https://doi.org/10.18778/1689-4286.18.01

HYBRIS nr 18 (2012)
ISSN: 1689-4286

Peter Machamer

University of Pittsburgh

The Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: Monist, Materialist and Mechanist. Abstract

This essay will present Hobbes as the most consistent philosopher of the 17th century, and show that in all areas his endeavors have cogency that is unrivalled, in many ways even to this day. The second section will outline Hobbes' conception of philosophy and his causal materialism. Section 3 will deal briefly with Hobbes' discussion of sensation and then present his views on the nature and function of language and how reason depends upon language. Section 4 portrays his views about the material world; Section 5 deals with nature of man; and the 6th section with the artificial body of the commonwealth and the means of its creation.

The Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: Monist, Materialist and Mechanist

> For everything is best understood by its constitutive causes. For as in a watch, or some small engine, the matter, figure, and motion of the wheels cannot be well known, except it be taken insunder and viewed in its parts; so to make a more curious search into rights of states and duties of subjects, I say, not to take them insunder, but yet that they be so considered as if they were dissolved (Hobbes, *The Citizen*, 99).

1. Introduction

Most of what has been written about Thomas Hobbes has been about his political philosophy and much misunderstood. Most of these discussions have neglected his natural philosophy and only concentrated on the bits of his theory about humans that are deemed relevant to his politics. Sometimes writers have even gone so far as to claim that his materialism and mechanism about the physical world and human beings are irrelevant

to his political theory. Hobbes himself lent seeming support to this divide by claiming that his political theory could be understood apart from his views on natural philosophy (De Corp I.7; M 73). To an extent they are discrete domains, but to miss the relation between them is to lose the integrity of Hobbes' thought and to eliminate the basic philosophical grounds as to why he thought his political theory was viable. Maybe the only person who really understood Hobbes was William Harvey, who in his will, written in 1651, leaves "…tenne pounds" "…to my good friend Mr. Thomas Hobbs to buy something to keep in remembrance of me."

This essay will present Hobbes as the most consistent philosopher of the 17th century, and show that in all areas his endeavors have cogency that is unrivalled, in many ways even to this day. The second section will outline Hobbes' conception of philosophy and his causal materialism. Section 3 will deal briefly with Hobbes' discussion of sensation and then present his views on the nature and function of language and how reason depends upon language. Section 4 portrays his views about the material world; Section 5 deals with nature of man; and the 6th section with the artificial body of the commonwealth and the means of its creation. All of this will move rather quickly, so that at the end hopefully the overall structure of Hobbes' thought will be clear. If there is time at the end I will try to correct a few misconceptions.

There is some textual evidence that Hobbes changed his views sometime after 1640, which is the year he wrote and circulated his *Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (which includes "Human Nature" and "De Corpore Politico"; a pirated unapproved version was published in England in 1650). In this early work he seems to countenance a form of mind-body dualism. In 1641 Hobbes accepts Mersenne's invitation to write an objection to Descartes' *Mediations*, and it may be that this is where he first forges his uncompromising materialism. Hobbes criticized Descartes' *cogitio* [*I think* or *I am thinking*] on the grounds that it needs a subject who thought. He then writes "For it seems that the subject of any act can be understood only in terms of something corporeal or in terms of

matter." [3rd Objections and replies, CSM 122, AT 173]. Descartes, of course, demurs and counter-asserts that the subject is mental and need not be corporeal.

In 1642 Hobbes publishes *De Cive* (in Latin). From 1647 until 1650 Hobbes is working on his *Leviathan*, which is published (in London) in 1651. In 1655 he publishes *De Corpore* (in Latin, English edition 1656). And finally, in 1658, *De Homine*. Certainly these latter 3 works comprise the core of Hobbes' mature thought. Because *De Cive* may still be a transitional work, I will lay out Hobbes' position as it is found in *Leviathan*, *De Corpore* and *De Homine*.

2. The Nature of Philosophy and Causal Materialism

At the very beginning of *De Corpore* Hobbes defines "philosophy":

> *Philosophy* is such knowledge of effects or appearances, as we acquire by true ratiocination from the knowledge we have first of their causes or generation; and again, of such causes or generations as may be from knowing first their effects. (DC I.2 & 1.6; M 3 & 63)

Finding out "causes" or "generation" provides us with knowledge. We find out by ratiocination, or as he later says, by using the right *method*, where "method" means "the shortest way of finding out effects by their known causes, or of causes by their known effects". It is in this sense that Hobbes is a 'causalist' about knowledge.

He further holds that only one kind of thing that may count as a cause, a body. Body is "that, which having no dependence on our thought is coincident or co-extended with some part of space". This sets the fundamental part of his ontology. The next ontological move comes from realizing that in order to be causes, bodies must act.

> A body is said to work upon or act, that is to do something to another body, when it either generates or destroys some accident in it. …as when one body putting forward another body generates motion in it, it is called the *agent*; and the body in which the

> motion is so generated, is called the *patient*. …a cause simply, or an entire cause, is the aggregate of all the accidents both of the agent how many so ever they be, and of the patient, put together which when they are all supposed present, it cannot be understood but that the effect is produced at the same instant; and if any one of them be wanting, it cannot be understood but that the effect is not produced. (DC II.8.1.1, 102 & II.9.3; M 121–2)

The only agents of change are motions, which are accidents of bodies. Motion is defined as "a continual relinquishing of one place and the acquiring of another"[?] (DC II.8.10; M 109). Finally, we find clearly stated Hobbes' only cause: "There can be no cause of motion, except in a body contiguous and moved." (II.9.7; M 124). Again, "Wherefore the power of the agent and the efficient cause are the same thing" (DC II.10, 1; M 127) and "the efficient cause of all motion and mutation consists in the motion of the agent or agents… all active power consists in motion" (DC II.10.6; M 131).

Hobbes has laws of motion (1) "Whatsoever is at rest, will always be at rest unless there be some other body besides it, which, by endeavoring to get into its place by motion, suffers it no longer to remain at rest." (II. 8.19;M 115) and (2) "Whatsoever is moved, will always be moved, except here be some other body besides it which causeth it to rest." (DC II.8.19; M 115). These are certainly like the laws of Descartes found in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644; Part II); though they too are reminiscent of some things Galileo said in his *Dialogues* and in *Discorsi*, and which Hobbes could have picked up from discussions with Mersenne and his circle in Paris, or Mersenne's editions of Galileo.

There is one last concept, *endeavor* or in Latin, *conatus*, that will be most important in our later examinations.

> I define *endeavour* to be motion made in less space and time than can be given; that is, less than can be determined or assigned by exposition and number; that is, motion made through the length of a point, and in an instant or point of time. (DC III.15.2; M 206) … All endeavour tends towards that part, that is to say, in that way which is

> determined by the motion of the movent, if the motion be but one; or, if there are many movents, in that way which their concourse determines. (DC III.15.5; M 215)

At this point we have before us the major explanatory concepts that Hobbes' will use: body, cause, motion and endeavor. But to see how they work we must become clear about Hobbes' views about experience, language, and reason. Hobbes' theory is presented (in different order, yet with the same content) at the beginning and end of *De Corpore*, and also earlier first books of *Leviathan* (and later in the latter books *De Homine*).

3. Sense Experience, Language, Reason

Hobbes begins his *Leviathan* with discussion of sensation. Earlier and in more detail in *Human Nature* he discussed "Man's Natural Faculties" and "The Cause of Sense", and later in *De Corpore*, at the beginning of Part IV "Physics or Phenomena of Nature", he starts with a chapter (XXV) "Of Sense and Animal Motion". Basically these all lay out the same doctrine. Sense perception is epistemically fundamental for Hobbes. In this sense, he is an empiricist since all knowledge is ultimately traceable back to, and validated by, sense perceptions. Objects, external to us, cause in representations or appearances us. From these appearances we *may*, not always *do*, figure out how they are generated by external bodies (DC IV, 25, p 388). The appearance Hobbes calls a phantasm, which is "made by the reaction and endeavour outwards in the organ of sense, caused by an endeavour inwards from the object, remaining for some time more or less." (DC IV 25, 2). So sense perception is just a motion in the sentient, which then passes to the imagination (as a first repository of memory). Hobbes continues:

> The perpetual arising of phantasms, both in sense and imagination, is that which we commonly call the discourse of the mind, and is common to men with other living creatures. For he that thinketh, compareth the phantasms that pass, that is taketh notice of their likeness and unlikeness to one another… so he is said to have good

> judgment, that finds out the unlikeness or differences of things that are like one another. (DC IV.25.8)

To the perceptual sense of objects, Hobbes adds an internal sense of pleasure and pain that accompanies every external perception and consists in a motion "towards the heart". (DC IV 25. 12).

> For the original of life being in the heart, that motion in the sentient, which is propagated to the heart, must necessarily make some alteration or diversion of vital motion, namely by quickening or slackening, helping or hindering the same. Now when it helpeth, it is pleasure; and when it hindereth it is pain, trouble, grief &c. …Now this vital motion is the motion of the blood, perpetually circvulating (as hath been shown from many infallible signs and marks by Doctor Harvey, the first observer of it) in the veins and arteries. (DC IV 25.12)

Sensation and this internal sense conspire to avoid what troubles an animal and to pursue what pleases it. So "this first endeavor which when it tends towards such things as our known by experience to be pleasant, is called *appetite*, that is, an approaching; and when it shuns what is troublesome, aversion, or flying from it." (DC IV.25 12) Experience and memory of such experiences that have proven pleasurable or painful are necessary for knowledge. Then with imagination one may deliberate on what appetite they may follow, as long as it lies within one's power to obtain the object that will seemingly satisfy that appetite. There are many respects in which Hobbes is not only materialist, but also a behaviorist.

Hobbes is a nominalist about language. Basically the nominalist position, deriving from William of Ockham, holds that the meaning of terms in language is determined by their referents. For a term to have a direct meaning it must signify an object that exists. General terms and abstract terms are only meaningful insofar as they ultimately signify classes of objects that are actually instantiated by at least one actual body. For Hobbes, terms directly refer only to the phantasms of sense, since these phantasms are motions

inside the perceiving human, created by actual material objects, in most cases, there is a transparent intentional relation between word which names a (type of) phantasm and the physical body that caused it. In cases where the phantasms are not directly caused by the physical body (as in dreams) (Lev. I.ii.7), Hobbes tell us that we can perform tests to find out that we are dreaming and so tell that the phantasms are only creations from residual sense experience in the imagination and so are not being directly caused by objects. In fact, Hobbes tests every term for significance by seeing if there is a phantasm caused by an object to which it refers. That is, significance or sense of a term means that the term signifies a body or material object.

In this way Hobbes is very much a man of the new Renaissance, despising Scholastics and others for building philosophies and theories that are only composed of words having no referents (Lev. I.ii.8). He saves he greatest scorn, however, for those religious people, mainly Catholics, who invoke the word "God" in explanations or think that God is an immaterial spirit. The word "God" or terms that are used to describe 'Him' such as "immaterial" or "incorporeal" are non signifying, and in the latter case Hobbes feels they are self contradictory, or oxymorons. They can mean nothing. "immaterial body": is just nonsense (in literal sense). However, Hobbes believes religion is important, but only as an exhortative act, showing honor or faith. Religion may also be used by the Sovereign of a Commonwealth, in a Machiavellian manner, to help ensure peace and security. Here is rather lengthy quote from *Leviathan* about the nature of religion:

> But the opinion that that such spirits were incorporeal, or immaterial, could never enter into the mind of man by nature, because though men may put together words of contradictory signification, as *spirit* or *incorporeal*, yet they can never have the imagination of anything answering to them; and therefore, the men that by their own meditation arrive to the acknowledgment of one infinite, omnipotent, and eternal God, choose rather to confess he is incomprehensible, and above their understanding, than to define his nature by *spirit incorporeal*, and then confess their definition is unintelligible; or if they give him such a title , it is not *dogmatically*, with the intention

> to make the divined attribute understood, but piously, to honour him with attributes of significations as remote as they can from the grossness of bodies visible. (Lev. Ixii.7)

There is not time to go into Hobbes' extremely interesting view of reason. Suffice it to say that for Hobbes' reason is human faculty of computation that depends upon using words, which in turn depend upon comparing phantasms. When the word that is the predicate of sentence names the same thing as the word that is the subject of the sentence, then the sentence is true. The subject is said to be contained in the predicate, when both words are co-referential (via their associated phantasms). Truth, therefore, only properly applies to sentences. Yet it is their reference to material bodies that makes sentences true. Reasoning, and reason, is what happens when humans put sentences together into chains that are connected by inclusion relations among the terms of the sentences. In this sense, Hobbes' theory of reasoning is very like the Aristotelian theory of the syllogism, though we may also see a foreshowing of Leibniz. Humans reason or calculate by comparing terms to their phantasms and to their signified objects.

4. Physical Bodies

Material objects have natural motions, which are based in geometry, straight line uniform motion. Two (or more) material bodies will (must) collide, since there is no vacuum. The result is composite motion as studied in mechanics, optics, and the other mixed sciences.

5. Human Bodies

Man is an organized collection of material bodies that act in a coherent way such as to form a unitary. single type of body. Man, and animals, have appetites (or desires and aversions) that are their natural motions, their endeavors. Human bodies will collide by having appetites that are in conflict with one another. Such collisions are characteristic of men in the state of nature. But, humans, and not animals, also have language and reason

that *may* provide a check on appetite, and so constitutes another natural motion proper to human beings. Humans may use their reason to escape from the state of nature.

6. Artificial Bodies

The Commonwealth or State is an artificially created body, personified in a Sovereign. The creation occurred because men, in the terrifying and dangerous state of nature, used their reason to contract or make covenant among themselves that authorized the Sovereign to act for them. The Sovereign's endeavor or natural motion is to provide peace and security for his citizens.

7. Conclusion

"Body" is an univocal term, defined by its signification of material bodies, human bodies and artificial bodies, and their proper motions. Since the meaning of term is solely provided by what it signifies, the expansion of the reference class to include all three types of body means that Hobbes to talk about one type of body, material body maybe composed to make up another more complex body, humans. Further he may speak about how humans make up, by contract, the artificial body of the State. But this does not mean that the state or the human is reducible to simple material bodies. The creation of each type of body brings with it a natural motion appropriate or proper to each type. So we have coherent, materialist system.

REFERENCES

Descartes, Rene (1641), *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and *Objections and Replies*, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, translators, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume II, Cambridge University Press 1984. Hereafter 'CSM'. The

Latin edition, *Principia Philosophiae*, appears in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Volume VIII-1, Paris, J., Vrin, 1964. Hereafter cited as "AT".

Harvey, William (1963), *The Circulation of the Blood and other writings*. Translated by Kenneth Franklin, Everyman's Library, London: Dent (New York: Dutton).

Hobbes, Thomas (1642), *The Citizen*, translation attributed to Thomas Hobbes (1651) in William Molesworth, The English Works, Volume II; Latin version in Molesworth, *Opera Philosophicae*, Volume II. Reprinted in Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen* edited by Bernard Gert, Hackett Publishing Company 1991 (originally 1972).

Hobbes, Thomas (1651), *Leviathan, or The matter, Forme, & Power of a Commonwealth ecclesiastical and civil*. Richard Tuck, editor Revised Student Edition, Cambridge University Press 1996.

Hobbes, Thomas (1655), *De Corpore* [*Elementorum Philosophiae, Sectio Prima, De Corpore*; *Elements of Philosophy. The First Section Concerning Body, written in Latin by Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury, and translated into English*] by William Moleworth, editor, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, 1839; reprinted by Scientia Aalen 1962.; Latin edition: Molesworth, Guliemi ed. Thomas Hobbes, *Opera Philosophica, quae Latine Scripsit*, Volume I[?], 1839–45; reprint Scientia Aalen, (1961.) Hereafter cited in text as "M" followed by page number of English translation.

Hobbes, Thomas (1658), *De Homine*, Latin version in Molesworth, *Opera Philosophicae*, Volume II. Chapters 10–15 translated into English in Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen* edited by Bernard Gert, Hackett Publishing Company 1991 (originally 1972).