

philosophy, Western

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Modern philosophy → **The rise of empiricism and rationalism** → **The materialism of Thomas Hobbes**

Thomas Hobbes was acquainted with both Bacon and Galileo. With the first he shared a strong concern for philosophical method, with the second an overwhelming interest in matter in motion. His philosophical efforts, however, were more inclusive and more complete than those of his contemporaries. He was a comprehensive thinker within the scope of an exceedingly narrow set of presuppositions, and he produced one of the most systematic philosophies of the early modern period—an almost completely consistent description of humankind, civil society, and nature according to the tenets of mechanistic materialism.

Hobbes's account of what philosophy is and ought to be clearly distinguished between content and method. As method, philosophy is simply reasoning or calculating by the use of words as to the causes or effects of phenomena. When a person reasons from causes to effects, he reasons synthetically; when he reasons from effects to causes, he reasons analytically. (Hobbes's strong inclination toward deduction and geometric proofs favoured arguments of the former type.) His dogmatic metaphysical assumption was that physical reality consists entirely of matter in motion. The real world is a corporeal universe in constant movement, and phenomena, or events, the causes and effects of which it is the business of philosophy to lay bare, consist of either the action of physical bodies on each other or the quaint effects of physical bodies upon minds. From this assumption follows Hobbes's classification of the fields that form the content of philosophy: (1) physics, (2) moral philosophy, and (3) civil philosophy. Physics is the science of the motions and actions of physical bodies conceived in terms of cause and effect. Moral philosophy (or, more accurately, psychology) is the detailed study of "the passions and perturbations of the mind"—that is, how minds are "moved" by desire, aversion, appetite, fear, anger, and envy. And civil philosophy deals with the concerted actions of people in a commonwealth—how, in detail, the wayward wills of human beings can be constrained by power (i.e., force) to prevent civil disorder and maintain peace.

Hobbes's philosophy was a bold restatement of Greek atomistic materialism, with applications to the realities of early modern politics that would have seemed strange to its ancient authors. But there are also elements in it that make it characteristically English. Hobbes's account of language led him to adopt nominalism and to deny the reality of universals. Bacon's general emphasis on experience also had its analogue in Hobbes's theory that all knowledge arises from sense experiences, all of which are caused by the actions of physical bodies on the sense organs. Empiricism has been a basic and recurrent feature of British intellectual life, and its nominalist and sensationalist roots were already clearly evident in both Bacon and Hobbes.

