"But to build either a philosophy or anything else, there must be materials... Nobody's synthesis can be more complete than his analysis." – J.S. Mill

"Doctrines must take their beginnings from that of the matters of which they treat." – Giambattista Vico

Introduction

According to an old-fashioned and somewhat out-of-fashion view, Thomas Hobbes, "The Monster of Malmesbury," espouses perhaps the most consistent and rigid mechanical materialism in the history of thought. In the words of A.E. Taylor, a proponent of this old-fashioned and simple view, Hobbes's philosophy, if completed, would amount to a vast system of deductions by which all the truths of physical and mental science would be shown to be logical consequences of the ultimate simple laws of motion laid down by mechanics.¹

If one tried to follow out this characterization of Hobbes's systematic ideal,² his truly philosophical, or truly scientific account of human nature could be obtained only by deducing it from "the very first principles of philosophy," viz., body and motion. More precisely, the truly scientific account of human nature would take the form of a logical "generation," or synthesis of man from the explanatory material available at the appropriate stage of the grand


(would-be) deduction that purports to be Hobbes's scientific system. This appropriate point of departure for this anthropogenesis would include the characterization of the elements of sensitive-appetitive life exhibited in "the nature of brute beasts," plus any additional concepts needed to effect the "construction" of man.3

Now, while it is generally true that Hobbes neglected to develop this version of his philosophical anthropology, it is my view that Hobbes, besides giving us an inkling of what this bit of theory would look like, also supplied us with the principles and insights necessary for carrying out (in a rough and ready manner) this endeavour. What I would like to do in this paper is to make a contribution towards recovering this somewhat esoteric version of Hobbes's teaching on human nature. This reconstruction will of necessity involve a certain amount of speculative invention, a hopefully not "offensive" (as per, EW, I, vii) mixture of interpretation and critique. Such venturesome, though not 'violent,' maneuvers are necessary not because Hobbes's teaching has somehow "come to pieces,"4 or because of an incoherence calling for the hermeneutical intervention of "the king's men," magically to supply order where there is only chaos.5 No, our interpretation must be somewhat inventive here simply because it is true that even though Hobbes "thought one could build up a psychology from physics, he made no

3 Of crucial importance from a practical point of view, this version of Hobbes's teaching on human nature would be accessible only to the mathematici (EW, IV, 73–74); it would contain the vision of man open only to those who have "learned the first part of philosophy, namely, geometry and physics" (Logica, 301, 303EW) – the theoretical initiates "whose heads [are] strong enough to withstand the giddiness provoked by [Hobbes's] skepticism"; Michael Oakeshott, "The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes" in Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays (New York, 1962), pp. 287–288. According to Oakeshott's account of the oft-noted discrepancies or tensions in Hobbes's philosophical system, the anthropology he develops and uses in his political works is a 'political' or 'popular' anthropology, which is to be contrasted to the somewhat esoteric version insinuated in Hobbes's system. For another account of the interplay between the political-polemical and the scientific components of Hobbes's teaching, guided by insights similar to those of Oakeshott, see Hiram Caton, "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy," Political Studies, 22, 4 (1974), 413–431.


5 Brian Barry, "Warrender and His Critics" in Hobbes and Rousseau: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. M. Cranston & R.S. Peters (Garden City, NY., 1972), p. 49 where Barry speaks of the strangeness of the reconstructive efforts to make coherent a theory the interpreter assumes to be incoherent.