Justice and contra-natural dissolution

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“hominis ad hominem proportio,” Dante, Monarchia, V. 1.
“There are three kinds of couches: (of the craftsman, of the painter) and one of which, I suppose, we would say a God produced.” Plato, Republic 597b

In Hobbes the strongest themes of the modern state come forward: it is not based on feudal honor and religious or an ideological gnosis but on bourgeois contract, it is secular in spirit, individualistic in its suspicion of mere custom and it is technological (implying bureaucratic) rather than metaphysical. Hobbes’ politics is decidedly anti-theological and naturalistic in a sophistic and Epicurean tone – “not wisdom but authority makes (measures) the civil law.” Classical naturalism, particularly Plato and the stoics, included the divine whereas Hobbes’ naturalism is a materialism opposed to platonic metaphysics, with the result that it leaves the divine not open to philosophy. Like Epicurus, Hobbes severely restrains both religion (platonized or not) and platonic metaphysics from intruding into the political structuring of human affairs. Justice must be considered in a human measure both within nature and in the construction of an artifice, the state, to which man is driven by his desires and a rationality that calculates them for the sake of controlling the harmful desires by means of the preservative ones.

Hobbes avoidance of a theological politics is an exemplary modern departure from the political tradition of the religiously dominated periods of the West. Consider how his mood opposes the Puritan pamphlet, “A Glimpse of Sion’s Glory,” published contemporaneously in 1641, when it says: “Babylon’s falling is Sion’s raising, Babylon’s destruction is Jerusalem’s salvation....Blessed is he that dasheth the brats of Babylon against the stones....God intends to make use of the common people in the great work of proclaiming the kingdom of his Son.” Hobbes is in the genius of Machiavelli: religion must be defanged or it will be the enemy of the state: it will curse the peace where the natural has primacy over its own orientation. In “The Kingdom of Darkness,” which is the title of the fourth and last part of Hobbes’ Leviathan, and in which the Catholic Church is the exemplar of institutionalized supernaturalism, Hobbes opposes anti-statist superstition and, its ally, false metaphysics. The Kingdom of Darkness makes men vulnerable to a fear of the unnatural greater than the fear of the natural that grounds
the coercive power of the state. Like Varro, in his Antiquities (47 B.C.E.), Hobbes champions the right of the imperium mundi to organize the divine cultus: and thus organizes politics on the primacy of the natural.

Further, Hobbes’ naturalist method has a modern feel combining ideational construction and empirical principles. It does not much separate the empirical from a definition normativity, though he usually moves from an empirical generality to the universality of definitions. Definitions allow measurement; here he emphasises the inexactitude of the laws of nature, as empirical theorems that purport to bring peace, in contrast to the mensurativity of the civil law which, in principle, is always decidable by the sovereign asserting the civil laws’ true meaning. Notably, the civil authority, unlike the authority of an institutionalized Church, is based on a natural necessity; consequently, in Hobbes’ understanding, not only can one not rationally choose among competing supernatural claims but any supernatural foundation is incapable of calculation. Literally nonsense because its definitions do not arise from the empirical, it is available, whether wittingly or unwittingly, to be used to oppose man’s natural interest. Empirically, the state is useful for all – or nearly all men – who desire the fundamentals of life, obtainable in the stability produced by peace, since it is the instrument that provides the best hope for securing them: so he offers the overstated contrast between the condition of nature and civil society as between conditions of war and peace.

Yet, though the fear of death and the desire for prosperity, the psychological generalities that ground Hobbes’ view of the state, has much empirical weight, they are also to be taken up as a methodological ideal, that is, as a definition, in order to theoretically discount the wide-spread suicidal or anti-self-interested behavior of actual human beings. This is a normative empiricism, which in its generic consideration as a rational proposal is unlike radically individual-specific sophistic positions (or, more modern, radical romantic positions) and, in its strategy of universalizing the basic psychological needs of human beings, not unlike the functionalism of Aristotle; however, by emphasizing that convention is in the service of nature, there is a sideling toward Hobbes’ nominal essentialism. Aside from individual vice and stupidity, since actual men are vulnerable to distortions of their self-interest, it is necessary to guard against all ideological systems that are not grounded in a sturdy commonsensical empiricism, and, particularly, in Hobbes’ era, to guard against the zealotry and the opposition to natural interests of religious doctrine.

Hobbes does makes some accommodations with religion, again in the tone of Epicurus – how else could he have written in seventeenth century Europe? – but of the “defanging” sort. Hobbes is a Erastian or caesaropapist, that is, he gives the power of setting religious dogma and ritual to the sovereign – thereby keeping intact the centrality of secular power – these he argues are the outward formulas for honoring God and not a matter of truth: this is a matter of hortatory and not de-