

Stephen J. Finn

# Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Natural Philosophy



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**THOMAS HOBBS AND THE POLITICS OF  
NATURAL PHILOSOPHY**

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## Abbreviations for Hobbes's Works

<i>B</i>	<i>Behemoth</i>
<i>Ci</i>	<i>De Cive</i>
<i>Co</i>	<i>De Corpore</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England</i>
<i>El</i>	<i>Elements of Law</i>
<i>EW</i>	<i>The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>Leviathan</i>
<i>OL</i>	<i>Thomas Hobbes Malmesburiensis opera philosophica quae latine scripsit omnia</i>
<i>PPG</i>	<i>Principia et Problemata aliquot Geometrica</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>Six Lessons to the Savilian Professors of the Mathematics</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>'A Short Tract on First Principles'</i>
<i>T</i>	<i>Eight Books of the Peloponnesian War written by Thucydides the Son of Olorus, interpreted with Faith and Diligence immediately out of the Greek by Thomas Hobbes</i>

References to Hobbes's works are cited in the text with the abbreviations listed above. References to *Ci*, *Co*, *El* and *L* are to chapter and page number. References to *EW* are to volume and page number. References to *B*, *D*, *OL*, *PPG*, *SL*, *ST* and *T* are to page numbers.

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## Background and Goals

### 1.0 Introduction

In 1642, Thomas Hobbes presented to the world a little treatise on political philosophy (*De Cive*) that contained, at least in his opinion, the first *science of politics*. Hobbes believed his political philosophy achieved a scientific status because it was modelled on geometry, which is the ‘onely science that it hath pleased God hitherto to bestow on mankind’ (L 4.105). An earlier version of his science of politics, i.e., the *Elements of Law*, had been privately circulating in manuscript form in 1640. Readers of this book would discover a political philosophy grounded on the ‘rules and infallibility of reason’, both of which provide the ‘true and only foundation of such [a] science’ (*El Epistle xv–i*). Eleven years later, in 1651, Hobbes published his masterpiece that would put him in contention for being one of the pre-eminent political philosophers in English history. In *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*, which contains the most developed version of his political philosophy, Hobbes reaffirmed the scientific nature of his views. This work, like its earlier counterparts, presented a ‘true doctrine of the laws of nature’, which is the heart of Hobbes’s ‘science of virtue and vice’ (L 15.216). For the first time in human history, Hobbes believed, a science was available that would provide indisputable answers to political problems, and thereby promote peace and stability in the commonwealth.

If Hobbes’s philosophy offered genuine solutions to persistent political problems, it could not have come at a better time in

English history. In 1642, civil war erupted in England after many years in which, as Hobbes said, the nation was 'boiling hot with questions concerning the rights of dominion and the obedience due from subjects, the true forerunners of an approaching war' (*Ci* Preface 103). Political turmoil, although percolating for many years, had become especially acute in the two decades prior to the outbreak of war. In 1625, Charles I inherited not only his father's crown, but also his desire to run the country without interference from Parliament, a desire that faced numerous obstacles. One such obstacle was Parliament's control of the primary sources of taxation. When the King needed substantial funds, he was often forced to turn to Parliament for assistance. As might be expected, the Members of Parliament were unwilling to offer such assistance since it required them to perform the unpopular task of taxing their constituents. Financial disputes between King and Parliament marked the 1620s, as is evidenced by the fact that Charles used forced loans on numerous occasions. In 1628, for example, the King relied on forced loans to support his war efforts against Spain and France when subsidies were not granted by Parliament. Such financial problems contributed to political tensions that culminated in a civil war and, eventually, in the beheading of the King. The execution of Charles in 1649, however, did not put an end to the political unrest. A continual shifting of political power caused civil disorder until the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. After completing *Leviathan*, which was published in 1651, Hobbes hoped that his work would 'fall into the hands of a Sovereign' who might 'by the Publique teaching of it, convert this truth of speculation, into the Utility of Practice' (L 31.408).

Hobbes's political philosophy, as the name suggests, reveals his practical interest in *politics* and his theoretical interest in *philosophy*. These two interests dominated his life. His long-standing concern with political matters is clearly evidenced in the history of his written work. In 1628, at the age of 40, Hobbes published the first work of his extended literary career, a translation of Thucydides'

*History of the Peloponnesian Wars*. According to his autobiographical writings, the goal of publishing this translation was to point out how 'foolish democracy is, and how much wiser one man is than an assembly' (OL xxxviii). The translation was followed by the writing of three versions of his political philosophy, concluding with *Leviathan*. In 1668, Hobbes wrote *Behemoth*, which presents an historical account of the causes of the English Civil War. One year later, Hobbes composed a dialogue on the nature of law called *A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England*.

While a number of works attest to Hobbes's political interests, his writings in natural philosophy and his active involvement with contemporary scientists manifest his interest in scientific and abstract philosophical questions. In his biography of Hobbes, John Aubrey recounts his subject's first experience with geometry.

He was ... 40 years old before he looked on geometry; which happened accidentally. Being in a gentleman's library ..., Euclid's Elements lay open, and 'twas the 47 *Ellibri* I. He read the proposition. 'By G—,' sayd he (he would now and then sweare, by way of emphasis), 'this is impossible!' So he reads the demonstration of it, which referred him back to such a proposition; which proposition he read. That referred him back to another, which he also read. *Et sic deinceps*, that at last was demonstrably convinced of the truth. This made him in love with geometry.<sup>1</sup>

Whether the details of Aubrey's story are historically accurate does not need to be confirmed here. What is important is that Hobbes's discovery of geometry prompted him towards natural philosophy. According to some scholars, Hobbes's first work in natural philosophy was composed early in the 1630s, a work commonly referred to as 'A Short Tract on First Principles'.<sup>2</sup> In this tract, Hobbes lays out a number of mechanistic principles from which



conclusions about optics, metaphysics and human motion are derived. In 1642, Hobbes wrote a criticism of Thomas White's *De Mundo*. As a Catholic theologian, White attempted in this text to refute Galileo. In 1644, Hobbes's 'Tractatus Opticus' was published in Paris by Marin Mersenne. Shortly thereafter, in 1646, Hobbes became a mathematical instructor to the Prince of Wales, who would later become Charles II. Hobbes's most comprehensive work in natural philosophy, *De Corpore*, was published in 1655. In this work, Hobbes provides an extended discussion of philosophical methodology, geometry and physics. Hobbes's *Six Lessons to the Savilian Professors of the Mathematics*, wherein he responds to criticisms of his work by eminent mathematicians, was published in 1656. Hobbes criticized the methodology of Boyle in *Dialogus Physicus de Natura Aerae*, published in 1661.

Hobbes's practical concern with political affairs and his theoretical interest in natural philosophy are united in his political philosophy. In this book I am concerned with the relationship between these two components of Hobbes's philosophy. According to what I call the 'traditional interpretation of influence', which shall be more fully discussed in Chapter 2, Hobbes's natural philosophy, and especially his fascination with geometry, plays an influential role in the formation and evolution of his political ideas. I will attempt to reverse the traditional direction of influence by pointing out ways in which Hobbes's political ideas influence his natural philosophy. To elaborate further upon the particular nature of my project, I will situate it within the context of Hobbes scholarship in Section 1.1. In Section 1.2, I will provide a brief outline of the remaining chapters.

## 1.1 Scholarly Background

In this section, I relate this investigation to four areas of scholarly research on Hobbes. First, I discuss two interpretive approaches, one of which considers Hobbes primarily as a theoretical philosopher and

the other of which considers him primarily as a political advocate. Second, I present an overview of the scholarly attempt at solving the ‘problem of unity’, which is the problem of relating the different branches of Hobbes’s philosophy to each other. Since I am concerned with the relationship between Hobbes’s political philosophy and his natural philosophy, the problem of unity needs to be discussed. Third, I discuss the notion of a ‘political influence’ and how this notion is employed in Hobbes scholarship.

### *1.1.a Interpretive Approach*

In *The Obsession of Thomas Hobbes*, Jules Steinberg is highly critical of what he sees as the tendency of Hobbes scholars to treat him as a ‘disinterested philosopher’, rather than as a ‘traditional political philosopher’.<sup>3</sup> According to Steinberg, the majority of scholars interpret Hobbes as a disinterested philosopher, that is, as a thinker who first and foremost advances philosophical arguments about theoretical matters. In this case, although Hobbes explicitly states that his political philosophy offers a scientific solution for the disorders of his time, his science is not specifically designed for seventeenth century England. Instead, Hobbes’s philosophical arguments are supposed to transcend the particular historical situation from which they emerged. Howard Warrender, for example, takes this approach when he attempts to ‘discover the logical structure of his [Hobbes’s] argument’.<sup>4</sup> According to Warrender, Hobbes is a philosopher who is ‘clearly interested in logical and not historical analysis’.<sup>5</sup> Although Warrender recognizes the presence of ‘historical examples’ in Hobbes’s texts, these examples ‘carried little significance for Hobbes, who saw the problem of sovereign and subject as a problem of logical principle and not of practice’.<sup>6</sup> Hobbes’s political philosophy, in other words, is more about theory than practice. John Plamenatz, as well, is an adherent of this approach. In his *Man and Society*, Plamenatz claims that ‘to understand Hobbes we need not know what his purpose

was in writing *Leviathan* or how he felt about the rival claims of Royalists and Parliamentarians'.<sup>7</sup> Plamenatz undertakes a 'close study of his argument' without 'looking at the condition of England or at political controversies of the day'.<sup>8</sup> In a similar manner, Anthony de Crespigny and Kenneth Minogue argue that the '*Leviathan* is a complicated argument from which nothing at all follows directly or logically about what, in terms of the quarrels of seventeenth century England, should be supported'.<sup>9</sup> The basic idea behind this interpretive approach, or what I call the 'philosophical approach', is that Hobbes thinks of himself as primarily engaged in a philosophical and scientific activity, rather than in the advocacy of a specific political agenda.

One should note that in extreme cases of the philosophical approach an investigation into Hobbes's intentions plays virtually no role in the interpretation. The goal in such cases is to analyse, evaluate and improve upon Hobbes's arguments for the sake of the arguments themselves. Accordingly, determining Hobbes's own intentions is inconsequential to the principal duty of constructing a viable philosophical argument. It is not important to determine, in other words, whether Hobbes is primarily a philosopher or a political pamphleteer. Instead, as philosophers, our job is to stick to the arguments themselves. Gregory Kavka, for example, follows such a path in his *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory*. 'The ultimate goal', Kavka says of his book, is 'to explicate and defend a plausible system of moral and political hypotheses suggested and inspired by Hobbes'.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Kavka claims, 'while not Hobbes's own theory, the theory set forth in this book is surely Hobbesian'.<sup>11</sup> Kavka is more interested in critiquing and improving upon Hobbes's arguments than in understanding the intentions behind them.<sup>12</sup>

According to Steinberg, advocates of the philosophical approach are motivated by the desire to keep Hobbes's philosophical arguments free from the damning charge of being 'ideological'.

[T]his is the fundamental point of most contemporary Hobbes

scholarship: the denial that Hobbes was writing about anything associated with the English Civil War. However, this denial is justified by a widely-held conviction that to interpret Hobbes as a political philosopher writing about the English Civil War is to disparage these writings by suggesting that they are ideological rather than philosophical.<sup>13</sup>

Steinberg claims such scholars hold fast to the view that ‘philosophers do not advocate, prescribe, recommend, or justify in their political writings’.<sup>14</sup> Steinberg is obviously quite hostile to the philosophical approach. It is, in his opinion, ‘absurd and misleading’,<sup>15</sup> ‘ludicrous in the extreme’,<sup>16</sup> ‘absurdly wrong’<sup>17</sup> and a ‘mis-conceived dead end’.<sup>18</sup> He contends the philosophical approach is based upon the fundamental and mistaken assumption that ‘political philosophers never write in isolation from actual historical events and political circumstances’.<sup>19</sup>

Steinberg’s alternative to the philosophical approach is to treat Hobbes as a ‘traditional political philosopher’ and to interpret his political philosophy in light of his political intentions:

Let me restate what I am suggesting when I claim that Hobbes wrote as a traditional political philosopher. This means that Hobbes was directly engaged in the practical business of advocacy or justification, that Hobbes wrote with a ‘practical purpose in mind,’ that this latter consideration was provoked by Hobbes’s reaction to the political crisis that led to the English Civil War, and that Hobbes was writing to condemn certain ideas and behavior and to support alternative ideas and behavior. From this perspective, it is absurd to claim that Hobbes wrote with any kind of ‘disinterested attitude.’<sup>20</sup>

I will refer to Steinberg’s interpretive strategy as the ‘political approach’. According to the ‘political approach’, one interprets Hobbes primarily as a political advocate, and secondarily, if at all, as

an abstract philosophical thinker.

The choice between the political and philosophical approaches is often related to the decision to include historical factors in one's interpretation. Adherents of the political approach frequently interpret Hobbes within an historical context, taking into consideration such things as the social and political circumstances of seventeenth-century England, events in Hobbes's personal and private life, and other such factors. The philosophical approach, on the other hand, usually focuses on the arguments themselves and often overlooks historical information.

Steinberg gives the impression that a philosophical approach necessarily excludes historical analysis. In this case, however, Steinberg falls prey to what Quentin Skinner calls a 'widespread tendency to insist that the interpretation of Hobbes's texts and the study of their historical contexts are alternative undertakings'.<sup>21</sup> Despite this tendency, a number of the philosophical interpreters do emphasize the importance of historical factors. John Watkins, for example, claims historical information is necessary for an accurate philosophical interpretation of Hobbes:

Although this book is an essay in logical reconstruction its approach will not be unhistorical. It is, after all, *Hobbes's* ideas whose organization we shall investigate; and in trying to establish what a man's ideas are, one should use any available information about his problems, his intentions, his political and intellectual situation, about his contemporaries and their readings of him, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

Although Watkins appeals to history, his orienting principle is that Hobbes's philosophy, including his political philosophy, is grounded on a 'number of *purely philosophical* ideas'.<sup>23</sup> In this case, then, historical information is employed in a 'logical reconstruction' of Hobbes's philosophy, in keeping with the philosophical approach.

Quentin Skinner and A. P. Martinich are two scholars who