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HOBBES ON REASON AS ACTIVE POWER

Valtteri Viljanen

Introduction: Hobbes as an empiricist and a mechanist

Hobbes is usually regarded as an empiricist, for in the beginning of *Leviathan* he writes as follows:

> [T]here 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. (*Lev.* I.2)

As is well known, Hobbes is also a materialist, which is why he wants to ground his theory of sense perception in the motion of material bodies:

> The cause of sense, is the external body, or object, which presseth the organ proper to each sense[.] [...] All which qualities, called *sensible*, are in the object, that causeth them, but so many several motions of the matter, by which it presseth our organs diversely. (*Lev.* I.4)

Hobbes even states that "[f]or besides sense, and thoughts, and the train of thoughts, the mind of man has no other motion" (*Lev.* III.12). Hobbes thus shows strong tendencies to explain mental phenomena solely in terms of matter in motion. The question concerning the role and nature of reason thereby seems, for Hobbes, a difficult one.

2. Activity of reason as reckoning

Hobbes defines reason quite procedurally in *Leviathan*, as a kind of calculus:

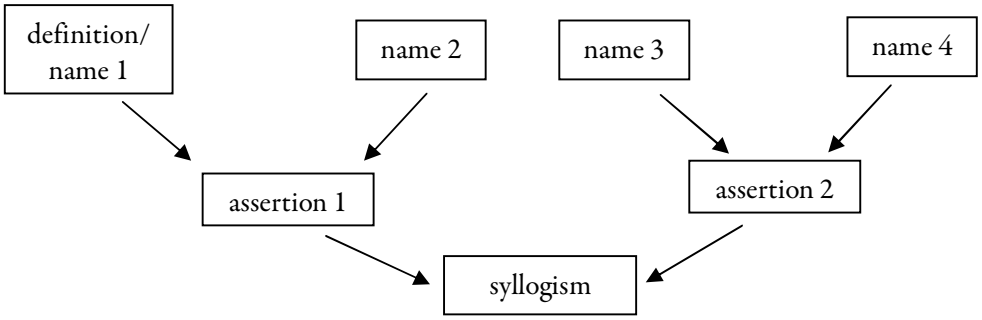
> When a man *reasoneth*, he does nothing else but conceive a sum total, from *addition* of parcels; or conceive a remainder, from *subtraction* of one sum from another[.] [...] For REASON, in this sense, is nothing but *reckoning*, that is *adding* and *subtracting*, of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the marking and signifying of our thoughts[.] (*Lev.* V.1.2)

According to Bernard Gert ("Hobbes on Reason," *PPQ* 82 [2001]), "the standard account of Hobbes's view of reason is that by reason he simply means reckoning." Although Hobbes begins *Leviathan* in a rather empiricist way, he considers geometry to be the model of science: "[I]n geometry, which is the only science that it hath pleased God hitherto to bestow on mankind, men begin at settling the significations of their words; which settling of significations they call *definitions*, and place them in the beginning of their reckoning" (*Lev.* IV.12). For Hobbes, not unlike for the Descartes of the *Regulae*, the task of reason is to start from the first definitions and then "proceed from one consequence to another" (*Lev.* V.4). This way we can arguably be certain of the validity of the conclusion, as in geometry, the method of which consists of the following features:

> [F]irst in apt imposing of names; and secondly by getting a good and orderly method in proceeding from the elements, which are the names, to assertions made by connexion of one of them to another; and so to syllogisms, which are the connexions of one assertion to another, till we come to a knowledge of all the consequences of names appertaining to the subject in hand; and that is it, men call SCIENCE. [...] *Science* is the knowledge of consequences, and dependence of one fact upon another[.] (*Lev.* V.16)

Considering what has been said, it is obvious that the "good and orderly method" is

based on right reasoning – "[reason] produceth the sciences" (*Lev.* VIII.13). This means that rationality of thought is judged by *how* the agent thinks, not by whether the outcome is substantively correct (as the ancients thought). Hobbes sees science to proceed like this:



The totality of science is constituted by all the ratiocinations such as this one. The arrows depict reason's activity. In this way Hobbes is forced to bring in some kind of inner activity of thought: *reason does not need anything external to it* in order to infer the consequences of different elements. This is the first aspect of reason's activity, and this kind of reason can be called *procedural* or *calculating* reason. Gert (2001) calls it verbal reason, but I it is difficult to say whether precisely linguality is the distinctive feature of this kind of reason. Hobbes says that it is not like "sense and memory, born with us; nor gotten from experience only, as prudence is; but attained by industry" (*Lev.* V.16).

There is, as Gert (2001) points out, a crucially important qualification in the definition of reason cited above: Hobbes says that reason is *in this sense* only reckoning. So, it has to be examined what else reason is in Hobbes's system.

3. Activity of substantial reason

3.1 Hobbes on language

Hobbes deals with the nature of language in *De Homine*. Because animals do not have language, they do not have understanding either. Their calls are just signs that "burst forth by the strength of nature from the peculiar fears, joys, desires and other

passions of each of them" (*De Homine* X.1). As linguistic beings men can choose the meanings of words: "words are constituted by the will of men for the purpose of signification," they arise "from human invention" (*De Homine* X.1–2). "The first man by his own will imposed names on just a few animals" (*De Homine* X.2). This can only mean that *the origin and use of language presuppose thinking that in its inventive activity seems to differ from natural necessity*. Only language makes possible the use of reason as reckoning, in other words counting, measuring, and comparing things (*De Homine* X.3). Linguistic activity is the condition of science as well: we can demonstrate *a priori* only those things "whose generation depends on the will of men themselves" (*De Homine* X.4). This activity can be seen especially clearly in geometry, in which "we ourselves create the figures" (*De Homine* X.5).

Linguistic activity plays a crucial role in scientific work. Hobbes states that "[reason] is grounded on the right use of speech" (*Lev.* VIII.13). To summarize, science proceeds in the following manner:

(1) We have to create the language of science, that is, we have to inventively impose the general names or definitions;
(2) from these definitions reason calculates the effects of the causes.

3.2 The construction of the laws of nature

It is extremely important to understand that according to Hobbes, also politics and ethics can be demonstrated *a priori*, and for the same reasons as geometry: "[W]e ourselves make the principles – that is, the causes of justice (namely laws and covenants)" (*De Homine* X.5). This is necessary in order to separate science from mere experience-based *prudence*.

Hobbes famously describes the natural condition of the humankind as a state war in which every one is against every one. This makes our existence one of "continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (*Lev.* XIII.9). Mankind can, however, be released from the natural condition, and this can be achieved with the aid of reason: with our rationality, we can find

out or construct those laws of nature or principles by which men may be drawn to agreement. This requires linguistic activity: the laws of nature must be properly defined. This, however, creates a problem: one can not arrive at true definitions only by calculating some already given elements. Gert (2001) states the problem as follows: "How can reason, if it simply means 'reckoning of the consequences of general names,' suggest convenient articles of peace?" This suggests that a different kind of reason, *substantial* one, is needed to articulate linguistic definitions.

According to the Hobbesian definition, the basis of the laws of nature lies in the general principle, found out by reason, "by which a man is forbidden to do that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit that, by which he thinketh it may be best preserved" (*Lev.* XIV.3). This is the way reason imposes that precisely the *self-preservation* of an individual is the basis of the laws of nature and morality: it is the general law of reason, governing the motion of "human bodies." Here arises a connection to the theory of *endeavour* (or *conatus*) on which the principle of inertia builds. Endeavour is striving that forces an individual to persevere in its being. Hobbes says in *De Cive* (I.7): "[T]he first foundation of natural right is this, that *every man as much as in him lies endeavour to protect his life and members*." Striving to preserve oneself is the basic phenomenon, and *the activity of reason can be considered one of its manifestations*. In other words, reason as active striving is the starting point of the laws of nature and natural right, and gives the criteria for judging things. "[T]he real good must be sought in the long term, which is the job of reason," although our fluttering desires can, and often do, lay hold of "the present good without foreseeing the greater evils that necessarily attach to it" (*De Homine* XII.1). This kind of reason can be called natural reason, and "it is no less a part of the human nature than any other faculty or affection of the mind" (*De Cive* II.1). It can be seen as a manifestation of a power intrinsic to us. Gert (2001) holds that the foundation of natural law is the fact that natural reason has its own end or goal (I would say striving, for there is really no room for teleology in Hobbes's mechanistic system), the avoidance of death, and now we have a pretty strong explanation for why this is so.

The thought of the natural condition is a construction that requires active

thinking – we never live in natural condition, and therefore cannot have experience-based knowledge of it. When (a) the basic self-preservation principle is connected with (b) the thought of natural condition's harshness and (c) the idea of death, *the first law of nature* can be deduced: "[E]very man ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of war" (*Lev.* XIV.4). It is a dictate of reason to seek peace, but peace is not an end in itself, only an efficient instrument for preserving life.

When (a) the first law of nature is combined with (b) the thought of the right to all things that prevails in natural condition, *the second law of nature* can be derived: men must give up the right to all things – provided that others do so too (*Lev.* XIV.5). With this synthetic method, Hobbes deduces altogether twenty laws of nature (although he often appears rather careless with his definitions), and these laws are, he states, eternal and immutable (*Lev.* XV.38). The reason for this immutability lies in the human nature: the striving for self-preservation never changes. The laws of nature are deduced with the geometric model presented above – but it is important to realize that were calculation the only kind of reason, the whole process of ratiocination could not get off the ground. This means that the very basis of Hobbes's political philosophy, the laws of nature, are consequences of one substantial principle, namely self-preservation, which is the active power driving calculating and substantial reason.

4. Hobbes and Spinoza on reason: some comparative remarks

There seems to be a profound connection between Hobbes's system and Spinoza's theory of *conatus*. According to Spinoza, the actual essence of a thing is a power called *conatus*, the striving to persevere in the thing's being. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza says that "striving of the mind, by which the mind, insofar as it reasons, strives to persevere its being, is nothing but understanding" (4p26d). In other words reason is the striving or essence of our mind, insofar as it understands clearly and distinctly. No wonder Spinoza writes: "We know nothing to be certainly good or evil, except what really leads to understanding or what can prevent us from understanding"

(4p27). Reason is the only indubitably good thing, always only increasing our power. It realizes our inherent power: "Acting from reason is nothing but doing those things which follow from the necessity of our nature" (4p59d). In brief, reason is the highest expression of a human being's *conatus*.

Now consider the Hobbesian position, according to which the laws of nature, "because they oblige only a desire, and endeavor, I mean an unfeigned and constant endeavor, are easy to be observed. [...] [T]hey require nothing but endeavor" (*Lev.* XV.39). Hobbes's notion of *endeavour* correlates with Spinoza's *conatus*; both concepts refer to the constant striving to persevere in being, in other words to self-preservation. It can be argued that also Hobbes thinks that reason has power exactly because it is one kind of manifestation of endeavour, *endeavour as reason*. In *De Cive* Hobbes states that we strive to self-preservation "as much as in us lies" (*De Cive* II.1). Spinoza's terminology is astonishingly similar: every thing strives to persevere in being "as far as it can, and it lies in itself" (3p6d). By "being in itself" Spinoza refers to acting on intrinsic power, and Hobbes seems to think quite similarly – in the end, every human being strives to preserve her life with all her power.

5. Reason, passions and civil laws

Although Hobbes thinks that "the laws of nature [...] are contrary to our natural passions, that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like" (*Lev.* XVII.2), some passions can lead men to act according to the dictates of reason. Especially the fear of death is a passion that inclines us to peace (*Lev.* XIII.14). On the other hand, people obey civil laws largely because of fear: "The passion to be reckoned upon, is fear" (*Lev.* XIV.31). The power of reason can be combined with the power of passions so that human beings end up acting according to the laws of nature. Although both reason and passions are expressions of the same endeavour, solely acting on the basis of passions does not lead to self-preservation, which is why reason has to have power to resist passions. Again, it is helpful to compare Hobbes's position to that of Spinoza.

Spinoza holds that reason is endowed with the power to control passions pri-

marily by forming adequate ideas of them (5p3). For reasons we cannot go into here, the power of an adequate idea is much stronger than the power of a passion, and that is why reason can nullify the power of the passion. Spinoza states that "we can devise no other remedy for the affects which depends on our power and is more excellent than this, which consists in a true knowledge of them" (5p4s).

In Hobbes's system the controlling of passions is achieved by acting according to the laws of nature. In a sense the laws of nature are adequate ideas of what it takes to avoid death. As is well known, the laws of nature lead to the generation of commonwealth, that great Leviathan, to which we owe our peace and defence (*Lev.* XVII.14). The sovereign commands the civil laws, that men are obliged to obey (*Lev.* XXVI.1–2). Obedience requires restraining of passions, and in this way reason can control the passions *through the sovereign*.

The relation of the laws of nature and the civil laws is very interesting in this context. Hobbes (*Lev.* XXVI.8) holds that the laws of nature are actually "qualities that dispose men to peace and obedience." Only when they are codified as civil laws, they become actually laws. This is why Hobbes says:

> The law of nature therefore is a part of the civil law in all commonwealths of the world. Reciprocally also, the civil law is a part of the dictates of nature. [...] Civil, and natural law are not different kinds, but different parts of law; whereof one part being written, is called civil, the other unwritten, natural. (*Lev*. XXVI.8)

In other words *the laws of commonwealth are always based on the laws of nature*, but *without the civil laws the laws of nature could not be realized*. They are to exist together or not at all. As the historical conditions vary, the civil laws realize the immutable and rational core of the natural laws in many different ways.

6. Concluding remarks

It is of crucial importance to understand that Hobbes's political philosophy is essentially a rational construction: it would be impossible to leave behind the natural con-

dition without the principles of active reason, which form the basis of commonwealth and thus make self-preservation possible. This rationalistic core can be manifested in numerous ways in different historical situations, but it is nevertheless at play in any given society.

We can return to the original question of what could possibly be the basis of reason's activity in a thoroughly materialistic philosophical system. As noted in the beginning, it has been traditionally difficult to reconcile Hobbes's materialism with the mental terminology he keeps using. It seems clear that reason must be motion just as everything real is, but Hobbes fails to tell us *what kind of motion* it is. Here conjecture can hardly be avoided; perhaps reason is best seen as self-regulating vital motion, taking place in the brain – "a train of thought" in Hobbes's terms.