CHAPTER EIGHT

MOTION AND REASON: 
HOBBES’ DIFFICULTIES WITH THE IDEA OF ACTIVE POWER

Juhani Pietarinen

Galileus in our time, striving with that difficulty, 
was the first that opened to us the gate of natural 
philosophy universal, which is the knowledge of the 
nature of motion.

Thomas Hobbes, De Corpore

Introduction

At first sight, a chapter on Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) may seem entirely 
inappropriate in a book that examines metaphysical theories of the 
world as active power. Hobbes himself would certainly protest, for his 
main philosophical doctrine is that ultimately the world does not consist 
of power at all, but of motion. Hobbes wanted to build a ‘first philoso-
phy’ entirely free from the assumption of powers or forces reminding 
of the ‘occult qualities’ of scholastic metaphysics. For a scientifically 
oriented philosopher there is just the world of bodies the ultimate 
constituents of which are motions: “For the variety of all figures arises 
out of the variety of those motions by which they are made; and motion 
cannot be understood to have any other cause besides motion.”¹ So, 
if one wants to use notions referring to power, like ‘cause’, ‘tendency’ 
and ‘resistance’, these should be defined in terms of motion. We may 
speak of Hobbes’ kinematist theory of power.²

In what sense can this kind of power be regarded as active? It follows 
directly from the kinematist theory that bodies can be active only in the 
relative sense of transferring a motion received from some other body 
to other bodies. Thus, active power in the corporeal world means, for

¹ De Corpore 1.6.6; EW I, p. 70.
² Valtteri Viljanen suggested this term to me.
Hobbes, bodily motion that will or may cause another motion. The idea of bodies having power of being and acting by themselves is rejected as scholastic nonsense:

[F]or those that say anything may be moved or produced by itself, by species, by its own power, by substantial forms, by incorporeal substances, by instinct, by antiperistasis, by antipathy, sympathy, occult quality, and other empty words of schoolmen, their saying so is to no purpose.3

In brief, the notion of active power in the ‘scientific’ metaphysics Hobbes aimed at building is reduced to the motion of bodies conceived as causes of other motions.

This, however, is not all what can actually be found in his writings concerning the first philosophy. I will argue that Hobbes did not succeed in the attempt to eliminate from his kinematist metaphysics the idea of active power in the strong sense, understood as a capacity of being and acting ‘in itself’. Certain basic assumptions of his philosophy seem to imply that God is such a power, and that God’s power should be thought to be effective in the whole corporeal world. The failure to take these implications into account makes the Hobbesian first philosophy inconsistent and the proofs of certain of its basic principles problematic, most importantly the proof of the persistence principle crucial for Hobbes’ construction of scientific metaphysics.

Hobbes’ kinematist theory can be seen to fail also in giving an account of the activity of human reason. It seems evident that what Hobbes describes as ‘ratiocination’ involves active operations of reason in the strong sense of being causally independent of sensations and other bodily affections. The tacit presumption that humans are able to act freely, by their own power alone, becomes particularly obvious in Hobbes’ description of the sovereign as an independent and unlimited agent in political life.

If we hold on to the kinematist theory officially promoted by Hobbes, there is not very much to be harvested for the present purposes. If, however, we follow the implications of Hobbes’ more or less tacit presumptions concerning genuinely active power and bring them into daylight, a different picture emerges. If, as one of the implications, the laws of motion are taken to manifest God’s active power, Hobbes’ position turns out to be very similar to the Cartesian view of the inert material

---

3 *De Corpore* 4.30; EW I, p. 531.