Hobbes on Self-Preservation and Suicide

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"His whole works are a heap of mis-shapen errors, and absurd paradoxes, vented with the confidence of a juggler, the brags of a mountbank, and the authority of some Pythagoras, or a third Cato, lately dropped down from Heaven." (Bishop Bramhall from EW., IV, 381)

Introduction

Hobbes's modern commentators would not put it quite like Bramhall in the above quote but many would agree that no interpretation of Hobbes is without confounding data from within his corpus. We now survey a long history of disagreement about the central notions in Hobbes's system, and about the putative connections between his physics, psychology, and politics. The man's worst fear was that his Leviathan would be as ineffectual as Plato's Republic; (EW., III, 357) he prided himself on having adopted "an idoneous principle of tractation" (EW., II, vi) capable of presenting his doctrine in a way superior to that of his predecessors, who, he says, presented civil philosophy in a "counterfeit and babbling form." (ibid, xi) Sadly, Hobbes's version, "derived from true principles by evident connection", (ibid) met the same fate as Plato's. And while it did find its way into the universities (as he so ardently wished), (EL., 183-4) the "true doctrine concerning the law of nature, and the properties of a body politic," (ibid) gave rise to further disputation: it did not serve as either a rubber stamp for those "whose minds are yet as white paper", (ibid) nor as the font of civil knowledge for the public beyond the university.

My interest is in a question that usually arises as a codicil to theories about Hobbes's conception of self-preservation and its connection with the obligatoriness or otherwise of his laws of nature. On occasion it is mentioned by way of showing that self-preservation is a fundamental and unshakable motive force for Hobbesian individuals. I am alluding to the question of suicide in Hobbes. Warrender exhibits the first interest and Gauthier the
second. Gauthier argues that what Hobbes says about suicide is an implausible attempt to salvage an obviously defective psychology, encapsulated by Gauthier in the assertion “that men are necessarily self-maintaining engines, that self-preservation is a necessary and basic motive of human action.” Gauthier believes that there are flaws in Hobbes’s premises, and furthermore that there are genuinely inconsistent doctrines to be found in Hobbes. This is no doubt true, but I shall argue that it is not true with respect to what Hobbes says about self-preservation and suicide. On these matters what he says is at least highly plausible, and certainly not contradictory. If anything is suspect it is Gauthier’s reading of Hobbes’s psychology.

The Dialogue Treatment of *Felo de se*

In his *A Dialogue of the Common Laws of England* (written between 1662 and 1675 but not published until 1681) Hobbes devotes part of his section on Crimes Capital to the consideration of felonies, one of which is voluntary self-killing, suicide. What he has to say is brief enough to quote in full:

**Lawyer.** He is a Felon also that killeth himself voluntarily, and is called, not only by Common Lawyers, but also in divers Statute-Laws, *Felo de se.*

**Philosopher.** And ‘tis well so: for names imposed by Statutes are equivalent to Definitions; but I conceive not how any Man can bear *Animus felleum,* or so much Malice towards himself, as to hurt himself voluntarily, much less to kill himself; for naturally, and necessarily the Intention of every Man aimeth at somewhat, which is good to himself, and tendeth to his preservation: and therefore, methinks, if he kill himself, it is to be presumed that he is not *compos mentis,* but by some inward Torment or Apprehension of somewhat worse than Death, Distracted.

**Lawyer.** Nay, unless he be *compos mentis* he is not *Felo de se* ... and therefore he cannot be Judged a *Felo de se,* unless it be first proved he was *compos mentis.*

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2 Gauthier, D., op. cit., p. 23.