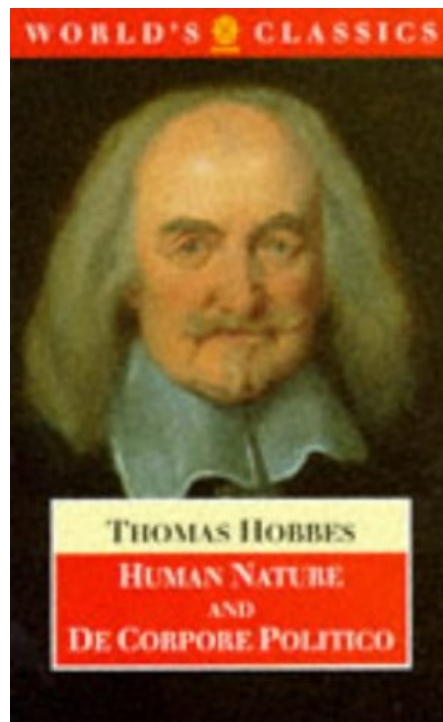




The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic: Part I: Human Nature; Part II: de Corpore Politico with Three Lives

Thomas Hobbes , J.C. Gaskin (Editor)

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Thomas Hobbes' timeless account of the human condition, first developed in *The Elements of Law* (1640), which comprises *Human Nature* and *De Corpore Politico*, is a direct product of the intellectual and political strife of the seventeenth century. His analysis of the war between the individual and the group lays out the essential strands of his moral and political philosophy later made famous in *Leviathan*. This first ever complete paperback edition of *Human Nature* and *De Corpore Politico* is also supplemented by chapters from Hobbes' later work *De Corpore* and "The Three Lives," never before published together in English.

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Xander says

In *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* (1640), Thomas Hobbes sets out to explain the relationship between physics, psychology and politics. In doing this, Hobbes falls back on Epicurean materialism (there are significant differences between the philosophy of Hobbes and Epicurus though).

In the 1640's, Descartes' philosophy was just taking hold, and would remain influential on the Continent for more than 100 years - it was only in the Enlightenment that Cartesianism gave way to Newton's mechanics. Descartes built his philosophy on the notion of dualism: there is matter and there is the immortal (human) soul. Hobbes, to the contrary, is a monist (like Spinoza after him): for him there was nothing but matter and motion - even spirits are matter in the sense of quantity and dimensions, just invisible to our senses.

Based on his materialistic picture of Nature, Hobbes starts by describing physics in terms of mechanics - maybe this was due to his 1636 visit to the godfather of mechanics, Galilei? After this, Hobbes starts to describe the workings of our mental life in terms of motion. Motion is all there is, according to Hobbes, so even human psychology should be explained in terms of motion. And, since states are in effect conglomerations of human beings, we should view politics as a form of mechanics as well. This leads to Hobbes' picture of the social contract - to be explained in more detail in his 1651 magnum opus *Leviathan* - whereby all citizens give up their power to an authoritarian sovereign, who wields absolute power (legislative, as well as executive).

This sounds like a plea for dictatorship, and in effect this is exactly what Hobbes is promoting. It is important not to start moralizing right away, and take a look at the time when *The Elements of Law* (and the *Leviathan*, for that matter) were written. Hobbes witnessed the collapse of his society in the English Civil War. During this period, English society collapsed in royal and parliamentary factions, with all consequent massacres, persecutions and violent outburst. Hobbes saw in this a return to the natural state of mankind.

This last point is important, because Hobbes' picture of mankind in nature, is a building block for his political philosophy. Man in nature is, according to Hobbes, a 'homo homini lupus' - a wolf for his fellow beings (Hobbes seems to forget/not to know that wolves live in packs, though). In short: life of man in a state of nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." This view of mankind, is the stepping stone to the rest of his political philosophy. It is easy to see where Hobbes draws this picture from, considering the events he witnessed during his lifetime.

The problem with Hobbes is, for me, that he writes so dry and abstract, that it is sometimes hard to be convinced by the arguments. Hobbes uses the synthetic method: giving detailed and scrupulously circumscribed definitions and then using logic to deduce new truths. At times, where this method is inapplicable, he resorts to the analytical method: inducing universals from particulars. This leads inevitably to abstruse texts. It makes the works also seem slightly outdated.

An important point to note is that Hobbes was accused by his contemporaries of atheism. And that was a serious offence in 17th century England. It is not hard to see where this accusation comes from: for Hobbes the whole cosmos is matter and motion - no obscure substances like immortal souls and God exists, but we

cannot say anything sensible about Him. Hobbes thought he was supported in this by Holy Scripture; the earthly resurrection of all deceased human beings is clearly announced in the bible. His religious contemporaries were less convinced and saw Hobbes' philosophy as a threat to religion (and rightly so, in my opinion).

I cannot recommend this book. It is only interesting as a historical document and as a background to his more important work Leviathan.

Yann says

Ce texte de Thomas Hobbes, philosophe anglais du dix-septième siècle connu pour son œuvre majeure, Léviathan, comporte deux parties : dans la première, il s'agit de décrire ce qu'est la nature humaine, et dans la seconde, sont abordés les rapports politiques.

La première partie m'a énormément impressionnée. Ce n'est pas simplement un mais dix traités différents qui semblent condensés en un seul tellement la matière qu'il renferme est à la fois riche et ramassée. Le choix de Hobbes d'articuler son exposé par une succession de définition est excellente: elle donne une impression d'ordre et de rigueur inspirée des mathématiques, comme ses nombreux renvois aux différents paragraphes lorsqu'il invoque telle ou telle notion évoquée précédemment. Le fait que Diderot se soit proposé de le lire tout les ans est parfaitement justifié : traité de la connaissance, des passions, de la liberté, du rire, de l'honneur, ... tout est abordé en détail avec une concision remarquable. On y trouve déjà l'essentiel de l'essai sur l'entendement humain de Locke. Le lecteur n'a plus qu'à parcourir les allées d'un jardin taillé avec ordre, baigné d'une lumière toute grecque.

La seconde partie s'appuie sur la forme de la première, mais doit par contre sacrifier à l'opinion. Si elle est moins éclatante que la première, elle offre un éclairage intéressant de ce que les hommes de cette époque ont pu imaginer pour résoudre les difficultés qui se présentaient à eux. Hobbes fut un traducteur de la Guerre du Péloponnèse de Thucydide. Il épouse les vues du général Athénien, car le spectacle de la vie politique de son temps le ramène à l'époque d'Alcibiade et Nicias. L'idée principale est que l'autorité ne saurait être partagée et que l'on ne peut obéir à deux maîtres : en germe l'idée de séparation de l'église et de l'état, mais aussi une justification de l'absolutisme. Au rebours de Machiavel, qui puisait ses idées républicaines dans l'histoire romaine, Hobbes plonge ses idées monarchiques dans l'histoire grecque, et il ne fait pas mystère de son mépris pour la démocratie, qu'il considère n'être qu'une oligarchie déguisée. Il ne dédaigne pas non plus l'histoire sainte, et s'y appuie fortement pour illustrer ses opinions. Les vues de Hobbes ne manquent pas d'intérêt, mais je trouve que Machiavel avait quand même plus de pénétration.

Cristian says

În buna tradiție pornită de la Platon, Hobbes construiește modelul statului perfect pornind de la natura umană. În ascunsă polemică cu Aristotel (Hobbes proclamă egalitatea oamenilor de la natură, nimeni nefiind înzestrat să conducă, iar alții să fie conduși, așa cum vedea Aristotel lucrurile), se dezice totodată de vreo asociere cu Platon prin faptul că "echilibrul" statului e posibil pentru Hobbes doar în ideea în care voința corpului politic reprezintă dedublarea unei voințe unice și coerente, cea a suveranului, și nu o armonie a părților cum imagina Platon.

Ceea ce e foarte interesant la Hobbes sub aspect politic e modul cum legitimează practic orice decizie a suveranului drept un dat divin. Suveranul are puteri absolute și e întruparea terestră a lui Dumnezeu stăpânul în calitate sa de conducător, iar cum creștinismul (baza statului la Hobbes) nu-i altceva decât o interpretare a Scripturii, Suveranul o poate "interpreta" după plac și voie, ca tot ce face și zice să fie lege cu dublă întemeiere, pământescă și cerească. Destul de terifiant gândul unui stat de genul, unde conducătorul se crede reprezentantul voinei Domnului pe pământ! Am totuși vagă impresie că istoria nu-i străin de astfel de cazuri.

Hobbes scrie într-un stil precursor filosofiei analitice engleze, adică foarte metodic, bazat pe logică și argumentație, dar cu mult bun simț, așa că lecturarea sa merge ușor. Hobbes merită citit, dacă nu pentru partea politică, atunci măcar pentru cea despre natura umană (aproape jumătate din carte), unde anticipează o mulțime din "descoperirile" psihologiei și filosofiei limbajului.
