

## Genesis and Steadiness of Modern Political Thought. Thomas Hobbes: Axiomatic Geometry or Secular Theology?

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**ABSTRACT:** Among many interpretations about either the aims and the accomplishments of Hobbes's political philosophy there is one which seems to remain outstanding: he tried and achieved a new way of founding and solving political affairs, based upon geometrical, logical, scientific procedures.

However, certain passages of his works can be read as no more than plain theology, since Hobbes identifies in them Natural Law and Divine Law. Thus, some incoherences seem to claim for a *tertia via* of understanding Hobbes's thought: a solid structure dressed in alleged scientific and secular status, inspired both in geometry and physical science, but built upon a controversial concept (Natural Law).

So the point of discussion will be about the plausibility of that alleged scientific and secular method, rather than the confirmation of the *fact* that the works of this English thinker who lived in 17th century changed forever the layout of western political organizations.

That change did not arise from whimsical nor trendy motives. Reason and reasoning were reckoned to be the best way of dealing with reality. Political issues are part of reality, indeed a chief part of the live of individuals. Therefore, reason must be the main instrument to think and act the political realm. That seemed plain to several philosophers back in 17th century. So the question now in 21st would be: Was early modern political actually based on strictly rational principles? Or was it based much more on desire, aversion and agency, which seem to imply hope and fear? That hope and fear which messes so well with Revelation and so bad with inertial nature. Even: Are desires linked to reason? Up to what extent?

In other words: Is the "Preservation-Natural Law *package*" a solid axiomatic basis upon which men are able to build a firm geometrical political true, so to speak? Or is it rather itself a theological issue, that is, found out by desire and aversion, hope, fear and faith? Do not desire, aversion, hope, fear and faith imply intention and thus a pre-geometrical cornerstone? What has collapsed and what remains from that Aristotelian conception of nature which Hobbes endeavors to devastate?

**KEYWORDS:** Immanency and politics, theology and politics, the will and politics, natural law, law of desire.

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So... Let us go ahead and down this road we will stumble upon some key matters concerning political affairs. And in the end, this will be about questions that might lead to answers rather than about answers that might lead to questions.

Thomas Hobbes is reckoned to be, along with the earlier Machiavelli, the outsider of that “bunch” of thinkers who tried to banish theology from the factual political realm. He tried to change Revelation and natural theology for natural reason. That is, the substitution of suprasensorial reason grounded on Schools's metaphysics and theology for sensorial reason, *scientific, geometrical* reason.

That intention of change did not come out of the blue. It was inserted within a raising frame of a mechanical and mathematical world.

As many other philosophical tendencies this new mechanistic materialism was involved in the quest for the whole. That is, the search for a set containing everything. It seems to be a typical problem of philosophy that endless endeavour to categorize so that we can understand what surrounds us, the purpose of handling whatsoever concerns us with language and the understanding. So Hobbes claimed that reality is nothing but mechanical nature: nothing to do with the animic intention that we found in the Aristotelian conception of nature. But: ¿What should be said about the human being? On the one side we have a rare being in that infinite material world endowed with life-*anima*, an internal source of motion. Hence, it seems, we are talking about a non-inertial being. On the other side, we have a likewise rare being endowed with consciousness and intention, endowed with what we call “the will”. In Aristotle we find the classic idea of a world as a living being. However, Aristotle didn't talk about the will. At least speaking in a strict way. There is no place for the will in the fatal Greek world, a world of natural tendencies, of internal goals compelled by nature.

So, within that quest for the whole (that need to categorize) we stumble at first upon the immanency problem. Hobbes, then, so that he can reach that set containing the whole, had to design a set out of which nothing fits: for there is not such a place, there is not a place out of this world, “the” world. Several problems may immediately arise.

Now we need to ask: What's this all about? Hobbes told us: that's all about matter and motion, that's all about body and cause-effect change, that's all about inertia and force. No thing out of this. Classical mechanics illustrated by the machine metaphor. Spirits, phantoms and the like are by no means matter in motion for they are defined as immaterial. Thus, there is no such thing as spirits, there is no such thing as phantoms. So there is no such thing as soul. Let

us go to Hobbes's proper words: "The Word Body, in the most generall acceptation, signifieth that which filleth, or occupyeth some certain room" (HOBBS, 1651: 302).

Hobbes's words seem to be quite clear: For the *Universe*, being the Aggregate of all Bodies, there is no reall part thereof that is not also *Body*; nor any thing properly a *Body*, that is not also part of (that Aggregate of all *Bodies*) the *Universe*" (*Ibid.*)

Then: "*Substance incorporeall* are words, which when they are joined together, destroy one another, as if a man should say, an *Incorporeall Body*" (*Id.*, 303).

In addition he writes:

Now seeing the Scripture maketh mention but of two worlds; this that is now, and shall remain to the day of Judgment, (which is therefore also called, *the last day*); and that which shall bee after the day of Judgement, when there shall bee a new Heaven, and a new Earth. (*Id.*, 376)

There is not, then, a superposed world. There is just one world, the other is a world to come.

Now we face what we could call "the bet for immanency" (that *Deus sive natura versus Deus ex-machina*): that is Hobbes's risky bet as well as perhaps his most accurate one. To settle the discussion we may borrow Hannah Arendt's elegant definition of immanency as the "sheer givenness of the world". Nothing beyond this world, then. Nothing will come from beyond, thus. Related to that bet for immanency, both Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt found in Hobbes's writings what it seems to us an astonishing paradox: the Machiavellian separation of the two worlds (God's world, *this* world), retaken by Hobbes, spins weirdly to regain unity out of that non-original excision. Politics, as well as theology, are this world matter: rejection, then, of any sort of transcendent utopism. No fairy tales in the political realm anymore: no transcendent religion, no morals nor salvation from above. Just reason, history and science: *true* knowledge. In *here* we will have to search for *salus* (salvation), in here we will find it.

Therefore: no more kingdom of God in this world, no more Almighty's government over men, no more *Civitas Dei*. It is time for Leviathan, that marine but earthly beast, that mighty but mortal power. A conventional artifact (namely, made by the art of men: "that great Leviathan called a Commonwealth, or State") which rules man's community lives, the basis thereof Hobbes found it, as Machiavelli did before him, in ancient Greece and Rome.

Let us get back now to a question we mentioned before.

What happens, then, with that piece of *reality* that we call “soul”? What about what we call “mind”? Do they fit in that immanent hobbesian world?

According to Hobbes, sensations, impressions and the like are but movements of matter located in the brain. But, still, the problem remains: What about thoughts or representation? We know them. In fact they are the only thing we know with certainty, the immediate, the primary, the spring of our knowledge. Nowadays we know that thoughts are indeed located in the central nervous system. But, what we mean exactly by “location” of a thought? Even more, what we mean exactly by “location” of the understanding? In other words, where is that *topos noetos*?

We typically define bodies as entities having mass and extension. Do thoughts have mass and extension? Certainly neurotransmitters have it. But, can we reduce thoughts to the movements of the central nervous system in a living human body? Or are they rather nothing but a correlative physical phenomena that cause massless thoughts and what we call mental activities? Hence, if we resolve that they don't have mass, for we are theoretically unable to measure it, do we have to conclude that they just do not exist?

We can put it in a more radical way. As far as we scientifically know nothing of the existence of transmigration of souls, for instance, can we say the same concerning the ultimate nature of thoughts?

Let us go even further: Can we say the same concerning that faculty we call “the will”?

We seem to stumble again upon the intention problem, though in a different way. But we would rather change that slippery concept by the like slippery concept of “the will”. In this context we should understand the will as the faculty whereby man decide action in certain situations typically described as voluntary. Non-compulsory actions, either psychologically nor physically, nor unconscious actions. Actions where the self typically decides, once given the prompts to human action (affections, passions, reasons, values, volitions: whatsoever may be involved in human actions). Actions where the agent chooses between possible ways of acting, decides to act and then acts. The will as that very special trigger. An apparently non-mechanical trigger.

It has been widely observed that the will as such was a faculty unknown to de Greeks. Arendt has stated that was firstly attributed to men, in the early years of the Christian Era, on the idea that men are made by God Godlike. Spinoza, seven hundred years later, spoke about God's will as nothing but nonsense. For, how can we conceive a perfect entity (i.e. *perfectum*, finished, completed, done, thus nothing left to achieve by it) willing anything? God/Nature consists of everything, no thing out of it: therefore, no thing can be willed by It. This is pretty brilliant rhetoric and perfectly coherent with

Spinoza's ontology. But men are by no means perfect insomuch as they are biological, living creatures. Thus, they seem to be not completely done but in death.

Hobbes certainly noticed the appearance of the will (free-will, liberty) as the third division of reality, and added it to the ancient taxonomy. Indeed he entitled a work *On Liberty, Necessity and Chance*. Nonetheless, Hobbes denied liberty with an argument pretty similar to Spinoza's: liberty is but knowledge of the cause-effect processes of reality. Material, mechanical reality consists of a display of colliding power in an inanimate, inertial universe, thus utterly different from the teleological world of Aristotle.

Hobbes deals with the idea of human nature as the basis upon which men should build political artifacts. And finally finds the ultimate foundation in reason and the original search for self-preservation.

But that concept of human nature (that reasonable but compulsive search for preservation) appears to be still teleological since it gives explanations of movement in terms of compulsion from the inside, in form of needs focused towards a concrete *telos*.

We can face it in a more radical way: Is it possible to give an inertial account of human motion on the basis of the search for preservation when a man is able to commit suicide at will?

Hobbes himself seems to have been aware of that question, as Edwin Curley notes it in the Introduction of his Leviathan's edition: "(...) his praise of Sidney Godolphin, who went to his death in the service of his king during the Civil War, suggest that he did not think it inherently irrational to prefer death to dishonor" (HOBBS, 1651-1668: Introduction, xviii).

So, what can we say about honor or dignity as preferred to preservation? Are they rational or irrational? Are they adequate to law of nature?

Cicero himself provided an eloquent example in his Catiline Orations. He claimed he loved his native land more than his own life. It may be argued that we are before an extended first person. Not just the self, but the self and what really concerns the self. The extension of the first person to the plural: this is the key of civilization. That first person plural: that self that it is no longer "me" but "us", not "mine" but "ours". However, is that a valid argument or is it rather foolishly circular?

Hobbes goes on:

Felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers. Nor can a man any more live, whose Desires are at an end, than he, whose Senses and Imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continuall progresse of the desire. (HOBBS, 1651: 75)

Then, we have a glimpse of an interesting idea: we may take “to will”, “to desire” as intransitives. So, the chief matter is not the object of desire, but the action of willing itself: that pure verballity.

For man do not “tend to”, but just “tends”, so to say. Hobbes's well known words: “So that in the first place, I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death.

In that context it should be understood “power” as ability, as capacity, as the condition of being able to. Just to fulfill that natural tendency of man conceived as a desire and aversion machine. The Greek *Thelein* (to be ready, to be prepared for something) appears to be something quite similar.

Following with this conception of the human nature we find now that actually we have not such thing as material goals. We are moved by just a formal structure of acting: desire and aversion as pure activity. As Ortega wrote in his *Studies on Love* we are, more than anything, a natural born system of *preferences and disdains*. That is, we are entities that typically hang around between good and bad. The human being, thus, constructs institutions just to handle values and contempt. Hence, we have politics and morals as background institutions to deal with what we like or what we dislike, to deal with pleasures and pains. If politics has to deal primarily with human nature and human nature is that “machine” of desire and aversion, then political has to deal primarily with desire and aversion, good and bad, values and contempts as formal issues. Then, geometrically speaking, so to say, preservation or search for peace or obedience to God's Commandments are nothing but secondary matters derived from those primary. Therefore, political affairs are prompted by desire and aversion. There is no place at the very basis, then, for natural material goals found out by geometrical procedures nor for theological precepts.

So, what we have, concerning human nature, is a desire machine. Reason is closely related to desire, much more than usually it has been acknowledged. The execution of a desired action in a human being, insofar as a human being is a living creature, typically involves some consequences, some “ifs”. Reason seems to be the most adequate instrument to handle those “ifs” and so to guide action and decision. But reason, evidently, it is not the only spring of desire and will. Upon those considerations, then, if they happen to be true fundamentals, we must understand and build political institutions.

That sort of will, assisted by reason, has to bear in mind a crucial fact so that it can decide and lead political action properly: humans are driven by multiple factors (included compulsive factors). So the game is played under different kind of rules: biological, mechanical, psychological, moral, rational rules.

This signifies that values (moral rules, bundles of desired targets, in the end) may prompt to action, to political action. So self-preservation might be seen as a value, as a wanted goal, even as a reasonable one, even as the most reasonable of them all. But by no means can be a natural compulsion in desire-and-aversion-machines endowed with reason and will.

Maybe we have found a new set containing the whole, but a most flexible one. A whole located in this world which includes intelligence, desire and will in that living creature we call human being. On the one side, “in there” we can find the basis of politics, on them we can build political artifacts, along with the help of reason. On the other side, couldn't we say that the main sources of religion are desire and reason itself?

In addition we may conclude the following: concerning political actions conceived as human voluntary actions, law of nature is but law of desire, law of nature is but law of a living creature's will. Therefore, the will of a living being subjected to biological-mechanical causes for that biological-mechanical causes provide the life which allows this being to go on living. Namely, to go on desiring and willing.

As far as we know, there is nothing unnatural-supernatural in consciousness, will or reasoning. They are necessarily bound to the fact of living inasmuch as they are necessarily bound to a living central nervous system.

Thus, concerning the political realm a new idea seems to arise: the law of desire, the law of the will. And it seems to be underneath everything. It may be not a sound founding, but perhaps that is the way things happen to happen. Man may be a machine. But a pretty weird machine. A will-desire machine, not a self-preservation machine.

It is desire, it is the will that prompts to positive law in the first term.

Natural inclination of mankind is a perpetual and restless desire. Period. What really matters is desire itself: not that alleged desire of self-preservation.

Well, down this road we have stumbled upon some ideas that could help to overcome the defectiveness of ancient political and legal foundations. Concerning the very basis of politics, what if we put gods' commandments or commanding phantasmagoric *physis* aside and focus our endeavours in *this* complex world? Shouldn't we rather work upon an acute study of nature and human nature which takes notice of the integration of both biological-mechanical and *mental* aspects involved in human action? Compulsions, unconscious and voluntary actions, desires, passions, cohabitation, values, reason, the understanding and the will seem to be as natural as the beating of a heart, as natural as the falling rain.



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