

Hobbes

A. P. Martinich



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Zhou Jianshe, Zhang Yunqiu, Zou Lihzi, and Yincun Dai

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Preface

After my book, *Hobbes: A Biography* (1999) appeared, I intended never to write another one on Hobbes. I thought it completed my mature work on Hobbes, which started with *The Two Gods of Leviathan* (1992), and continued with *A Hobbes Dictionary* (1996) and *Thomas Hobbes* (1997). My biography won the Robert W. Hamilton Book Award for 2000, and I thought I had said everything I wanted to say about Hobbes at book length. I changed my mind when Brian Leiter invited me to contribute to his distinguished series, Routledge Philosophers. I realized I had more to say and could say certain things better. If it hadn't been for Brian, I never would have written this book. My first thanks, then, go to him.

I also want to thank Mark Englestone and Neil Sinhababu for reading various parts of it, and Sharon Lloyd and Leslie Martinich for reading and commenting on all of it.

This book is intended for undergraduate students and non-specialists in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, whether they are professional scholars or educated nonscholars. This fact explains why some of my arguments are more explicit than they would be if I had Hobbesian scholars in mind. Except in the last chapter, my primary goal is to explain Hobbes's philosophy, and sometimes to argue with him. For philosophers, such argumentation is a sign of respect.

Acknowledgements

Excerpts from *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes, edited by A. P. Martinich, published by Broadview Press, 2002. Reprinted by kind permission of the publisher.

Abbreviations

Method of Citations: References to *De cive*, *De corpore*, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, and *Leviathan* are by chapter and section or chapter and paragraph. When references are given by page number, the edition used can be found in the bibliography.

AW	Anti-White
B	Behemoth
BB	An Answer to Bishop Bramhall's Book, 'The Catching of the Leviathan'
DC	<i>De cive</i>
DCo	<i>De corpore</i>
DH	<i>De homine</i>
DPS	Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws
DP	<i>Dialogus physicus</i>
EL	<i>The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic</i>
EW	English Works
L	<i>Leviathan</i>
LL	Latin <i>Leviathan</i>
LN	<i>Of Liberty and Necessity</i>
L R&C	<i>Leviathan</i> , "Review and Conclusion"
OL	<i>Opera Latina</i>
QLNC	Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance

Chronology

- 1588** Birth of Hobbes, on Good Friday, April 5
- 1608** Graduation from Magdalen Hall, Oxford
- 1614** First tour of the Continent, with William Cavendish, future 2nd earl of Devonshire
- 1626** Death of 1st earl of Devonshire
- 1628** Death of 2nd earl of Devonshire
- 1629** Publication of Hobbes's translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*; second tour of the Continent, with Gervase Clifton
- 1637** Publication of *Briefe of the Art of Rhetoric*, probably not Hobbes's translation
- 1640** Circulation of *Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* immediately following the dissolution of the Short Parliament; departure for France in December
- 1641** Writing and publication of *The Third Set of Objections to Descartes's Meditations*
- 1642** Private publication of *De cive*
- 1645** Debates with John Bramhall about free will
- 1647** Public edition of *De cive*; serious illness
- 1649** Execution of King Charles I
- 1651** Publication of *Leviathan*
- 1652** Arrival in England in late January or early February
- 1655** Publication of *De corpore*
- 1656** Publication of English translation of *De corpore*, with

changes, and with *Six Lessons to the Professors of the Mathematics* as an appendix.

1658 Publication of *De homine*

1666–8 Probable dates of the composition of *Behemoth* and *A Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England*

1668 Publication of *Opera philosophica*, in Amsterdam; first Latin edition of *Leviathan*

1679 Death of Hobbes on December 3

One

Life

THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

In the winter of 1652, at the age of sixty-three, Thomas Hobbes was crossing the English Channel from France to England. He probably thought that he was returning in triumph after a self-imposed exile of ten years. *Leviathan*, his *magnum opus*, had been published in England the preceding spring. A year before that *De corpore politico* (1650) was published. A third version of his political philosophy, *Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society*, had the date 1651. It was a translation from the Latin of *De cive*, which had first appeared in a small private edition in Paris in 1642, and then was published in 1647 in an expanded version.

In all three versions of his political philosophy, Hobbes argued for what is known as “absolute sovereignty.” This could have two different meanings, and Hobbes seemed to support both. The weaker form was that the sovereign did not share political power with any other entity. In this sense, it contrasted with mixed governments. The stronger form was that the sovereign or government had all the political power and had authority over every aspect of life. In this sense, the doctrine of absolute sovereignty was easily contrasted with the theory of limited sovereignty held by contemporary democratic theorists. According to limited sovereignty, either the government does not have authority over every aspect of life or the political power is split between two or more agencies, and usually both. Even in constitutional monarchies, the power of the monarch and the scope of its authority are limited. In the

2 Hobbes

United States the constitutional doctrine of privacy is a result of the government's limited power, and the separation of powers into legislative, executive and judicial is a result of the limited scope of any one part of government.

Hobbes certainly acted as if his return to England were triumphant. He settled in London, where the political and intellectual action was, rather than north in Derbyshire, where he had been employed for decades, earlier in his life. In London, he attended social gatherings with many distinguished people.

However, Hobbes also had to deal with some situations that he didn't like. King Charles I, whom Hobbes had favored before and during the English Civil War, had been executed in 1649. And although Hobbes had presented the exiled King Charles II a magnificent copy of *Leviathan*, handwritten on vellum, he made his peace with Charles's enemies, the newly created Commonwealth of England. Many royalists were deeply disturbed by Parliament's requirement that all adult male citizens sign the Engagement, a loyalty oath, because they thought that they were obligated to the monarchy by prior oaths. For these men, the fact that the current monarch was in exile did not diminish their obligation. Hobbes, however, had a way around these scruples. For him, a "government" that is unable to protect its citizens is not a government. More precisely, an entity that is unable to protect people is not the sovereign of those people. Since the only entity that was able to protect people in England was the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth was the only sovereign. Hobbes had written about this in other places but he addressed it directly in "A Review and Conclusion" of *Leviathan*. Although he thought the execution of Charles I had been unfortunate and preferred monarchy over any other form of government, his political philosophy was not tied to monarchy. Aristocracy and democracy were equally legitimate forms of government according to him.

His prominence as a political theorist in the early 1650s was somewhat strange since a large part, possibly the largest part, of his

life during the 1630s and 1640s had been dedicated to mathematics and natural science. He had been a member of the scientific circle of William Cavendish, the future duke of Newcastle, in the 1630s. In Paris in 1635, he met Marin Mersenne, who was the leader of a scientific circle in Paris, not to mention other French philosophers and scientists. In the spring of 1636 he met with Galileo in Florence. In 1637, he received a copy of Descartes's *Discourse on the Method* from Sir Kenelm Digby, a well-connected patron of science.

When Hobbes was preparing to leave England in late 1640, he corresponded with Mersenne, possibly to arrange to meet with him in Paris. In 1644, he contributed an article on ballistics to Mersenne's *Ballistica*. During the 1640s, Hobbes's major project was the first part of his envisioned tripartite work in philosophy, *Elementa philosophiae* [*The Elements of Philosophy*]. The first part was named *De corpore*, but Hobbes did not complete it during the 1640s or even during the first half of the 1650s. In a letter of June 1646, Hobbes wrote:

Part of the reason why I am taking so long over the first section of my Elements is partly laziness, but mostly the fact that I find it difficult to explain my meanings to my own satisfaction. For I am seeking to achieve in metaphysics and physics what I hope I have achieved in moral philosophy, so that there may be no room left for any critic to write against me.

(Hobbes 1994: 133)

Most scholars think that it was not laziness but the difficulty Hobbes was having with the proofs that delayed its completion.

Shortly after it appeared in 1655 (in translation, 1656), *De corpore* began to cause Hobbes trouble that continued for the next twenty years. The source of the trouble was his materialism, which most critics thought was inconsistent with Christianity. Also controversial was his alleged proof of squaring a circle, that is, the proof that there was a way to construct a square equal in area to a given circle using only a straightedge and compass. In a series of books

and pamphlets during the 1650s, 1660s, and into the 1670s, Hobbes and John Wallis, Savilian Professor of Geometry at Oxford, debated various versions of Hobbes's proofs, all of which were recognized by competent, emotionally uninvolved mathematicians as defective. Although Wallis was more than competent as a mathematician and recognized the faults in Hobbes's proofs, he was emotionally involved; and this caused him to insert into the debate issues of religion and politics that were irrelevant to the mathematical issues. Hobbes won the irrelevant battles, I think, but lost the mathematical war. By 1670, Hobbes's reputation as a mathematician and scientist was irreparably damaged.

EARLY LIFE

When Hobbes was born prematurely on April 15, 1588, just outside of Malmesbury, Wiltshire, no one could have predicted the eventual eminence he would attain. In his autobiography, Hobbes said that he was born a twin with fear. Some scholars doubt that he was born prematurely since the attempted invasion of the Spanish Armada did not occur until July. That is a very comfortable judgment to make from the heights of 300 years. A pregnant woman with little protection against an invasion might well have carried fear along with her child.

Hobbes's father, Thomas, was an ignorant and alcoholic clergyman. When he fled Malmesbury in the direction of London after a brawl with another clergyman he disappeared from history. This happened about the time Hobbes was leaving for Magdalen Hall, Oxford. His education was paid for by his uncle Francis, a successful glover.

Hobbes was precocious. He began school at the age of four and knew Latin, Greek, and arithmetic before setting off for Oxford. He was somewhat younger than the other boys at Magdalen Hall when he arrived, but he did well although he denigrates the Aristotelianism that was being taught and brags about the time he spent catching birds and visiting bookshops to pore over maps. He graduated in

February 1608 and, upon the recommendation of the Principal, he was hired by William Cavendish to tutor his son William, the future earl of Devonshire. In fact, Hobbes was at least as much a companion as a tutor. They went on a Grand Tour of the Continent in 1614, Hobbes's first trip abroad. They visited Paris, Venice, and Rome, among other places, and traveled at least as far south as Naples. Back in England in 1615, Hobbes translated the correspondence of Fulgentio Micanzio to William from Italian into English until 1628. Micanzio was the secretary of Paulo Sarpi, the state theologian for Venice. He reported on battles of the Thirty Years War in the vicinity of Italy and indirectly tried to get William to move James I to support the Venetian cause. One path to James was through Francis Bacon, and Micanzio came to correspond with Bacon too. John Aubrey, Hobbes's first biographer, said that Hobbes was Bacon's secretary for some time and translated some of his essays into Latin. This probably occurred in the middle of the 1620s. Not much more is known about Hobbes's life between 1615 and 1620.

Between 1620 and 1630, Hobbes carried out various tasks for William. He was a shareholder in the Virginia Company, one of the earliest companies intended to colonize America, and attended its meetings between 1622 and 1624. But he also secured loans to help sustain William's spendthrift life. William died in 1628, just two years after becoming the 2nd earl of Devonshire.

Hobbes dedicated his translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1629) to William. In a rare personal note, Hobbes, late in life, said that his years with William were the happiest of his life and that he continued to dream about them. Hobbes probably considered his translation of Thucydides' work a political action in part. Presenting a translation of the history by Thucydides, whose disdain for democracy was well known, could easily be seen as support for Charles I, who was having trouble with the supporters of Parliament during the second half of the 1620s. In his address "To the Readers," Hobbes said "the principal and proper work of history . . . [is] to instruct and enable men, by the knowledge of

actions past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future" (Hobbes 1629: xxi). The 1620s are usually considered the humanistic phase in Hobbes's life. This judgment is justified by the time he spent translating the letters of Micanzio, his translation from the Greek of Thucydides' history, and his introduction to the translation, "On the Life and History of Thucydides," which is "constructed according to the precepts laid down in classical handbooks of rhetoric for the presentation of persuasive arguments" (Skinner 2002: 5).

William's widow Christian probably had blamed Hobbes to some extent for the dire condition of the estate when William died. Hobbes was let go but then promptly hired by a neighbor Gervaise Clifton to take his son on a Grand Tour during 1629–30, which was Hobbes's second trip to the Continent. During this trip Hobbes probably came upon the proof of the Pythagorean theorem in Euclid's geometry. At first he doubted the proof: "By G_, this is impossible," he reportedly said. But he checked the proofs of its premises, and then the premises of those proofs until eventually he became convinced. "This," says John Aubrey, "made him in love with geometry" (Aubrey 1680: 332). Some scholars, notably Leo Strauss, downplay the importance of science and geometry for Hobbes. They claim he remained a humanist in a scientist's clothing. I think that natural science, and especially geometry, inspired Hobbes to present his philosophy rigorously. If he failed to do that, it was not for lack of trying. This is not to deny that Hobbes made a conscious effort in *Leviathan* to make his argument persuasive to less rigorous thinkers. What Hobbes especially liked about geometry was the method of laying down definitions and then drawing logical consequences from them. Properly executed, the result is a tower of interlocking propositions, built upon a foundation of incontestable definitions, incontestable because they are true by stipulation. The influence of geometrical method on Hobbes's general philosophy is clearest in *De corpore* (1655).

Once back in England, Hobbes was rehired by Christian

Cavendish. In 1634, he took William, the 3rd earl of Devonshire, on a Grand Tour of France and Italy. Hobbes, now well into his forties, lacked the inclination to keep a tight rein on the rambunctious teenager and occupied himself intellectually on the principles of physics. Hobbes spent a great deal of his time with Marin Mersenne's circle. He was particularly intrigued by the mechanics of sensation. The key to understanding sensation was that if all physical things were at rest or if everything moved at the same speed and in the same direction, then there would be no way to distinguish one thing from another and hence no sensation (AW 323). Consequently, he held that the cause of all things was the difference between motions. In *De corpore*, he filled out this idea: "Sense, therefore, 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" (DCo 25.2). His idea that our qualitative experiences of color, smell, taste, and sound are not accurate representations of the way things are in themselves was first asserted by Galileo, whom he probably met in Florence during the spring of 1636. Hobbes returned to England in the fall of that year.

SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Not much of Hobbes's life during the 1630s is known. An interesting tidbit is that he probably played a part in Ben Jonson's entertainment for Charles I in 1633 (Martinich 1998a: 370–1). More importantly, Hobbes associated with the circle of mathematicians and scientists assembled by William Cavendish, later the duke of Newcastle, a cousin of the "Devonshire" Cavendishes. His association with Newcastle began several years earlier when Hobbes and Newcastle were part of a party exploring the neighboring Peak District and out of which came a Latin poem written by Hobbes, *De mirabilibus pecci*. The purpose of the trip was to discover "the causes of things" (OL 5: 327; see also Martinich 1998b).

In 1634, Hobbes visited Malmesbury for, so far as we know, the last time. During this visit, he met a bright eight-year-old pupil of

his old teacher, Robert Latimer. This was a propitious meeting because the pupil was John Aubrey, who came to know Hobbes well and provided us with a vivid, fact-filled, though not always accurate, account of much of Hobbes's life. There's no reason to doubt that Hobbes had a daughter, whom he referred to as the joy of his youth. He never married because a person in his position, an intellectual and dependent on wealthy patrons, could not conveniently have a family.

In addition to his association with the members of Mersenne's circle and Newcastle's circle, Hobbes probably visited Great Tew, near Oxford, after he returned to England in October 1636. The circle of Great Tew included several men destined for distinction, such as Lucius Cary, William Chillingworth, Henry Hammond, Edward Hyde, and Edmund Waller. The major subjects of discussion there included the early history of Christianity and the relation between reason and revelation.

Science and religion, two of the three major topics of interest to the people that Hobbes interacted with during the 1630s, were also two of the three major topics of Hobbes's writings from 1640 onward. The third was political theory. In *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, which circulated in manuscript in the spring of 1640, Hobbes first presented his political theory and the part of science about human beings. Part I of the manuscript, "Humane Nature," gave a naturalistic and materialist account of sensation, imagination, rationality, and the emotions. It also contained the twin foundations of his political theory, the idea that human beings in the state of nature are equal and at war with each other and the idea that they can escape this condition if they lay down their rights to all things, as dictated by the laws of nature. Part II, "De corpore politico," talked about the kinds of governments – monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy – the supremacy of the sovereign, the causes of rebellion (a touchy subject in 1640) and the duties of the sovereign power. As the Long Parliament was about to begin in late 1640, Hobbes thought that England was no longer safe for him, in large

part because of the views he expressed in *The Elements of Law*, and that a civil war was likely. Thus he left England, “the first of those who fled,” as he later said of himself. Fighting broke out in 1642 and ended with the execution of Charles I in 1649.

In Paris, where Hobbes spent the decade of the 1640s, he was a valued member of Mersenne’s circle. He contributed one of the first sets of objections to Descartes’s *Meditations*, published in 1641. Hobbes is a wholly unsympathetic commentator. I want to consider Hobbes’s relationship with Descartes, emotional and philosophical, at some length, because of the light it throws on his personality.

Hobbes criticizes Descartes’s apparent inference from “I am thinking” to “I am thought” (Descartes 1641: 122). It is no better, says Hobbes, than the argument that “I am walking” entails “I am a walk.” Hobbes thinks that the inference from “I am thinking,” to “I exist,” is not the result of some intuition or direct awareness of oneself, but from the fact that humans are unable “to conceive of an act without its subject.” Descartes, in other words, was not distinguishing between a subject and its properties. Hobbes then says, “It seems to follow from this that a thinking thing is something corporeal;” and Descartes sharply retorts that Hobbes’s assertion is “quite without any reason, and in violation of all usage and all logic” (Descartes 1641: 124). Fifteen years later, Hobbes diagnoses Descartes’s mistake as the result of inferring from the fact that “it is possible to consider thinking without considering body” that something can be a thinking thing without a body (DCo 3.5).

Hobbes thinks that another part of Descartes’s problem arises from a false theory of what reasoning is. Hobbes suggests what he would later assert, namely, that “reasoning is simply the joining together and linking of names.” Further, since names are arbitrary labels that humans attach to things, the inferences of reasoning say nothing about things but about the labels applied to them (Hobbes 1641: 125).

Now, what shall we say if it turns out that reasoning is simply the joining together and linking of names or labels by means of the word 'is'? It would follow that the inferences in our reasoning tell us nothing at all about the nature of things, but merely tell us about the labels applied to them; that is, all we can infer is whether or not we are combining the names of things in accordance with the arbitrary conventions which we have laid down in respect of their meaning.

(Hobbes 1641: 125–6)

Descartes replies that there is no need to focus exclusively on the origin of names. When people reason, they don't link names but the "things that are signified by the names" (Descartes 1641: 126). Frenchmen and Germans reason about the same things even though they use different words.

One of the most important differences between Hobbes and Descartes concerned human knowledge of God. Hobbes, who thought that all ideas ultimately derive from sensation, thought that humans had virtually no knowledge of God, because he is never the object of a sensation. Hobbes seems to think that humans have two kinds of images or ideas. One kind we might call "resembling" ideas. They are ideas that purport to represent or picture some material object; and these are the ideas that are properly so called. It makes sense to ask whether one's image of a tree or even a chimera is "the likeness" of some object. It does not make sense to ask of the other kind of ideas, "nonresembling" ones. When a person thinks of an angel, his or her thought may be accompanied by the image of a flame or of "a beautiful child with wings," but the person does not think that these images are supposed to present a likeness of an angel. The same goes for whatever image might accompany a thought about God: "[We] have no idea or image corresponding to the sacred name of God." In short, "there is no idea of God in us" (Hobbes 1641: 127). The thought underlying Hobbes's claim about angels and God does not apply only to them. He also thinks that people have no idea of substance; it is something the existence

of which people arrive at by reasoning (Hobbes 1641: 130). A more important example of an object for which there is no corresponding image involves a blind man. He has no image resembling fire, even though he “recognizes that there is something which makes him hot.” The blind man’s belief that fire exists is the result of an inference from his experience and not a direct result of any experience.

Hobbes uses this example of a blind man’s belief that fire exists as an analogy for knowledge that God exists. Hobbes’s proof for the existence of God is a casual rendition of a cosmological argument: humans recognize that

there must be some cause of his images or ideas, and that this cause must have a prior cause, and so on; he is finally led to the supposition of some eternal cause which never began to exist and hence cannot have a cause prior to itself, and he concludes that something eternal must necessarily exist.

[Hobbes 1641: 127]

And this thing he calls God.

Hobbes would use a similar argument a decade later in *Leviathan*:

Curiosity or love of the knowledge of causes draws a man from consideration of the effect to seek the cause, and again, the cause of that cause, till of necessity he must come to this thought at last that there is some cause whereof there is no former cause but is eternal; which is it men call God . . . though they cannot have any idea of him in their mind answerable to his nature.

[L 11.25]

Hobbes compares human knowledge of God to that of a person “born blind, hearing men talk of warming themselves by the fire and being brought to warm himself” (L 11.25). The blind person thereby comes to believe that fire exists without having a resembling idea of it. Hobbes’s proofs for the existence of God are short and rather perfunctory. Since there were precious few atheists in

the middle of seventeenth-century England, deploying an elaborate argument for the existence of God would have been pointless.

Hobbes and Descartes also disagree about the meaning of “infinite.” Hobbes’s notion is negative. He says, “to be infinite . . . is [to be] impossible for me to conceive or imagine any supposed limits or extremities without being able to imagine further limits beyond them.” What follows from this is “that what arises in connection with the term ‘infinite’ is not the idea of the infinity of God but the idea of my own boundaries or limits” (Hobbes 1641: 131). In contrast, Descartes has a positive idea of infinity. Although God does not resemble any exterior material object, we can have an idea of the ways in which he is infinite by extrapolating from certain ideas. From the idea of human understanding, which is finite, we project to an idea of God’s understanding, which is infinite.

Descartes is nonplussed at Hobbes’s inability to do what philosophers for almost two millennia have been able to do: to conceive of an immaterial object. From this point on, Hobbes’s objections become more dismissive, and Descartes’s replies testier. In one, three sentences long, Descartes says, “I see nothing here that needs answering.” In his next objection Hobbes says, “If we do not have an idea of God (and it is not proved that we do)” and Descartes counters, “If we do have an idea of God – and it is manifest that we do” (Hobbes 1641: 127, Descartes 1641: 127).

In retrospect, the failure of Hobbes and Descartes to engage each other is not surprising. Hobbes was an inveterate monist and materialist. Descartes an inveterate dualist and rationalist. Each thought too well of himself and seems to have believed that philosophical distinction was a zero-sum game.

By 1640, Hobbes had worked out his views about optics, views that would eventually be published as part of *De homine* in 1658. He spent a large part of the 1640s working on *De corpore*, which was to be the first part of *Elementa philosophiae*. He was up to Chapter 13 by May 1645 and probably Chapter 25 by August 1648. But he was unable to put it into a form that suited him. In a letter of June