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# THOMAS HOBBES

His View of Man



*Dit 's HOBBES, die door Godts, Natuurs, en Redens Wet,  
De Hooge Opper-magt aen EEN heeft vast geset.  
Die door de donck're Hell, seg Nickers Spookery,  
Der Pausen overlast, en Preeckers Aovaerdij.  
I.V.S.*

edited by J.G. van der Bend

## Secularization in Thomas Hobbes's Anthropology

The starting point for analysing the concept of man in Thomas Hobbes's philosophy is, in my opinion, a deficiency which he recognized, but one he did not investigate sufficiently and the full importance of which he failed to grasp. It is the structural impossibility of constructing an objective, final and exhaustive meaning for reality and with it a settled meaning for personal existence. The inability of the mind to grasp reality in any global sense is shown most obviously when it is faced with specific contradictory aspects of human experience; pain in its different shapes and death, which summarizes, according to Hobbes, the whole negativity of life.

In contrast to the traditional views of Christian anthropology, Hobbes's man is lacking a religious sense, an attitude opposed to both natural and super-natural revelation. Thus is denied the idea of man as *capax Dei*, man open to the transcendent, able to know God, even if only analogically, and finding in God his ultimate interlocutor. As Hobbes has it, it is doubtful if one can discover God's existence through natural reason.<sup>1</sup> And, of course, for Hobbes there is no way to come to know him.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, His existence does not affect man's life and is unable to provide any basis for or meaning to it. We do not merely have to suppose that for Hobbes, man is unable to grasp a global and final sense of reality and life. Rather, we can see that it has no place in his anthropology since it is not an object of normal experience and in no way affects the behavior of man, who, in any case, doesn't really need it.

Hobbes emphasizes how inadequate philosophy is to recognize God's attributes by asserting that it is possible for man to know only what he himself produces, the generation of which can be conceived.

1. Cf. O. L., 336: *Praeterea etsi ex eo, quod nihil potest movere seipsum, satis recte inferitur primum aliquod esse movens quod fuerit aeternum, non tamen inferetur id, quod inferre solent, nempe aeternum immobile, sed contra aeternum motum; siquidem, ut verum est nihil moveri a seipso, ita etiam verum est, nihil moveri nisi a moto. Quaestiones ergo de magnitudine et de origine mundi, non a philosophis, sed ab iis, qui ordinando Dei cultu legitime praesunt, determinandae sunt.*

2. Cf. O. L., 335: *Est autem infiniti scientia finito quaesitori inaccessibleis. Quicquid homines scimus a phantasmatis nostri didicimus; phantasma autem infiniti, sive magnitudine sive tempore, nullum est; neque enim homo, neque ulla alia res, praeterquam quae ipsa infinita sit, infiniti conceptionem ullam habere potest....*

From this point of view, a deep discrepancy arises between the subject and reality and reality itself loses any possible meaning. Hobbes's man turns out to be incapable of contemplating reality or of having analogical or symbolic knowledge of it. He is locked in his own subjectivity, concerned only with what he creates with his own efforts, measures by his own intelligence and can reduce to "plus and minus."<sup>3</sup> Lacking any intuitive faculty of mind, man is left with reason alone and then reason itself is reduced to a mere calculating function.

Although Hobbes recognizes a supernatural revelation of God, in his outlook Christian faith is coherently reduced to the abstract statement that "Jesus is the Christ".<sup>4</sup> All that remains then is for men to follow their natural reason as the "undoubted word of God".<sup>5</sup> Hobbes does not believe that faith affects the cognitive process, or that it is capable of giving real meaning to human experience. It is merely a blind act of obedience to a powerful master plus the hope for an afterlife. Given then the cognitive gap between God and man, the task of judging reality and existence is totally entrusted to "natural" reason which, as we have already seen, is not receptive to the transcendent and is unable to capture any objective sense of reality as a whole, and is, as we shall see later, reduced to an *instrumentellen Vernunft*.

Summing up then, in my opinion, the interlocking grounds of Hobbes's gnoseology are:

- 1.) A total commitment to the Baconian attitude of *scientia propter potentiam*.<sup>6</sup>
  - 2.) The assumptions of gnoseology shifting between two polarities, either
    - a.) a "metaphysics of sensism-nominalism" (a kind of ontological atomism<sup>7</sup> with a theological foundation - only God is able to know reality as He made it - which renders knowledge of universals impossible and reduces truth to a mere question of formal relations), or, in the void left over by this conception.
    - b.) a mechanism leading to monism in which nothing but what is measurable exists, and which, consequently, can be kept under control.
- Since I intend to deal with this topic more fully in a forthcoming book,

3. Cf. O. L. I, 3: *Ratiocinari igitur idem est quod addere et subtrahere...*

4. T. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, edited with a preface and critical notes by Ferdinand Tönnies, Cambridge 1928, p. 122.

5. E. W. III, 358.

6. Cf. O. L. I, 6

7. Cf. T. Hobbes, manuscript N. 5297 of the National Library of Wales, published by M. M. Rossi in *Alle fonti del deismo e del materialismo moderno*, Firenze 1942, p. 104: "... there is nothing that truly exists in the world but single individual bodies producing single and individual acts..."

I will now just note that the experience of being as a gift that shows itself in the *actus essendi* does not appear in Hobbes's philosophy. Hobbes speaks of being only as a copula. His wonder extends only to the discovery of causes, not to the fact that things exist at all. Reality, for him, exists only as an object of measurement. The consequences of this attitude are more radical and dramatic in Hobbes than in any other mechanistic philosopher of his time. In fact we find right from the start in Hobbes's philosophy both the attitude of sensism-nominalism, which stresses the hypothetical aspect of knowledge and the separation of subject and reality, and the concept of faith as mere obedience without any dialectic connection with reason.

First of all, this implied *Weltanschauung* characterized by the crisis of the *analogia entis*, causes a "decentralization" and a "lowering" of man's position in the cosmos. The God of a nominalistic theology fades away from man's world and so, with the advance of the "new science", man more easily becomes an aspect of nature's mechanism, totally material like the animals. This "lowering" actually implies the giving up of man's proper attitude toward himself and towards his destiny. Paradoxically, Hobbes must react to this "lowering" and the reduction of man. In order to ground the possibility of science, he is forced to stress the wonder and the creative and arbitrary attitude present in human knowledge, and consequently the possibility of separation from nature.

A second consequence flows from this implicit metaphysics. In the Thomistic philosophy *ens et bonum convertuntur*. This allows one to conceive analogically, on the ethical level, a *summum bonum* as the perfection of man. In Hobbes's philosophy, since the former aspect disappears, the latter is also lost. Because reason is incapable of capturing the full and final meaning of existence, there is no possibility of experiencing in this life the fullness of meaning and happiness which would make it possible to formulate analogically a conception of the blessed condition insured by faith for the future life. There is in Hobbes's view, an unbridged gap between this life and the next and he thinks that man, like all reality, is nothing but body in motion, unable to come to rest and recognize a *bonum* exhaustive of his desires. Only a total "μετανοια" of man's structure, impossible in the present life, could permit man to grasp a *summum bonum*. From hence derives his criticism of the scholastic idea of *visio beatifica* which he condemns as "unintelligible".<sup>8</sup>

Compared with the traditional anthropology, the novelty in Hobbes's thought is man's inability to experience any permanent meaning for his life which would at the same time be an ethical rule for and the ultimate standard of judgement of his behavior. Consequently, the only rule left



for human behavior must be found in the existential passions which, traditionally, are seen as causes of "sin", inasmuch as they consist of an unending quest for ever new idols. From these stem inconsistencies in men's behavior and ethical relativism.

I wish to point out that, in my opinion, Hobbes's view of life as an insatiable race does not originate primarily from his mechanism, but emerges from a particular social situation and is legitimated by the philosophico-religious motivation described above. The justification provided by mechanism would, in this case as well as others, play an ideological role.

From a psychological point of view, the lack of a *summum bonum*, the senselessness and fortuitousness of life, produces in Hobbes's man a loneliness, a deep instability and a fear of losing his own individuality (the only thing he is instinctively sure of) and, consequently, a mistrust of events of which he is uncertain. Such an attitude exhibits two complementary aspects. First man fears the future as unpredictable and likely to bring about pain and death, this last being the ultimate evil as it entails the total loss of individuality. Secondly, man is incapable of living in the present. An "escape from the present" occurs because anxiety always projects man into the future as he strives to predict and anticipate events. Pleasure, in both its sensual and intellectual forms, definitely plays an important role in Hobbes's anthropology, but actually, it is itself an uncertain remedy for the "escape from the present" since it is not always readily available and is always fragile, it cannot transform man's primary sense of existence.

Out of these attitudes of unconcern with ultimate reality and the consequent fear of losing his individuality (his life and the pleasures connected with it) there arises in man the strong desire to assert himself as a separate individual, stressing his own existence opposed both to reality in general and to the existence of other man. The only possible way for man to assert his own individuality (since the acceptance of a religious meaning which could reconcile him with reality is not even contemplated) is through power, to avail himself of titles, possessions and people under his control in order to reassure himself of his individual worth and free himself from fear. The primary pleasure in life, is then, a sense of power, of the capacity to influence events, and not mere sensual or intellectual satisfactions. This desire of asserting himself in the face of reality, and even in opposition to it, becomes the primary sense of existence. Thus with the entire person striving for power, man finds finally his life's unifying factor.<sup>9</sup> Each aspect of the personality (virtues, vices, every possible

9. Cf. E. W. III, 85-86: "So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in Death".

passion) must gradually coincide with the sense he has of himself dominating things and people, a feeling as will be seen later, which is conditioned by other men. There is no room in Hobbes's man for developing different attitudes.

Attempts to exercise power over nature appears either as religion or science. Pagan superstition (and it appears that Hobbes saw any sort of popular religion, including Christianity, as superstition, compared to the purified religion of the learned) is the primitive way, ultimately harmful Hobbes believed, of exorcising the fear man has before an unknown and unpredictable reality. Ordinary people create their gods hoping in this way to pacify the hostile forces of nature. But popular religions are then manipulated by the powerful who oppress men with a yoke still heavier than nature's. We see again in Hobbes the ancient theory of Lucretius if here applied only to popular religious beliefs. Hobbes sees man's fear of natural and historical events as the self-explanatory source of religious phenomena. On the contrary, as I have already in part shown, religion is not viewed as an independent structure of human consciousness, and popular religion is not regarded as even a partial answer to the human need for some final meaning for man's existence.

In Hobbes's view, the "new science" is also a response to man's fundamental desire to rid himself of fear by coming to know the causes of events and thus being able to act efficiently on them in order to reduce their negative effects and maximize their positive ones. For Hobbes, as for his master in philosophy, Bacon *scientia propter potentiam*. But the new science not only satisfies man's need to be free of his fear by freeing him from his slavery to nature, it at the same time frees him from slavery to religious superstition through a process of "rational enlightenment." Nevertheless this process does not effectuate an immediate and final elimination of religious superstition. Hobbes is too realistic to suppose that. Rather he sees the fear that grounds not only religion, but science and politics as well, as too firmly rooted in man for such an outcome. The factor that can more than any other bring about a reduction of superstition seems for Hobbes to be the foundation of the state through political science, the state being a means of providing the individual with security. "Rational enlightenment" must become social change if it is to be effective.

On the other hand, the endless desire to dominate others and to possess more than they possess ("vanity"), underlays, especially in some individuals, men's relationships with his fellows and makes man different in this respect from social animals. Even though Hobbes does not expressly make it a part of his theory, I believe that all this stems from the same deep distrust of reality and the senselessness of existence which produces

in social life an instinctive opposition to others. In order to assert his own individuality, which in isolation is of no value, man must necessarily find some way to set himself apart from other men. He wants to be considered as better than they are and so he must possess more than they have. This self-assertion inevitably leads man to deny others and in this is found the greatest pleasure of existence. In support of his claims, Hobbes shows how a phenomenon of apparently little significance, such as smiling at another's faults, reveals the depths of man's opposition to his fellows.<sup>10</sup>

Since a man's superiority cannot be experienced by him as something permanently his, considering that nearly everyone is constantly pursuing the same goal, the race for power can never end. The fear of others, whose competitive and hostile nature results from the preceding considerations, is, in Hobbes's view, also the result of the scarcity of natural wealth and the natural equality of men, wherein no one can enjoy a definite position of supremacy. And so the natural desire for power is further stimulated and affects everyone, even those who might ordinarily be satisfied with what they already have. In their case it is a question of self-defense and protection from those whose desire for power, coupled with the possibility of taking advantage of weakness, could rob the individual of the means of sustaining his life. And so the chain reaction Hobbes calls the *bellum omnium contra omnes* is initiated. The fundamental problem of life, preserving individuality, remains unsolved.

From the initial thesis of this essay, a second consequence flows quite directly. If man is unable to accept or feel deeply the meaning of what he lives for, if he is unable to define his self-consciousness and his behavior before his fellow man in a way that constitutes a religious awareness of reality, then his own value comes more and more to depend on the opinions of society. Man's value, each man's value, comes to be identical with the value he has for others. When the way an individual views himself and his fellows is not anchored in some absolute or unquestionable pattern, it must be determined by social judgements for there is no other mode of evaluation. Linked in this way to social judgements, the value of every man becomes relative. In Hobbes's society where the primary aim of each person is power over people and things, the value of every man is necessarily measured by the power he has compared to that possessed by others.

Hobbes wrote: "The value, or worth of a man is, as of all other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power: and therefore is not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need

10. T. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*.... p. 32: "I may therefore conclude that the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others..."

and judgement of another....And as in other things....not the seller, but the buyer determines the price. For let a man as most men do, rate themselves at the highest value they can; yet their true value is not more than it is esteemed by others."<sup>11</sup> When man is deprived of any true meaning for his existence that can support him whatever the case may be, a meaning which could be shared with anyone, society becomes oppressive and plays a totalitarian role right up to the point of overwhelming the lone individual's conscience. Total individualism implies slavery of the individual to the state.

From what has been said above, it follows that man's condition in the "natural state" is tragic. And the tragedy of human life, as I have stated before, cannot find any adequate and efficient solution in popular religious beliefs or faith, which, according to Hobbes are of no importance, if not positively harmful. Rather men must rely on the limited solution to be found through natural reason and human effort. In Hobbes's view, reason, closed as it is to the fertility of religious experience, loses all normative value and any capacity for locating ends and so is reduced to a purely instrumental function subordinated to the predominant natural tendency of individuals toward self-assertion. Consequently, reason functions most effectively in social life and politics. And so it is in political science where the answer to what Hobbes took to be the most urgent problem of his time is to be found. The "new science" of the seventeenth century must involve itself in politics if it is to have a positive effect and realize the periods potential for liberation. So in Hobbes's view, only through the new political science, of which he believes himself to be the founder, could the "abstract" freedom promised by Francis Bacon and the supporters of the scientific method, become a reality for man.

Let us now see how reason gets applied to social life. The way instrumental reason works in the social sphere is as an "evaluator of pleasures," bringing about a revision of the manners one must follow in order to assert his individuality, that is to say, his power over others. Not everything that seems pleasurable is proper. Regarding the *bellum omnium contra omnes* the human mind proves capable of saving man from the imminent loss of all his goods, especially the one Hobbes held to be most precious, life itself, the essential condition of all other goods. At that very moment the calculation of pleasures becomes a contract among individuals. The true triumph of calculating reason is to be found in this contract. It could be described as the key to preserving man's individuality (especially his life, but his wealth and serenity as well) while carrying with it no need of changing in any fundamental way his natural

11. E. W. III, 76.



egocentricity and competitiveness. In this contract, the contractors agree to give up a good of at best minor importance, power in its most dangerous form. And this contract, while it moderates the competition for greater power in its most extreme form, does not affect its true genesis, the senselessness of human life. And the proof of this lies in the fact, shown many times, that after the establishment of the state, the basic psychological structure of Hobbes's man remains essentially the same.<sup>12</sup>

The assumption on which Hobbes's social contract rests is the total closure of man to the transcendent and the consequent positioning of the state as the supreme entity whose rigid logic is inescapable. From this it emerges that the ethical structure of the individual cannot be changed even by a gradual process of upbringing. The traditional educational policy of inculcating certain values is replaced by training in a rational "cultivation of the passions." A just social order is to be obtained without moral effort solely through investigation of the actual forces of society and attempting to find a satisfactory balance among individual interests.

And so the contract's logic becomes inseparable from human psychology and defines every social construction and every peaceful (that is every apparently non-violent) relationship including even those commonly experienced as free relationships such as those between a mother and her son or between members of the same church. Hobbes's philosophy does not seem to permit any possible unifying factor beyond those having their basis in the logic of the contract. Even the question of truth is subordinated to that of security and power.<sup>13</sup>

Hobbes is realistically aware that his political construction fails to eliminate man's deep contradiction and its consequent separation of men. Still he is convinced that the State, founded on rational social agreements, is the only possible solution to the dramatic problem of human life. Thus the constant shifting between his optimistic glorification of the State, which is not without its prophetic accents,<sup>14</sup> and his sour pessimism about man, whose deep origin lies in materialism and the closure to the transcendent, can be explained. While man needs a clearer answer to the problem of his earthly life, to his demand for a meaning acceptable each day, to his hope of ridding himself of fear, to his longing for a sincere fraternal unity with his fellow men, for Hobbes such an answer is

12. Cf. OL II, 305.

13. Cf. T. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*..., p. 150: "...seeing right reason is not existent, the reason of some man, or men, must supply the place thereof; and that man or men, is he or they that have the sovereign power, as hath been already proved... As for example, upon the occasion of some strange and .. deformed birth, it shall not be decided by Aristotle, or the philosophers, whether the same be a man or no, but by the laws".

14. Cf. OL II, 202-203.

realistically impossible and so the question itself is improper and should not be put. That is what his realistic pessimism wants to suggest.

To sum up, if the above is correct, then Hobbes's man is an original and coherent picture of man in a secularized society, not necessarily a theoretical atheist, but one who constructs his own life starting from a "reduction" by philosophic reason and from a "private" experience of faith. Such a conclusion is, in my opinion, of basic importance even though it seems opposed by Hobbes having devoted a significant portion of his political writings to trying to demonstrate the acceptability of his theses to a Christian anthropology, Hobbes's many references to Scripture aim at confirming on a theological level what he has argued philosophically. As it is impossible to think of this as merely some sort of practical device or stratagem, the relationship between Hobbes's Christianity and his philosophic anthropology requires some clarification. Hobbes, whose good faith when he calls himself a Christian is not to be doubted, constructs a new reading of the Bible and the Christian tradition based on a preconception of man thought of as outside any knowledge that could be acquired through religious faith. From this point of view it can be explained why Hobbes, though never openly denying them, tries to rationalize and secularize those doctrines of Christianity which would oppose through their implications his idea of man and his positioning of faith as a matter of secondary importance.

Primarily Hobbes seems to ignore the total unprecedentedness and gratuitousness, incomparable to any pattern found in natural reason, peculiar to the Christian message, the "foolishness" of Christ's sacrifice of atonement. It is obvious, therefore, why Christ does not play any significant role in Hobbes's theology. As has been argued, Hobbes insists on considering the Christian event as essentially a "private phenomenon" to be restricted to the sphere of individual conscience, and incapable of becoming culture and original morality. Bramhall had understood this when he ironically remarked, "If his disciples have such an implicit faith, that they can digest all these things, they may feed with ostriches."<sup>15</sup>

As has already been pointed out, once faith has become a "private business," restricted to obedience, detached from reason, judgement and action, man's life is totally entrusted to natural reason. Hobbes theologically justifies this position by asserting the perfect equality in the Scriptures between Christ and natural reason: "The same Christ is called (vers. 9): 'the true light that lighteth every man that cometh in the world.' All which are descriptions of right reason, whose dictates we have showed before, are the laws of nature."<sup>16</sup> In Hobbes the Christian event is

15. E. W. IV, 381.

16. E. W. II, 51.

brought to rest solely in "natural reason" of which true light is the symbol.

Because of his conception of faith, he does not emphasize in his works the deep ontological transformation (rebirth) which can be lived even in this world, nor the way in which the saving event affects the believer, nor how necessary it is for him to join an autonomous ecclesiastic structure to benefit from his rebirth. Many are the passages where Hobbes asserts the perfect coincidence of church and state. Of Christianity he gets mainly the ethical aspect quite apart from the new anthropology, and so the Christian ethic is seen in a naturalistic way, in accord with a legal-prescriptive and individualistic contractual logic. Hobbes points out that "as the law of nature is all of it divine, so the law of Christ by conversion (which is wholly explained in the V, VI and VII chapters of St. Mathew's Gospel), is all of it also...the doctrine of nature."<sup>17</sup> In the same way, Hobbes had defined virtue in the *Elements of Law Natural and Politic* in contractual terms as being "social with them will be sociable, and formidable to them that will not."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the evangelical word "peace" has for Hobbes the reduced meaning of "absence of war." "But that which we set down for the fundamental law of nature, namely, that peace was to be sought for, is also the sum of the Divine law, will be manifest by those places... Math. v. 9: 'Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God.'"<sup>19</sup>

Here too the relationships among people acquires the characteristics of an agreement and of an exchange among individuals quite different from one another. Since such a contractual logic involves the whole of human life, there is no way to discover a different logic in our relationship with God, though Hobbes never quite draws this ultimate conclusion. This outlook also explains why Hobbes draws on the Old Testament more frequently than he does on the New. (It could be said that the latter, quite apart from tradition, is often read in the light of the former.) The Old Testament, indeed, if separated from the "Revealed Word" in its entirety, can be more easily construed in a legal, contractual way. If one reads the Bible, especially the Old Testament by the aforementioned criteria, dictated by a secularizing outlook aiming to emphasize in one way the eschatological dimension of Christianity, thereby depleting the richness of the faith-history-relationship, then one can find no discrepancies between the anthropological theory of the first part of Hobbes political works and the theology of the later parts. Both lines, the philosophical and the theological one, can thus meet on the basic statement of the anthropology

17. E. W. II, 62.

18. T. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law...*, p. 73.

19. E. W. II, 52.

and together create a solid political structure. Since Hobbes's political theory, even if seen in a theological context, would have been difficult for his contemporaries to understand, it was necessary for him to construct the state on an alternative series of motivations quite unconcerned with that original historical logic I have tried to outline in the present essay.

#### ADVICE

O. L. = T. Hobbes, *Opera philosophica quae latine scripsit omnia*, edited by W. Molesworth, London 1839-45 - Aalen 1961.

E.W. = T. Hobbes, *The English Works*, II voll, edited by W. Molesworth, London 1839-45 - Aalen 1961.