

Michael P. Krom

The Limits of Reason in Hobbes's Commonwealth

Continuum Studies in Political Philosophy



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For My Family

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Editions and Abbreviations

The full citations for the following editions can be found in the Bibliography:

<i>De Homine</i>	<i>De Homine</i> , ed. B. Gert
EW	<i>The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury</i> , ed. W. Molesworth, 11 vols
OL	<i>Thomae Hobbes Malmesburiensis opera philosophica quae Latine scripsit omnia</i> , ed. W. Molesworth, 5 vols
<i>Behemoth</i>	<i>Behemoth; or, the Long Parliament</i> , ed. S. Holmes
<i>Correspondence</i>	<i>The Correspondence</i> , ed. N. Malcolm, 2 vols
DCLE	<i>A Dialogue between a Philosopher & a Student of the Common Laws of England</i> , ed. J. Cropsey
<i>Elements of Law</i>	<i>Human Nature and De Corpore Politico</i> , ed. J. C. A. Gaskin
<i>Lev.</i>	<i>Leviathan</i> , ed. E. Curley

When citing a passage from one of these texts, I have provided the relevant divisions in addition to the pagination. For example, *Elements of Law* I.II.3, 23 refers to Part I, chapter II, section 3, which can be found on page 23 of the Gaskin edition. References to *Leviathan* provide the chapter and paragraph numbers in addition to the page numbers (e.g. *Lev.* 35.3, 297 is chapter 35, paragraph 3, page 297 of the Curley edition). The references to the appendices of the Latin *Leviathan* are from the Molesworth edition. References to passages found in the Molesworth editions provide the volume number after the name of the text and division (if any). For example, a reference to *De Corpore*, Part 1, chapter 1, section 8, on page 10 in Volume I of the English works would read *De Corpore* I.I.8, EW I, 10. References to *A Dialogue between a Philosopher & a Student of the Common Laws of England* include the pagination to the Cropsey edition as well as to the Molesworth edition (EW VI). Letters from Hobbes's *Correspondence* include addressee, place and date of authorship, and pagination in the Malcolm edition.

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Introduction

It is a hard matter, or rather impossible, to know what other men mean, especially if they be crafty.

A in Behemoth

Thomas Hobbes is often seen as the father of an approach to politics that so strongly emphasizes rational self-interest as to entirely ignore the need for character formation. This instrumentalist politics is nicely summarized in Immanuel Kant's claim that 'the problem of setting up a state can be solved even by a nation of devils (so long as they possess understanding)'.¹ Even if Hobbes rather uncomfortably fits into the modern liberal project, he bequeaths to us a tradition of thought that has come under fire in recent years for its failure to take account of those aspects of political life that so much of modern theory has ignored. What is the role of the virtues in a morally-neutral or at least pluralistic society? How should those intermediary institutions responsible for forming the citizenry (be they educational, religious, or otherwise) be situated within the body politic? By emphasizing freedom and a minimalistic and individualistic social contract as the foundations of politics, modern political thought tends to reduce and perhaps even undermine the role of the virtuous citizen, the philosopher, or the holy soul (as well as the institutions that sustain and cultivate such noble souls) in maintaining political stability. Most generally, the question is whether rational self-interest is a sufficient basis for political life.²

As with most histories of philosophy, one can find a counter-narrative that purports to find in the modern political tradition precisely those concerns that contemporary political theorists find to be of such importance. In the case of Hobbes, it is argued that he is a theorist of the virtues, a defender of a robust and nuanced political life; the fact that this has not been seen before is attributed to the narrowness of interpreters latching onto his vivid picture of the state of nature where fear dominates, ignoring all that comes after.³ Hobbes was aware of the distinction between calculating reason, on the one hand, and commitment to the good of public life,

on the other; he thought that his emphasis on the former would provide a robust foundation for political stability insofar as it could be connected to character formation as regulated by the sovereign.

As another thread in the scholarship attempts to show, Hobbes does not base his entire account of politics on the role of fear and rational self-interest, for he is also concerned with the threat posed to political stability by the prideful who refuse to submit to the philosophy of natural equality demanded by the commonwealth.⁴ Despite the fact that Hobbes's magnum opus is entitled *Leviathan* (after the biblical beast that is the 'king of the proud'), somehow generations of scholars have missed this point. As his most mature and complete work, my analysis focuses on *Leviathan*, using the rest of his corpus as a guide for interpretation.⁵

Hobbes's *Leviathan* asks the reader to follow along with a thought experiment that attempts to address how political society can be formed and maintained from the state of nature: natural man must be mentally transformed into civil man. Those readers who follow this genesis will then be in a position to implement civil philosophy (much as a geometrician constructs an object) by following the rules of this science. As Hobbes says, 'the skill of making and maintaining commonwealths consisteth in certain rules, as doth arithmetic and geometry, not (as tennis-play) on practice only.'⁶

Despite the attraction of Hobbes's claim to have founded civil science along the lines of geometry, one encounters in his text numerous ways in which the tennis-like aspects of politics cannot be ignored. Hobbes ends up being more traditional than he would like by relying on such things as prudence and statesmanship. Further, as with any thought experiment, by simplifying the starting point one inevitably leaves out some aspect of the phenomenon in question: Hobbes slips in assumptions about human nature that prove to be untenable *on his own terms*. Following his first principle that human desire is non-teleological and determined by biological drives, Hobbes's natural man has as his central motivation self-preservation and is considered rational to the extent to which he acts on self-interest. Yet this forces Hobbes to view certain motives as problematic that I argue turn out to be required for political life.

The first three chapters of this work trace Hobbes's genetic account of the rise of political life out of the natural man. Chapter 1 addresses human psychology, starting with the clean slate of the empty mind, then observing it as it transfers the exterior motions that press upon the senses into corresponding interior motions such as imagination and thinking. Desire directs the natural man to secure those objects that will preserve his life

and, in order to do so, develop reason as an instrument powerful enough to control the environment in which he finds himself. Chapter 2 picks up here and observes the reaction of the natural man to the problem of other men. The warlike condition that inevitably arises can be made peaceful via rules of interpersonal behaviour. These laws of nature necessitate a social covenant in order to secure the life of ease originally sought in the state of nature. Finally, Chapter 3 completes this account by focusing on the social order that emerges once the social covenant is put in place. The commonwealth turns out to be a transformative enterprise, as each individual begins to fulfil his respective role in the artificial body of which he is now a part.

In some ways Chapter 4 is a brisk pass through the previous three chapters that, by focusing on the passions more so than on reason, re-examines the interior life of the natural or civil man. Most importantly, the principal failures to reason properly are examined, and the cluster of terms associated with pride (e.g. glory, honour, etc.) is considered. This chapter provides a bridge between Hobbes's basic account of peace and security, on the one hand; and Hobbes's more nuanced (and ultimately failed, as I argue) reckoning with the causes of political dissolution, on the other.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 take up Hobbes's analysis of the threats to peace and security traceable to pride, as well as his need to incorporate pride into the body politic. While Hobbes's philosophical anthropology deems self-interest as the only rational basis for action, he ends up relying upon such irrational behaviour as giving up one's life for the commonwealth (Chapter 5); risking one's life for the satisfaction of scientific curiosity (Chapter 6); and seeking divine love in the company of one's fellow man (Chapter 7).

The typology of pride found in these last three chapters of this book is my attempt to develop an account of how Hobbes reckons with the questions of political stability that have proven to be of central importance in recent years. While I fear that A in *Behemoth* is right and that Hobbes is more crafty than I have the wits to follow, my hope is that this work extends our understanding of the limits of rational self-interest in the Hobbesian commonwealth; and that, by doing so, helps us to re-think our own affairs. The conclusion to this work only allows a little space for showing how Hobbes is relevant to us, but to attempt more would be rather vainglorious given the limits of my own reason.

Chapter 1

From Sense to Reason, a Genetic Account

A careful reading of *Leviathan* reveals a nuanced and unique account of the nature of philosophy and its origins in human nature. Focusing on this account is important for understanding Hobbes's philosophical anthropology as the basis of his civil and natural philosophy. Hobbes is a systematic thinker who attempts as much as possible to provide a solid foundation for all discourse. While this point is often made by commentators, there is much disagreement as to the nature of this foundation. In examining the relationship between natural and civil philosophy, there has been much interest in the possibility that Hobbes derives his civil philosophy from his natural philosophy.¹ Further, numerous attempts have been made to uncover the principle that binds together these two branches and provides a foundation for Hobbes's philosophy.² While the insights of those who focus on method in Hobbes's system contribute to my analysis, I ultimately diverge from these commentators inasmuch as I find the unity of Hobbes's system elsewhere: what stands behind Hobbes's method is his understanding of the nature of philosophy. As Tom Sorell puts it, both natural and civil philosophy

result from reasoning guided by method. And methodical reasoning in the two areas has the same general point or purpose, namely to find ways of improving human life, where that is understood as a matter of enlarging the number of effects producible by the human will.³

In tracing man's experience of natural bodies and the human attempt to develop natural philosophy, one comes to appreciate the basic principle of Hobbesian philosophy from which he constructs his system. Hobbes has been dubbed everything from a rationalist to an empiricist; a totalitarian to a father of liberalism; a proto-phenomenalist to a conventionalist; rather

than removing such titles, I argue for the addition of 'proto-pragmatist' to the list in light of Hobbes's insistence that a philosophical doctrine be judged by its fruits for life. After explaining the genesis of reason out of sense, I discuss Hobbes's conception of the nature of philosophy. I conclude by discussing the branches of philosophy and briefly note the importance of civil philosophy in his system. This chapter provides a foundation for my account of Hobbes's attempt to construct a commonwealth of rational men.

While Hobbes does offer a definition of philosophy in the Fourth Part of *Leviathan* that I will consider,⁴ in order to understand Hobbes's views on the nature of philosophy, one must be willing to piece together numerous aspects of his philosophical system; it is first necessary to work through this system in order to appreciate the force of this definition. For this reason, I more or less follow the order of *Leviathan* in its progression from sense perception to reason, along the way discussing the invention that makes reason possible, namely, speech, as well as the necessary corrective to speech that can lead man to philosophy, namely, method. After explaining the evolution from sense perception to reason in man, as well as the precise nature of reason, I discuss his understanding of philosophy. Only when one has understood the movement from the outside world to the mind and the mind's attempt to work back to the world in Hobbesian philosophy is one prepared to ask and answer the questions appropriate to determining what he means by philosophy.⁵

From Sense to Reason

*One only True Thing, the Basis of all
Those Things whereby we any Thing do call.
How Sleep does fly away, and what things still
By Opticks I can Multiply at will.
Phancie's Internal, th'Issue of our Brain,
Th'internal parts only Motion contain:
And he that studies Physicks first must know
What Motion is, and what Motion can do.*⁶

Hobbes, The Verse Life

Motion is the fundamental concept of philosophy for Hobbes: Hobbes's philosophical system presupposes that body and reality are coextensive,

and thus that knowledge of motion is 'the clue to all change and to all causation'.⁷ There are two principal branches of philosophy: the study of the motions of natural bodies (natural philosophy), and of the motions of citizens and their sovereigns in that artificial body, the commonwealth (civil philosophy).⁸ The following considers the move from external, natural bodies to the mind and back again in an attempt to understand what he means by philosophy in general.

Hobbes thinks of man in mechanical terms and attempts to understand the mind's operations by comparing them to the more familiar external world. For example, when considering the faculty of imagination, he draws an analogy from the way water is drawn to a path traced out by a finger in order to explain the fact that, when we imagine one thing, of necessity another imagination will follow: just as the finger touching one bead of water will draw numerous more beads in its train, so too does one sense impression raising an image draw numerous more images.⁹ Both processes are mechanical, and the fact that the mental is difficult to comprehend is alleviated by such comparisons. Hobbes's task is to explain the internal motions of the mind, their connections to the external motions of the world, and how through inventions man is able to systematize and control both the motions of his mind as well as those of the world.

Hobbes begins the First Part of *Leviathan* by stating that our access to the external world is mediated through representations, that these representations originate in our senses, and that these senses arise when external bodies impress themselves upon our own body. All of man's thoughts concerning the outside world are means of representing

some quality, or other accident of a body without us, which is commonly called an *object*. . . . The original of them all [viz. all thoughts] is that which we call SENSE. (For there is no conception in a man's mind which hath not at first, totally or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense.) The rest are derived from that original.¹⁰

That Hobbes begins his work by pointing out the representational nature of sensation must be kept in mind, for this will prove important in understanding his account of reason and, ultimately, of philosophy.¹¹ In order to indicate the fact that what man perceives of external bodies is merely a representation, I have attempted to provide a clear and simple terminology that will make understanding Hobbes's account of sense, reason, and so on, easier. The problem is that, despite his criticisms of others for not beginning with carefully defined terms, Hobbes does not adhere to one