There is a delicate balance between the two wings of a scientific investigation of society; this balance must result from the work of organizing empirical research and theoretical construction. Political philosophy has provided a long history of theoretical frameworks which have often shown an acute logical and methodological sensibility but are usually deficient in the ‘cash value’ of empirical research. Nevertheless, the attractiveness of a great philosopher’s social theory is the power of a sort of persuasive ‘root-metaphor’ for charting human experience which wraps together a vision of psychology, social action, and the actuality of the human condition. Empirical research, therefore, adds and refines, elaborates and redirects, the theoretical compass found in a philosopher like Thomas Hobbes.

Indeed, Hobbes’s vision of society is captivating just because it is plausibly crude and simple; I do not mean to say his thinking is unsophisticated but, rather, that he provides a plausible, commonsensically small grouping of principles from which he constructs what he calls a ‘science of politics’ and ‘science’ for him means that these fundamental principles relate to each other in an orderly and deductive way that explains the state as an artifice or construction that prudentially arises out of the dynamics of human psychology. Hobbes’s claim to be the founder of a science is significant since he says that before his own time only Euclid and, contemporaneously, only Galileo’s quantified physics and Harvey’s mechanistic physiology, have provided science. One notes a preference for the mathematical and mechanistic, which especially attunes one to Hobbes’s metaphor of the state as a machine, that is, as a construction or product with determinate parts in a cooperative process that achieves a specific goal: peace and prosperity. This, of course, is a theoretical structure presenting the fundamental rational framework – a definitional model – for the sort of thing a state ought to be and, thereby, it hovers above the empirical research of historical states. Through an ideal of well-functioning, normativity is built into this approach, legitimizing the speaking of society as healthy and sick, functional and

dysfunctional, rational and irrational. About this idealization, the sociological theorist, who is primarily interested in finding the principles for one or a group of historical societies, must have some scruple; but, empirical research, (which is to be as value free as possible in its collection), nevertheless must be theoretically interpreted. At the least, this demands the normative task of organizing the empirical collection; further, it seems impossible to avoid the temptation to suggest that an arrived upon social rule is either something which is a universal of human action or, something idiosyncratic, even when it is common to a number of societies. Social scientists, avoiding a commitment to an essentialist theory, often have opted for the letter, as a more defensible methodological operant, relying on their empirical research for limited and specific ascriptions of merely prevalent social behaviors, leaving aside a consideration of an essential ideal of social health or societal universals.

But, just so, Hobbes is attractive, despite his essentialist, methodological ideal of a science since his understanding of social action is constructed on principles that accept severe human limitations. This makes him a more plausible theorist even to those who do not accept the traditionally essentialist ideal of political philosophers. Indeed, Kant¹, who is a philosopher who absolutizes moral norms for mankind, criticizes Hobbes’s seemingly hard realism: Hobbes’s state ‘could be governed by a race of intelligent devils’. Avoiding Kant’s optimistic, Enlightenment idea of the progress of mankind to moral perfection, Hobbes employs principles that capture a harsher understanding of the human condition, ones that more or less, commonsensically are measured to human experience. Ideas like progress, moral perfectability, or a preference for some particular political form, like democracy are for Hobbes not scientific guides to understand the nature of the political.

Instead, for Hobbes, a small number of psychological principles leads to the construction of the state. These are: (a) human nature is unchanging. Of course circumstances change, which affects behavior, but the drive or orientation of our behavior, rooted in an unchanging human nature, does not. (b) That orientation is our own welfare, so that one might say that man is gregarious – he needs others both for his welfare and pleasure – but not social by nature. Here Hobbes opposes the Aristotelean political tradition that sees man by nature as a zoon politikon.³ (c) A limit to man’s greed and competitive impulse toward domination or ‘vainglorious’ striving is the fear of harm and, especially, of violent death. (d) Despite some differences of intelligence or physical strength, human beings are to be considered equal since there is not enough differences among them so that anyone is secure in a condition of nature, that is, where the state does not exist.

¹ I. Kant, ‘Ueber das Gemeinspruch...’, Part 2, ‘Hobbes’; also, see ‘Zur Ewigen Frieden.’