Introduction

Hobbes viewed philosophy as a practical subject. He thought that philosophical mistakes have serious consequences. In the preface to De Cive, he says:

But in those things which every man ought to meditate for the steerage of his life, it necessarily happens that not only from errors, but even from ignorance itself, there arise offences, contentions, nay, even slaughter itself. Look now, how great a prejudice these are; such and so great is the benefit arising from this doctrine of morality truly declared. How many kings, and those good men too, hath this one error, that a tyrant king might lawfully be put to death, been the slaughter of! How many throats hath this false position cut, that a prince for some causes may be certain men be deposed! And what bloodshed hath not this erroneous doctrine caused, that kings are not superiors to, but administrators for the multitude! Lastly, how many rebellions hath this opinion been the cause of, which teacheth that the knowledge whether the commands of kings be just or unjust, belongs to private men; and that before they yield obedience, they not only may, but ought to dispute them!

Hobbes not only wanted to discover the truth, he wanted to persuade others that he had discovered it. He believed that if his discoveries were universally accepted, there would be no more civil wars and people would live together in peace and harmony. After praising the work of the geometricians, he says:

If the moral philosophers had as happily discharged their duty, I know not what could have been added by human industry to the completion of that happiness, which is consistent with human life. For were the nature of human actions as distinctly known as the nature of quantity in geometrical figures, the strength of avarice and ambition, which is sustained by the erroneous opinions of the vulgar as touching the nature of right and wrong, would presently faint and languish; and mankind should enjoy such an immortal peace, that

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unless it were for habitation, on supposition that the earth should grow too narrow for her inhabitants, there would hardly be left any pretence for war.²

Although Hobbes was aware that it was extremely unlikely that his discoveries would be accepted by any significant number of people, let alone universally accepted, he kept working to improve his theory and to present it more forcefully. He wrote several versions of his moral and political theory, but although he improved many important details, the overall theory remains the same. *Leviathan*, published in 1651, is generally considered to be his masterpiece, but *De Cive*, published in 1642 with new notes and a new preface to the reader added in 1647, may be the most careful presentation of his moral and political theory. Insofar as Hobbes expresses the same positions in both *De Cive* and *Leviathan*, there can be no doubt that this position is part of his theory.

Hobbes's interests in philosophical topics other than moral and political philosophy were also practical, although not always quite so directly. Hobbes used his philosophical views to argue against and discredit standard religious views. For Hobbes it was a practical necessity to discredit those religious views that were incompatible with his moral and political philosophy. Failure to appreciate how important Hobbes thought it was to make religion compatible with civil peace makes it unintelligible that Hobbes explicitly devotes about a third of *De Cive* and about a half of *Leviathan* to the interpretation of Christian scriptures; Christianity being the only religion that had a serious impact on people's behavior in Hobbes's England.

Although Hobbes's major interest is in moral and political theory, he is a systematic thinker and his views about language, reasoning, and science had a significant impact on the presentation of his moral and political theory. His epistemological and metaphysical views, which were less developed, and he used them as a foundation for his anti-religious views. Hobbes viewed religion as the greatest threat to civil peace. As the amount of space that he devoted to biblical interpretation shows, he regarded it as crucial that Christianity be interpreted in a way that was compatible with his moral and political theory. Although he knew that belief in some form or another of Christianity was going to be a dominant factor in the political life of England, (and of the other European countries) he attempted to provide an interpretation of Christianity that removed it as a threat to civil peace. Although Hobbes used his views about language in arguing against standard religious views, he also had a more positive view about language as necessary for scientific reasoning. On the other hand, his epistemological and metaphysical views were developed only as far as was necessary to

² Op cit. p 91