Individualism, Absolutism, and Contract in Thomas Hobbes' Political Theory

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I Introduction

Thomas Hobbes thought that his philosophy formed one unified and consistent system, perhaps even a deductive system. *Leviathan* is apparently meant to be a single argument proceeding from a materialist metaphysics and a nominalist epistemology to their ethical, political, and theological consequences. *De Corpore Politico* and *De Cive* were also planned as parts of a more comprehensive philosophical whole.¹

Despite Hobbes's explicit claims for the unity of his system, most modern writers, as K.R. Minogue has pointed out,² tend to treat parts of his thought in isolation and to ignore the unity of the whole. This usually produces unbalanced, if sometimes interesting accounts of Hobbes's philosophy. In this paper I will try to redress the balance in two ways: first, by focusing on some parts of Hobbes's thought that are rarely discussed today, and identifying some of his sources for these arguments; second, by showing that much of what is really original and interesting in Hobbes's thought is the direct result of his attempts to harmonize these different, independent interests.

Specifically, I believe three different, major interests can be identified in Hobbes's life and writings: literature, especially classical literature and translations in the tradition of the Elizabethan Renaissance; politics, especially the absolutist politics of Stuart England; and science, the new science of Bacon, Harvey, Galileo, Descartes, and Boyle. These three interests appear to us today to be quite distinct, even antithetical, but this appearance is the result of our twentieth century understanding of these concepts. They

¹ Because Molesworth's edition of *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes* is not easily available to all scholars, I have tried to give all references both to the named text and to Molesworth (E.W., volume, page).
did not appear to be necessarily in conflict in the middle of the seventeenth
century. For example, today we look at royal absolutism as a hopelessly
irrational political system. In the seventeenth century it was perceived as the
new, modern way to govern a state, as up to date and as rational as the new
science of the time. Furthermore, these different interests remained with
Hobbes throughout his very long life. His first and last major works were
Greek translations, done fifty years apart. From his forties to his nineties he
remained interested in and wrote about science and about politics. Finally,
he thought that he had found a way to harmonize these three disparate
interests into one coherent philosophy. This was his proudest boast; one that
he repeated again and again. We do not really understand Thomas Hobbes
until we understand exactly what interested him in each of these three areas
and how he argued for their consistency.

What I have just outlined would be a book. In this paper I will describe
two historical sources that influenced Hobbes, one in literature and one in
politics. I will then show how they conflict and how Hobbes sought to make
them cohere. My underlying belief is that Hobbes in fact succeeded in
deriving his sovereign from his individuals in the state of nature through the
mechanisms of “contract” and “agency”. Whether or not his sovereign must
be an absolute sovereign is a different, more debatable question.

This paper will neglect Hobbes’s philosophy of science, not because I
think it unimportant, but because I have only limited space.

II Hobbes and the English Renaissance: Humanism, History, Exploration,
and Individualism

The most obvious aspect of Hobbes’s Renaissance character is his human-
ism. Humanism, even in the late northern Renaissance, was more a matter of
shared attitudes than a specific set of beliefs. In particular, humanists felt
that interest and ability in languages, especially Greek and Latin, was
important. A good prose style was equally important. The ability to produce
accurate, clear translations was a natural outgrowth of these two abilities,