sutherland, 'God and Religion in *Leviathan*', in King (ed.), *Hobbes, Critical Assessments*, IV, 107-114; D. Johnston, 'Hobbes's Mortalism', *HPT*, X(1989); R. Tuck, 'The Civil Religion of Thomas Hobbes', N. Phillipson and Q. Skinner (eds.), *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1993).
3. P. Geach, 'The Religion of Thomas Hobbes', in King (ed.), *Hobbes, Critical Assessments*, IV, 280; originally published in *Religious Studies,* Vol. XVII, Dec. 1981. Geach believes that the treatment meted out to Hobbes by earlier critics amounts to "character assassination, something of an English tradition", particularly in Oxford, where his books were burnt, 281.
4. *Ibid.,* 282. Johnston argues that Hobbes's denial of the soul's incorporeality and immortality was "one of the most salient and controversial features" of the *Leviathan*, *HPT,* X, 647. In the context of the mortalism of Hobbes and Milton, Thomas proposes that in mortalist thought man's pre-eminence over animals "was something which only became evident at the Resurrection", Keith Thomas, *Man*

is, as we shall see shortly, a fair enough condensation of the eschatology which Hobbes himself sets out in considerably more detail, particularly in ch. 38 of *Leviathan,* 'Of the Signification in Scripture of Eternal Life, Hell, Salvation, The World to Come, and Redemption'. That Hobbes was not an atheist, or a materialist in the strictest sense, is clear enough from even a cursory reading of *Leviathan*.[1] As Martinich points out, Hobbes, "as a Christian", considered both Old and New Testaments "to contain the revelation of God to human beings".[2] Hobbes did not disbelieve the Bible but the interpretation imposed on it by those not adequately qualified to do so, and the random and often quite illogical application of principles derived from such study.[3] Letwin states quite categorically that Hobbes was a Christian and a Protestant,[4] conclusions which Geach endorses but with the important qualification that Hobbes's Christianity was "extremely heretical" by the standards of both contemporary Protestant and Catholic belief.[5] It seems highly likely, in fact, that Hobbes leant rather heavily towards a Socinian theology which, among other things, proposed that "men are material and mortal beings; immortal souls are a heathenish myth; (and) men's only hope of a future life is God's promise of resurrection, of which Christ's resurrection is our surety".[6]

Martinich is also positive about Hobbes's essentially Christian stance, stating that he was "a sincere member of the Church of England" with a "preference for

and the Natural World (1983), 123. Not all mortalists, including even Hobbes and Milton, while concurring with the significance of the resurrection, might have agreed with such a radical assessment.

1. Joseph Priestley would later identify himself with this criticism of Hobbes, "Like Mr. Hobbes, I may for generations live under the imputation of absolute atheism", *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit*(1777), xvi.
2. A.P. Martinich, *A Hobbes Dictionary* (Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford, 1995), 47.
3. One of the essentials of Hobbes's political theory was that the stability of society was threatened by the unchecked freedom of sects in preaching and practising their newly-discovered beliefs. The possibility of potential social disintegration had already come about by the time *Leviathan* was published in 1651 and may even have contributed to its composition. Cf. Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603 -1714*, 173-5.
4. Letwin, in King (ed.), *Hobbes, Critical Assessments,* 158. The earlier examination of Hobbes's theology by Nathaniel Henry should not be overlooked. Henry pointed out that Hobbes was "no atheist", remarking that "on the subject of the intermediate state, he is scholarly [and] exegetical, rather than dogmatic", Henry, 'Milton and Hobbes: Mortalism and the Intermediate State', *SP*, 48(1951), 241. With the advantage of later studies, Henry might not have concluded that Hobbes's position on the soul, death and the intermediate state was "orthodox Calvinistic", 241.
5. Geach, in King, *Hobbes, Critical Assessments,* 281.
6. *Ibid.,* 286. Geach (p. 284) draws from three sources in addition to *Leviathan* itself in arriving at the conclusion that Hobbes "professed a variety of Socinianism": the Racovian catechism, the theological writings of Joseph Priestley, and *Christendom Astray* by the Christadelphian, Robert Roberts. Cf. Tuck in Phillipson and Skinner (eds.), *Political Discourse,* 131.

the liturgy prescribed by the Book of Common Prayer".[1] Martinich is equally emphatic regarding Hobbes's eschatological beliefs, saying quite unambiguously that he "was a mortalist" who "correctly argues that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is not biblical".[2] Martinich suggests four reasons why Hobbes denied the doctrine of the immortal soul, among them that it supported the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory and the doctrine of everlasting punishment in hell, both of which Hobbes himself rejected as false.[3] Commenting on Hobbes's treatment of the matter in *Leviathan,* Martinich states that the doctrine of the soul's immortality "is said to be one of the doctrines of the Kingdom of Darkness", a doctrine, moreover, which "diminishes the salvific work of Jesus".[4] Geach concurs, pointing out that Hobbes held that the formula 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' was "the essential Christian creed", arguing "charitably" that anyone "who holds this doctrine fast has enough faith for salvation even if the great and terrible day burns up the rotten structure of superstition he has reared upon this foundation".[5]

It is from one standpoint at least not surprising that Hobbes has been misunderstood and that he has become the subject of divergent opinion, or that his mortalist eschatology has until recently been overlooked. In his own day he was misread, even misrepresented. One of his more outspoken contemporary critics, John Bramhall, later Archbishop of Armagh, attacked the *Leviathan* with immoderate gusto, asserting that "Hobbian principles" had the potential to destroy the essence of Christian religion in virtually every particular:

> the existence, the simplicity, the ubiquity, the eternity, and infiniteness of God, the doctrine of the blessed Trinity, the Hypostatical union, the kingly sacerdotal and prophetical offices of Christ; the being and operation of the Holy Ghost, heaven, hell, angels, devils, the immortality of the soul, the catholic and national churches; the holy Scriptures, holy orders, the holy sacraments, the whole frame of religion and the worship of God; the laws of nature, the reality of goodness, justice, piety, honesty, conscience, and all that is sacred.[6]

Bramhall acidly concluded that Hobbes's disciples, if they could believe such a catalogue of errors, may as well "feed with ostriches".[7] In actual fact few, if any, of them did so believe.

1. Martinich, *Hobbes,* 16, 2-3.
2. *Ibid.,* 257. There is a useful discussion of Hobbes's use of the word 'soul' and his opposition to the doctrine of natural immortality at pp. 275-77.
3. *Ibid.,* 276.
4. *Ibid.,* 257. See pp. 158-162 for discussion of Hobbes's interesting and important concept of the Kingdom of Darkness, which owes its temporal existence largely to misinterpretations of Scripture.
5. Geach, in King (ed.), *Hobbes, Critical Assessments*, 284-5.
6. John Bramhall, *The Catching of Leviathan* (1658), 501-2.
7. *Ibid.*