



Hobbes' Philosophy and Its Historical Background

Z. Lubienski

Journal of Philosophical Studies, Vol. 5, No. 18. (Apr., 1930), pp. 175-190.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=1752-6795%28193004%295%3A18%3C175%3AHPAIB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-5>

Journal of Philosophical Studies is currently published by Cambridge University Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/cup.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

HOBBS' PHILOSOPHY AND ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Z. LUBIENSKI, Ph.D.

THOMAS HOBBS of Malmesbury, one of the greatest philosophers of law and state, died 250 years ago, on December 4, 1679. His name was so frequently associated with a certain unfortunate conception of his moral and political philosophy, that the public's lack of interest in this centenary is not to be wondered at. So far, even amongst the scholars who admitted his merits, few tried to penetrate into the depths of his thought, and only at the end of the last century, thanks to the writings of Ferdinand Tönnies and George Croom Robertson, was a new impulse given to research into Hobbes' spiritual heritage. A series of monographies was published, and the personality of Hobbes appeared in a new light. His theories, when better known, proved to be less crude and more human than they had seemed, for they are a reaction from the revolutionary tendencies of his time. At the beginning of our century the Great War aroused new interest in the personality of Hobbes, for his proverbial sayings, "bellum omnium contra omnes" and "homo homini lupus," suddenly became a terrifying reality. Although a calm outlook is sounder than pessimism, nevertheless common sense demands that we should keep our eyes open and see things as they are, even should reality be displeasing. This is the only guard against light-hearted carelessness or morbid apathy, and is the best guarantee of a perfect balance. Hobbes' philosophy possessed precisely that character of balance and common sense that made him foresee the Great War, and, furthermore, the subsequent striving for general peace resulting from a comprehension of the disastrous consequences of hate and murder. A number of scholars emphasized the fact that the present pacifist movement fulfils the dreams of this great enemy of war.

As the number of "Hobbists" grew in many countries, it became necessary for them to meet in order to concentrate and co-ordinate their efforts into a methodical co-operation. An international congress was organized in Oxford at the end of September, which was attended by the delegate of the "British Institute of Philosophical Studies," as also by representatives of different branches of philosophical and political science in England and abroad. The immediate result of this was the foundation of a Hobbes Society, similar to the one founded two years ago for the Spinoza centenary. It is hoped that it will mark a new phase in Hobbesian research, and will render this great thinker more universally known and appreciated.

JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES

The object of this article is to outline the philosophical system of Hobbes on the background of historical events in order to show up their influence on him and, on the other hand, his influence on the ideas of later periods.¹

Hobbes was born in 1588 in Westport (Wiltshire), not far from Malmesbury, hence his Latin surname "Malmesburiensis." His family was not well to do, but fortunately a wealthy uncle paid for his education, first at Malmesbury and Westport, later at Magdalen Hall (now Hertford College), Oxford. Here it was that Hobbes studied scholastic philosophy for five years, until he obtained the degree of Bachelor of Arts. This scholastic training left its trace on his mind throughout all his life, even though in later years all his scientific activity aimed at the destruction of the very theses he had to defend before his teachers. The latter evidently esteemed him highly, for they recommended him as teacher for the son of Lord William Cavendish, later Earl of Devonshire.

¹ Among the books and dissertations in English on Hobbes' life and philosophy the following are to be recommended: G. C. Robertson, *Hobbes*, Blackwood's Philosophical Classics, Edinburgh and London, 1910. F. Brandt, *Thomas Hobbes' Mechanical Conception of Nature* (translated from the Danish), Hachette, London, 1928. L. Stephen, *Hobbes*, Macmillan, London, 1904. Phyllis Doyle, *The Contemporary Background of Hobbes' "State of Nature," Economica*, No. 21 (December 1927). W. G. Pogson Smith, *The Philosophy of Hobbes* (inserted in an English edition of *Leviathan*, at the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1909). Among the most remarkable in other languages are: F. Tönnies, *Hobbes Leben und Lehre*, 3rd edition, Frommann, Stuttgart, 1925. V. Beonio-Brocchieri, *Studi sulla filosofia politica di T. Hobbes*, Bocca, Torino, 1927. C. Brockdorff, *Hobbes als Philosoph, Pädagoge und Soziologe*, 2nd edition, Lipsius, Kiel, 1929. R. Hönigswald, *Hobbes und die Staatsphilosophie*, Reinhardt, München, 1924. G. Jaeger, *Ursprung der modernen Staatswissenschaft und die Anfänge des modernen Staates, Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 14, 4. A. Levi, *La filosofia di Tommaso Hobbes*, Soc. Ed., Dante Alighieri, Milano, 1929. G. Sortais, *La philosophie moderne depuis Bacon jusqu'à Leibnitz*, Tome 2, Livre 2, pp. 270-584. G. Tarantino, *Saggio sulle idee morali e politiche di Tommaso Hobbes*, Giannini, Napoli, 1905; and many others.

The chief editions of Hobbes' works are the following: *T.H.M. Opera philosophica, quæ latine scripsit omnia . . . collecta studio et labore Gulielmi Molesworth*, Vols. I-V, Londini, 1839-1845 (specified in quotations with the letter L). *The English Works of T. H. . . . collected and edited by Sir William Molesworth*, Vols. I-XI, London, 1839-1845 (specified with the letter E). Unfortunately this edition is most imperfect and full of mistakes, so that for precision it is better to consult the original editions. So far only two works of Hobbes have been published correctly, and are due to Tönnies. These are: *The Elements of Law*, 2nd edition, University Press, Cambridge, 1928, and *Behemoth, or The Long Parliament*, London, 1889 (out of print). The first had been reprinted by Molesworth from the first incorrect edition in two parts under the titles: *Human Nature* and *De Copore politico, or Elements of Law*. The necessity of a new correct edition of Hobbes' works was discussed at the above-mentioned congress at Oxford. The chief obstacle is the difficulty in collecting the necessary funds.

HOBBS' PHILOSOPHY

At that moment began a new phase in Hobbes' life. He travelled in France, Germany, and Italy; he made the acquaintance of many celebrated scholars and thinkers, and under the influence of new impressions his mind matured, preparing for future activity.¹

In 1629 Hobbes published a translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponesian War*. The choice of the subject shows his early interest in politics, but it was only from 1640 onwards that he became wholly absorbed in political activity. During the sitting of the Short Parliament he wrote a first outline of a philosophy of State under the title, *Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*. Soon afterwards he had to face the attacks of his opponents, which became so fierce that Hobbes had to flee to Paris. Nevertheless, not even that could turn him away from his beloved politics, and during the next ten years he worked out and developed his political theory. This he expounded in the pamphlet *De Cive* (first published in 1642, reprinted with corrections and additions in 1647), and in his masterpiece published in London in 1651 under the title, *Leviathan, or Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*.

After the publication of this work Hobbes returned to England, where the Civil War had ended with Cromwell's dictatorship. He remained in his country to the end of his life, always absorbed in scientific activity. In 1655 appeared his important book *De Corpore*, and in 1658 *De Homine*, which contained an exposition of a mechanical cosmology showing a psychological insight remarkable for his time, as well as a chapter on metaphysics and physics, especially on the author's beloved optics. Besides these, he published many other books and pamphlets on various subjects. He wrote much on mathematics, and in this realm had to stand the opposition of the famous mathematician John Wallis. To several of his books he gave the form of a dialogue or discussion, and of these the most interesting is his dispute with Bishop Bramhall on the question of Free Will. Towards the end of his life he worked at historical subjects, translated Homer, and also wrote an autobiography in verse. He died, a very old man, in 1679.²

Now let us cast a glance at the age in which Hobbes lived and which forms a background to his activity. The seventeenth century had been preceded by great upheavals in the realm of politics and economics, as well as in that of thought and religion. The invention of printing, the discovery of America, the new astronomical theories of Copernicus, were facts which produced a complete change in

¹ He had relations with Francis Bacon, Herbert of Cherbury, Galileo, Gassendi, Descartes, Mersenne, and others.

² All details of Hobbes' life are best reported in the above-mentioned work of Ferdinand Tönnies.

JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES

current ideas and customs. A true "Reformation" began to transform all aspects of life. Through the influence of experimental science the old scholastic, rationalistic philosophy gave place to a more empirical, critical way of thinking. Whereas the first is based on dogmatic assertions, the new philosophy admitted nothing without proof and tried to gather direct data from the senses.

Whilst ideas changed, the economic conditions of life were also transformed, giving rise to many new problems. Philosophical thought therefore abandoned sterile speculations and sought to solve the new difficulties. In the first place there were the capital questions of religion and politics. The powerful movement towards freedom, which began with the Italian Renaissance, urged people on to a revision of the limits of ecclesiastical and civil power, and after the effort to liberate themselves from papal authority, they tried to lessen the power of the monarchy.

The Reformation of Luther had weakened the authority of the Pope, but it had not imposed a cohesive system of dogmas to replace those it had rejected. Consequently Christianity broke up into a multitude of sects, each of which attempted to impose upon the others its own interpretation of the Bible. In all countries disputes and religious wars arose. Everywhere confusion reigned and a calm development of economic and intellectual life was impossible. Then in the minds of a few eminent men who remained above the fanatic struggles of the crowd there arose the desire to find a common platform on which all people could meet, and to establish the fundamental truths to which all could acquiesce. Thus they sketched the outlines of a natural religion, Herbert of Cherbury being the first to speak of this. Furthermore, many endeavoured to establish morals independent of any supernatural element. Charron, Francis Bacon, Grotius, and others, worked on these lines, and amongst them Hobbes played an important part.¹

Nowadays it may seem strange that in politics so much importance was attached to religious belief, instead of each person being left free to believe what he chose; but it is necessary to understand that in those days the new idea of moral freedom was far from being put into practice. One of the first men to demand it publicly was Roger Williams, who in 1644 published a protest against religious persecutions. However, much time elapsed before theory became fact. In the meantime Church and State had so many common interests that their separation seemed unthinkable. In those countries, therefore, which liberated themselves from the authority of the Pope, the Governments had to assume his power. The religion of the sovereign

¹ W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. ii; *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation*, 3rd edition, Teubner, Leipzig and Berlin, 1923, pp. 106 sqq., 247 sqq.

HOBBS' PHILOSOPHY

became obligatory for his subjects. Complete religious freedom was not even dreamed of by the persecuted sects; all they asked was tolerance and deliverance from continual vexations. The interference of the Government in religious matters gave rise to numerous controversies concerning the relationship of the civil and ecclesiastical powers and concerning their respective rights. Not only theologians discussed these; in England, besides such scholars as Andrew and Donne, King James I, who was keenly interested in theology, took part in religious disputes and tried to refute eminent Catholics such as Suarez, Bellarmin, and others.¹

None of these struggles were ignored by Hobbes. It seems that in theory he was a partisan of religious freedom, but in practice he considered that for the sake of public peace it was necessary to submit to the Commonwealth the ultimate decision in religious as in worldly matters. This was because he considered it a compelling necessity to strengthen the shattered authority of the Commonwealth, since strong government alone could restore order and bring to an end the continual religious struggles.

The latter were frequently an outcome of economic misery and faulty political organization. However, the transformation of the mediæval Commonwealth into a modern one could be effectuated only by a strong Government. And, in fact, after that period of troubles, in nearly all countries absolutism was installed.

This had been foreseen earlier by a few thinkers, and so at the beginning of the sixteenth century Machiavelli defended the principles of the sovereignty of the Commonwealth, and later Jean Bodin developed the theory of absolutism in a way very much akin to that of Hobbes.

At the same time there appeared contrary theories, defending the rights of the people in opposition to those of the rulers. The most interesting were those based on the principle of social agreement, drawn from antiquity. The chief representatives of this current before Hobbes were Althusius and Grotius. The latter stood for the School of Natural Law which based the commands of civil law on purely rational principles, independent of supernatural factors.

All these problems and disputes which absorbed people's minds in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had their counterpart in the political life of Great Britain. The course of events here was of a peculiar character, and the difficulties were solved in a way different from the Continent.

Religious struggles kindled by the Reformation here took a purely political turn and became an open fight for power between King and Parliament. Contestations of the King's power, which dated from the

¹ L. Stephen, *Hobbes, loc. cit.*, p. 179.

famous "Magna Charta Libertatum" of King John, had calmed down, nevertheless they could be restimulated on the slightest occasion. In fact this occurred when religious troubles and mismanagement of public affairs discontented the people. After Henry VIII had abolished the supremacy of the Roman Church, the country was rent in two, as one after the other the kings who followed him reinstalled or abolished the unity with Rome. As each Government demanded absolute obedience to its orders regarding religious rites and persecuted its opponents, it is easy to imagine the resulting chaos.

At last Queen Elizabeth's moderate policy strengthened the power of the throne and brought some peace to the country. She made some wise concessions to the Parliament and obtained, in return, the liberty to carry out her own plans. In religious matters her efforts were directed to supporting the authority of the Episcopal Church and to subduing the Catholics and Puritans. This policy had deep motives. The Episcopal Church considered the King as its head, and consequently supported the throne; whilst the Puritans, whether the moderate Presbyterians or the radical Independents, carried their democratic ideas into the field of politics, and demanded the same rights in the administration of public affairs as the faithful had in their churches. The Presbyterians, therefore, tried to divide the sovereign power between King and Parliament, and the Independents wanted to introduce a purely democratic government. This explains how the Queen, while putting a break on their religious liberties, checked their political influence.¹

The circumstances changed completely during the reign of her successors. James I (Stuart) tried to exploit the splendour that Queen Elizabeth had given to the throne and restore absolutism. However, he equalled her neither in genius nor wisdom, and his wastefulness and lack of financial ability, as also the corruption and protection in his court, disgusted the people and provoked discontent. Moreover, when neither the unfortunate pro-Spanish policy nor high taxes succeeded in covering the deficit in the treasury, and when in order to find a solution Parliament was convoked, the latter demanded the right to control the use to which the taxes were put. The House of Commons at that time consisted mainly of the wealthy middle class, whose interests were endangered by the wasteful policy of the King. This explains the strong opposition of the Parliament and its efforts to limit the King's prerogatives.

Meanwhile events carried the oppositionists farther than they had at first intended. During the reign of Charles I, who, like his father, refused to give up any of his power, whilst being equally incapable of remedying the evils, the tension became more acute, until it ended

¹ A. Stern, *Geschichte der Revolution in England*, Grote, Berlin, 1881.

HOBBS' PHILOSOPHY

in open war between King and Parliament. The King's lack of sincerity and reliability rendered impossible an understanding regarding the division of power. Finally, with the victory of the Independents, Cromwell took the reins of government in hand, the King was beheaded, and monarchy abolished in 1649.

During all these events England was divided into two opposing parties: the defenders of the King and the partisans of Parliament. Each of these had its representatives in literature. For some time already numerous pamphlets had appeared expounding the theory that kings inherited the throne "by the Grace of God," so that their power could never be limited by human laws, not even by the kings themselves. These theories were collected after the tragic death of Charles I, and published by Salmasius under the title, *Defensio regia pro Carolo I.* The answer of the Republicans came from the pen of John Milton.

All these struggles and controversies made a deep impression on Thomas Hobbes and inspired his political writings, which were composed chiefly in the eventful years between 1640-1650. S. R. Gardiner maintains in his *History of the Commonwealth*¹ that Hobbes' political theories were a reaction of monarchic ideas caused by the excessive parliamentarism which drove the country to long civil war. Indeed, not only in Hobbes' monarchic views, but in all his system it is easy to detect repercussion of contemporary events.

There is one thing, however, that has not as yet been emphasized, and that is Hobbes' *Theory of Duty*. At a time of general dissolution and confusion, when religious principles were losing their hold on the people and radical elements abused the conceit of the rights of nature, demanding liberties without limits, when levellers tried to abolish private property and introduce Communism, Hobbes considered it to be his mission to expound and motivate the importance of civil duties. All his work aimed at the restoration of order and at the exaltation of governmental authority. This will become clearer to us if we try to penetrate deeper into the principles of his system.

Contrarily to the Scholastics' dualistic theories, Hobbes considered matter as the unique reality.² The world, according to him, consists of very small particles which move continually and which are the cause of the processes of cognition and volition. These

¹ *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, 1644-1656.* Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1903, Vol. ii, pp. 77 *sqq.*

² Hobbes' conception of matter is a very broad one; it is equal to the idea of spacial extension. Therefore several authors warn us against any one-sided and mistaken interpretation of his "materialism." Brandt (*op. cit.*, p. 379) calls him even "motionalist" instead of "materialist," as his conception of motion plays a much greater part in his system than matter.

particles act on the special faculty of knowledge where they hit upon a contrary movement, proper to each being, which is the vital motion. The shock of the two motions produces in the perceiving subject an image of the perceived object. According to whether the action of the object helps or hinders the vital motion, the subject reacts with a sense of pleasure or displeasure. These feelings arouse automatically corresponding impulses, or, as Hobbes calls them, "endeavours," which are appetite and aversion, and from which all other motions of the will proceed.

However, according to Hobbes, pleasure and displeasure, and consequently appetite and aversion, are not only produced by objects actually perceived, but also by the image of objects previously known. On the other hand, through reasoning the mind comes to conclusions which also present themselves as images. The effect, therefore, produced by any object is strengthened or weakened by the previously accumulated experiences and reasons. Although man's decisions are always determined by the influence of objects whether actually perceived or only imagined, yet these decisions can also be guided by the consideration of future pleasure or displeasure; and in seeking pleasure man's activity is directed not so much to a momentary, fleeting one, as to a lasting and full satisfaction of his whole personality.

But not even that is the ultimate goal of human activity, as, according to Hobbes' clearest expressions, the sense of pleasure or displeasure is only a sign of that which helps or hinders the vital motion.¹ The ultimate goal of all actions, therefore, is the furtherance of life, *i.e.* the most intense development of all natural and sound tendencies. Life itself is then that supreme good, to the fullest realization of which all mankind, whether consciously or unconsciously, tends.

This thoroughly individualistic anthropology was to be used by Hobbes as a foundation for his ethics. Consequently in the latter appeared the defects of its premisses. And so, since in the theory of impulses he considered the vital motion as the unique central tendency and gave no place to innate social feelings, so in his ethics he admitted only egoistic aims. To these, all other tendencies, such as the desire to help others or to give in to them, had to be subordinated if they were to be considered as rational, moral, and in harmony with the postulates of ethics. That is why Hobbes had to limit his teaching of morals and establish a code based on negative principles, as it is easier to enumerate the things that hinder life than those that further it. First of all, in order to live it is necessary to avoid death. On this principle Hobbes based all his system of ethics, and he tried to formulate rules which men must follow in order to main-

¹ *Lev.*, chapt. vi, p. 25 (E. iii, 42), *De Homine*, chapt. xi, 15.

HOBBS' PHILOSOPHY

tain their lives as well as the necessary means for its preservation.¹ This does not mean that Hobbes limited ethical actions to those directed to the sole preservation of life, as his critics generally pretend. On the contrary, such narrowing of human tendencies would be in contradiction with the whole system. Nevertheless, the principle of self-preservation could serve as an excellent basis for this part of ethics which deals with the civil law, and could supply logical reasons for its precepts. This was all the more important for Hobbes, as all his ethics were imbued with a political tendency.

The rules which express the indispensable conditions for the preservation of life are called by Hobbes "laws of nature," and the essence of moral duty lies in the conformity to these laws. But since all human actions are strictly determined, being a resultant of external and internal forces acting in the moment of ultimate decision, the conception of duty, with Hobbes, takes on a very peculiar meaning. Expressions such as "man ought to" or "is obliged to" only mean that such and such conduct corresponds to the cosmic laws and to the inborn desire of life proper to each man. As all men desire life, so *they desire* to avoid whatever may threaten it. If it so happens that their actions are contrary to the inborn tendency of self-preservation, such conduct must be interpreted as due to a misunderstanding; they evidently do not realize that the consequences of their conduct are contrary to their most essential desires.² If only a man realizes the consequences of his actions, and at the same time his natural desire for life, it suffices to determine him fatally to act according to the law of nature. Transgressions against the latter are only due to insufficient enlightenment of the mind, and, in most cases, it is the force of passion that obscures the image of duty.

The most curious of passions described by Hobbes is *fear*. His conception of it, as of all other affects, is strikingly intellectual. It is defined as an aversion coupled with the opinion of possible damage.³ Since appetite and aversion follow automatically upon the corresponding images, the contents of the image determine the kind of fear. Sometimes, therefore, it may happen that the image representing a future damage is *absolutely clear*, in which case "fear" means the *foresight* of that damage. Nowadays we would use the word "apprehension," meaning an intellectual rather than an affective attitude. If, moreover, the foreseen danger threatens life itself or the necessary means for its preservation, then "fear" becomes an act of reason equal to *the sense of duty*, which demands that we should defend ourselves from that danger at all costs.

It is most important for the understanding of Hobbes' ethics

¹ *De Homine*, chapt. xi, 6.

² *Lev.*, chapt. xiv, p. 66 (E. iii, 120).

³ *Ibid.*, chapt. vi (L. iii, 44).

and politics to distinguish these two kinds of fear, one as foresight, identical with the sense of duty, the second as a reaction from a lesser or uncertain evil. In spite of numerous texts indicating these differences,¹ the majority of critics took the word "fear" in the ordinary sense, as a reaction from evil. That is why Hobbes' ethics have been misjudged as a sort of "gospel of fear." It is all the more necessary to emphasize the fact that Hobbes considered this ordinary fear as a low and unworthy motive, which can never be an excuse for the omission of a duty. Nevertheless he considered that in a Commonwealth it is necessary to enforce the law by the promise of reward or the threat of punishment, because most men are guided, not by reason, but by the immediate prospect of pleasure and displeasure.²

Hobbes' theory of the Commonwealth is the continuation, the consequence, and in a way the goal of his ethics. It is based on the premiss that, in order to preserve life, it is necessary to organize a Commonwealth by committing the sovereign power to an individual or to an assembly. The sovereign, once installed, cannot be dethroned by his subjects; he has the right to nominate his successor; and his orders must meet with complete obedience. These rights of the sovereign and duties of the subjects result from the fact that, without them, the maintenance of order would be impossible, and the world would become a chaos. On account of the universal competition and enmity—the "war of everyone against everyone"—nobody would be able to preserve his life or enjoy in security the fruits of his labour.

Quite a number of researchers on Hobbes' philosophy have remarked that this idea of war of everyone against everyone does not mean that such was the primitive state of humanity before the foundation of the present Commonwealths; it is merely a sort of logical fiction, meant to demonstrate the necessity for, hence the duty of, each man to obey the civil law. A similar fiction is the "pact of everyone with everyone," by means of which the citizens choose a sovereign and confer the power on him; there is no necessity for any external formality for the pact to be considered as valid and the Commonwealth as founded. Both acts are effectuated implicitly when they are demanded by reason, *i.e.* when otherwise the preservation of life and of the necessary means for it would be impossible. This remains in connection with the special meaning which Hobbes gives to the idea of Commonwealth. It does not consist in any specific constitution nor complicated bureaucracy. The only essential is the relation of mutual duties existing between

¹ *De Cive*, chapt. 1, 2 (Annotatio), chapt. iii, 5, chapt. xv, 7, etc.

² *Lev.*, chapt. xiv, p. 69 (E. iii, 127), chapt. xxxi, p. 108 (E. iii, 197), chapt. xxvii (L. iii, 213), App. ad *ibid.*, chapt. ii, p. 351-2 (L. iii, 548), etc.

HOBBS' PHILOSOPHY

two parties, one of which is bound to obey and the other to secure safety and the fullest development of life. The number of men submitting themselves to such obedience is of no account, as also the manner in which this submission is accomplished. A conquered people and their conquerors, as well as children and the parents who provide for them, can be considered as parties of a social contract. In such cases their relations are called "despotal, or paternal dominion," and began when one of the parties was overpowered by the other. In different circumstances, *i.e.* when this did not occur, the relation of the parties is a "dominion by institution." However, in all cases the essence of the Commonwealth remains the same. As we see, it is enough that an agreement should be necessary for the preservation of life, to render it obligatory, even if it should not be made explicitly. It suffices for a man to be the master of the life and death of another and yet not threaten to take his life, for it to be supposed that, in exchange for life, the submitting party has entered upon an agreement, and thus a Commonwealth has been established. Consequently families also are small Commonwealths. This is another proof that the "war of everyone against everyone" could never really exist.

Hobbes considers that in every Commonwealth both parties, sovereign and subjects, have duties towards one another. This has often been unjustly denied. And yet the very essence of Hobbes' conception of contract consists in mutual duties; it is evident, therefore, that the same rule must be applied equally to the social contract. Further, it must be understood that, whether in a Commonwealth or in the state of nature, all duties have their foundation in that law of nature which impels everyone to preserve his life. Many historians of philosophy err, therefore, in interpreting Hobbes' thought as if things were good or bad, right or wrong, merely because the sovereign had decided so. This would be "ethical nominalism,"¹ of which in Hobbes there is no trace. However, as the law of nature demands the absolute obedience of the subjects to their sovereign, Hobbes concluded with the famous paradox that, in principle, no order of the sovereign can be wrong or unjust. There is such close connection between the will of the sovereign and the laws of nature that one may consider the latter as being implicitly commanded by the sovereign, even without explicit order from him, provided only that no contrary order has been given by him.² Now it may happen that a conflict occurs between the law of nature and the order of the sovereign expressed in laws, decrees, or in any other way. In that case, again, the subjects are obliged to obey the sovereign, since he alone is allowed to interpret the law of nature in every particular case.

¹ Tönnies, *op. cit.* 1st edition.

² *Lev.*, chapt. xxi.

JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES

The social contract, which lies at the base of the Commonwealth, can be dissolved like any other agreement when the conditions which determined it cease to exist. Since the object of the agreement is the preservation of life, then the Commonwealth is dissolved whenever the sovereign has succumbed to enemies, or when for other reasons he is unable to guarantee security to his subjects. Similarly, as the agreement has been made implicitly, so it is dissolved implicitly when rational motives require it. However, when this is not the case, reason forbids the taking away or the limitation of the rights of the sovereign power. Otherwise there would be the continual danger of revolutions and seditions threatening the loss of goods or even of life. The sovereign himself cannot limit his absolute power to the advantage of his subjects, as this would be contrary to reason and to the laws of nature.¹ In this way Hobbes arrives at his famous conception of absolutism which has so often been misjudged.

In order to decide in what sense Hobbes can be called a partisan of absolutism, it is necessary first to realize that this word is interpreted in two different ways. One of these is to consider as absolute any Commonwealth which possesses unlimited power, so that private individuals have no rights except those that the Commonwealth bestows upon them. The other more current and accurate conception is that absolutism exists only where the power is concentrated in the hands of one single man or in a unique sovereign assembly, whose power does not derive from nor depend on any other factors.

If we analyse the first definition, we see that it means sovereignty and not strictly absolutism. In this sense all modern Commonwealths, even those which have a parliamentary constitution, could be called absolute, as everywhere the representatives of the Government consider themselves competent to decide and regulate all questions arbitrarily. If they grant certain liberties in private affairs to citizens or associations, it is because they have decided themselves to do so, and not because of the pressure of some higher command. The fact that Hobbes attributes such power to the sovereign is not sufficient reason for calling him an absolutist. On the contrary, it is to be marvelled at that he worked out so perfectly a theory which only later was to be universally acknowledged.²

With regard to the other conception of absolutism, Hobbes derived the rights of the sovereign from the will of the people

¹ One can see here the reflection of the theories of the unlimited power of the monarch, which had so great a hold on Charles I; but while those theories derived the rights of the King from divine origin, Hobbes, on the contrary, gave them a rational foundation.

² G. Tarantino, *Saggio sulle idee morali e politiche di Tommaso Hobbes*, Giannini, Napoli, 1905, p. 111.

HOBBS' PHILOSOPHY

(whether explicit or not),¹ and he subordinated them to the law of nature. The sovereign is obliged to govern according to that law, though he need not give an account of his acts to anybody. Therefore he ought not to demand greater obedience than that necessary for the realization of the purpose for which the power has been bestowed upon him, *i.e.* for the prosperity and security of the people.² Furthermore, it follows from the context that, on special occasions, when there is no doubt that the orders of the sovereign are contrary to the law of nature (or the law of God, which comes to the same thing), Hobbes grants to the citizens the right of refusing obedience in order to follow the law of nature. This happens, for instance, when the sovereign demands the denial of the true Christian faith. Such cases Hobbes reduces to the minimum, and therefore, in the question of external worship, he recommends to the subjects the greatest submission, especially as inwardly everyone may believe what he likes.

Hobbes' decried absolutism appears very different in the light of the above remarks on the character and the limits of sovereign power, especially if we add that, in spite of his sympathy for monarchy, he considered that sovereign power can be concentrated not only in one man, but also in an assembly, whether a limited one (aristocracy) or comprising the whole nation (democracy). The only reason for calling him the "father of absolutism" is his teaching on the necessity of concentrating the whole power (executive, legislative, and judicial) in one central organ.³ But even here Hobbes cared more for the maintenance of the theoretic principle than for the practical application. As Tönnies remarked,⁴ Hobbes admits in *Leviathan* a form of limited monarchy in which power would belong in principle to the people, *i.e.* to an assembly convoked periodically, but in practice it would be entrusted for a limited period to a chosen dictator. This would be in fact a division of power in spite of the theoretical indivisibility. This conception is not far from our modern, parliamentary form of Commonwealth.

This outline shows how obviously Hobbes' philosophical system, and in particular his ethics and politics, are connected with the political and social problems that preoccupied contemporary minds. Moreover, this connection is so close that Hobbes' philosophy reflects the transitory character of the time. The intellectual development of this great philosopher, who first studied scholastic philosophy, then became acquainted with new currents in science based on observation and experience, corresponds exactly to two phases of European thought. The scholastic training gave him the

¹ *Lev.*, chapt. xxi.

² *De Cive*, chapt. vi, 13.

³ L, Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 253 sqq.

JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES

art of clear definition and the love of syllogisms and deductions, but it burdened him also with a marked inclination for building artificial mental constructions, which he treated as realities. This is striking in his purely artificial psychology, as well as in his conception of duty, which he based on the supposition of an unconscious desire to preserve life. On the other hand, the awakening experimental current impelled him to seek in reality foundations for his premisses, and to look for the confirmation of his theories in experiences and observation of life. In a most curious way, relativity and positivism, which characterized the new currents, met in his system with mediæval dogmatism and inner faith in absolute truth and absolute good.

Hobbes' conception of duty cannot be judged according to the idea we have of it to-day, since for us it consists in an imperative command, which arises not only from rational but also from irrational elements, such as traditions, habits, and social influences. For Hobbes himself, as we have already seen, the idea of duty did not embrace the whole domain of ethical actions; the latter reached much farther. But even so, his conception seems to us shockingly one-sided and lacking in elevation. We must remember, however, that all the philosophy of Hobbes is a reaction from the mistakes of his time, and if he limits and impoverishes the idea of duty, it is because until that time this idea had been exceedingly vague. He wanted to do away, once and for all, with the empty, insipid phrases of bigots and political agitators, and to oppose to them a solid, universally valid conception which could be easily verified. However, his efforts came to nought because of the very nature of the question, which cannot be solved *modo geometrico*. So that, although he narrowed the conception of duty, he did not succeed in proving what he had set out to do: the necessity of obedience to the established sovereign. He put forward as chief argument the fatal consequences of revolution and anarchy which threaten society, consequently also private individuals. Yet it is evident that there are people who thrive on upheavals and derive profit from disorder and struggles, hence revolutions occur periodically in the history of the world. It cannot be asserted that what is necessary for public security is equally necessary for the self-preservation of the individual; therefore Hobbes himself had to admit exceptions and allow disobedience on certain occasions. He did not realize that these concessions overthrew all his preceding arguments, for, from the moment that citizens are allowed to judge their relations to the sovereign, the limits of duties become vague, and each person follows his personal opinions. This, according to Hobbes himself, leads to revolution, which is the very thing he desired to avoid.

And so it is that, by his wonderfully logical system, Hobbes

HOBBS' PHILOSOPHY

proved the very opposite truth to the one he wished to demonstrate, *i.e.* that in questions of morals no absolute, universal, and "objective" rule can be established, and that the highest moral ideas can never be rationalized. Moreover, his ceaseless fear of all spontaneous irrational, and unforeseen events is certainly exaggerated. In the history of mankind the illegal interference of the people or its representatives has frequently produced results profitable to the Commonwealth.

As for politics, we know to-day that the form of government must vary according to local conditions. In many countries absolute government, which seemed out of date, has returned; censure, obtrusive pressure in religious and political matters, have reappeared, and this return to older forms of government is sometimes hailed with enthusiasm.

Despite all its faults, Hobbes' philosophy has undoubtedly many qualities. It represents the first great effort to place ethics and the science of Commonwealth on a reasonable foundation, without the help of religion. Hobbes' keen powers of observation, as also his sober and fair judgment, lend to many of his sayings an undying actuality. His anthropology especially aroused the admiration of numerous eminent thinkers, and nowadays modern psychology and even sociology owe a great deal to him.¹ In his relativist theory of cognition one can detect the germs of modern pragmatism. Special praise must be given to the style, so remarkably clear and concise, devoid of empty, bombastic phrases. It is not to be wondered at that in a short time his works brought him fame and were speedily bought up. The English edition of *Leviathan*, printed in 1651, was soon out of print, and Hobbes' adversaries, fearing his influence, persuaded the King to prohibit any new edition. Only the Latin version appeared at the end of Hobbes' life, first in Amsterdam in 1668, together with other works, and afterwards in London in 1676.

If the greatness of a man were to be measured by the fierceness of the attacks of his adversaries, then Hobbes would be among the greatest. No philosopher was ever more attacked by his contemporaries. The clergy in particular hated him as a free-thinker, whilst the monarchists considered that in *Leviathan* he had betrayed the cause of the King. In spite of so many reproaches, Hobbes, amongst his friends, had the reputation of being a kind-hearted, serene, and cheerful companion, fond of tennis and other amusements. Thanks to the efforts of his admirers, several fine portraits of him

¹ Hobbes was the first to formulate a law of association of ideas. He made interesting observations on the psycho-physiology of dreams, on the nature of affects, etc. On the influence of Hobbes' thought on the School of Durkheim, consult Sortais, *op. cit.*, p. 516.

JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES

have been painted which give us a vivid impression of his interesting and remarkable personality.¹

The reaction to Hobbes' works cannot be limited to the polemics and criticisms that they aroused on all sides. His remarkably logical thought proved the insufficiency of the methods previously employed, and forced people to revise the bases on which their ethics and philosophy of state were built, thus giving them a powerful stimulus towards the elaboration of new and better systems. This negative influence of Hobbes' teaching, which, in England particularly, was very marked, has been emphasized by all his critics.² His ethics therefore produced a reaction in two different currents of thought represented, on the one hand by the intellectualist tendencies of Samuel Clarke, Ralph Cudworth, later Price, Reid, etc., on the other hand by the so-called sentimentalists such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Butler, Hume, Adam Smith, and others.³

The positive influence of Hobbes is less known, although it was very important. Amongst the thinkers whom he evidently inspired are Spinoza, Puffendorf, Leibniz, Helvetius, Holbach, Rousseau, as also Diderot and the French Encyclopædists. Some add the names of Comte, Berkeley, Nietzsche, and even Bossuet and Kant.

A detailed study of Hobbes' place amongst the great philosophers would pass the limits of this short survey. The extraordinary actuality of the problems he treated, as well as the acuteness of his judgment, compel us to believe that the part he has to play in the history of human thought is not yet ended. More than one chapter in *Leviathan* and *De Cive* sound as if they had been written to-day and for our own times. It seems, therefore, to be the appropriate moment to draw him out of the obscurity in which he has so long been left. Perhaps that is the reason why, during the last few years, he has begun to awaken new interest everywhere, even in his own country where he was most forgotten. The memory of great men never completely dies. Sooner or later their merits come to light and receive the appreciation which great men in their lifetime so rarely enjoy.

¹ Among the best is the portrait by Michael Wright in the National Portrait Gallery, and two others are to be found in the Royal Society in London.

² Cf. Robertson, *op. cit.*, pp. 214, 233 *sqq.*

³ H. Moskowitz, *Das moralische Beurteilungsvermögen in der englischen Ethik von Hobbes bis John Stuart Mill*. Inaugural Dissertation, Erlangen, 1906.