As is well known, Hobbes’s intention was to present his ideas as an integrated structure comprising the three elements or sections of philosophy. In the first work, he tells us, “I would have treated of body and its general properties,” under the heading of physics. The second book would have considered “man and his special faculties and affections,” that is, his will, reason, imagination, appetites, and so forth. Hobbes assigns this subject matter no contemporary ‘scientific’ classification, but we may, I believe, without prejudice to his intent, characterize this section of his philosophy as the province of psychology. In the third work, Hobbes writes, he proposed to describe “civil government and the duties of subjects,” that is, political philosophy. This intended presentation of his thought, Hobbes explains, was never adequately executed because the urgency and importance of the English Civil War intervened to force him to publish “the third part” before the foundations of this philosophical structure had appeared in print. “Therefore it happens, that what was last in order, is yet come forth first in time.”

Quite apart from the provocative substantive assertions of Hobbes’s thought, how the various levels of that thought cohere together has been the subject of considerable debate among later interpreters of Hobbes. Almost no one has accepted Hobbes’s claim that his psychological principles can be derived from certain physical principles, although no one doubts that Hobbes believed that this was, in principle, possible. Most of the controversy in the secondary literature has, therefore, focussed upon whether Hobbes’s political philosophy can be derived from his psychological assumptions. How this question is answered depends, in part, upon what one assumes those psychological principles are – a matter of some controversy in itself – and the conceptual relationship one believes obtains between science, psychology, and politics in Hobbes’s thought.²

Among those who believe that a logical relationship can be established between psychology, ethics, and politics, there is a division between those interpreters who argue that, generally speaking, Hobbes was successful in this endeavor, and those interpreters who maintain that Hobbes could have been successful if he had made just a few modifications in either his premises or his conclusions. Both versions of this position have been attacked by scholars arguing on Humean philosophical grounds that neither Hobbes nor anyone else can derive moral imperatives from empirically descriptive psychological characterizations of human behavior. In addition, a number of interpreters have separated Hobbes’s ethical or political theory from his psychological theory on the grounds that a more accurate interpretation of his political thought can be presented if it is seen to be dependent upon certain assumptions Hobbes held with respect to religion, God, or the sociological structure of his society, rather than as the outgrowth — logically or otherwise — of his view of the psychological makeup of human beings.

This schematic overview of the interpretive parameters of Hobbes scholarship will, I hope, serve as a map of the chartered regions of Hobbes’s thought. It cannot — nor is it intended to — convey to the reader the complexities of the various interpretations to which I have alluded; rather, I offer it because I propose to explore a relatively unchartered area of Hobbes’s


