

BREAKING OFF WITH CLASSIC PHILOSOPHY BY OPERATING A SEMANTIC REVOLUTION

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show Hobbes's intention of presenting a new philosophical model, in order to overcome the Aristotelian and Scholastic "vain philosophy" received at Magdalen Hall (Oxford), which he accomplishes by using classical terms, but altering their meaning. It may be said that Hobbes produces an actual semantic revolution. The author examines particularly the words *natura*, *ars* and *ratio*.

It is well known that, having graduated at the Catholic University of Argentina, my studies at that stage concerned chiefly classical philosophy, basically Aristotelian and Scholastic. My belonging to the Pontifical Academy Saint Thomas Aquinas, as corresponding member, is also known.

The context above explains why I consider that my humble contribution to Hobbesian studies consists in showing both its possible continuity with classical philosophy and its break with it. Besides, it is also this position that the reviews of my works in various catalogues and indexes remark as original.

The relative continuity between classical philosophy and Hobbesian thought, which is in fact indebted to the former more than Hobbes himself would be willing to admit, is evidenced, for instance, in his theory of the passions, such as it appears in *De Homine* and *Leviathan*, undoubtedly influenced by Aristotle's *Rhetorica*¹.

On the other hand, it must also be acknowledged that Hobbes manages to put forward a doctrine whose essential trend is to break off with tradition. Due to this critical bent, which is clearly evinced in his work, and to his branding both Aristotelian and Scholastic theories as "vain philosophy", he avails himself, however, of classical terminology, but adapting it to modern mentality; that is, by stripping the traditional terminological and conceptual instruments from their original sense, and thus elaborating a theory radically opposed to tradition. Therefore, my hypothesis consists in holding that Hobbes performs a rupture with classical and scholastic philosophy by operating an actual semantic turn. I shall try to prove this hypothesis by analysing the

¹ Cp. Peters, R., Hobbes, Penguin Books, 1967, 2nd edition, p. 135.

three terms I consider as a key to the development of Hobbes's anthropologic and political doctrine. These are: *natura*, *ars* and *ratio*. Naturally, the list of terms which suffer this semantic turn in Hobbesian philosophy is much longer, but I must respect certain limits, so I choose the three above-mentioned ones, in order to be able to develop my hypothesis in the required time. Notwithstanding, I enumerate by way of example, without seeking to exhaust the list, terms which are involved in that semantic turn: *lex*, *jus*, *voluntas*, *deliberatio*, *libertas*, *veritas*, *auctoritas*, *malum*, *bonum*, amongst others.

Let us begin by analysing the terms *nature* and *art*, both of which appear in the first lines of the Introduction to *Leviathan*². The concept of nature is one of the props on which the whole Hobbesian doctrine rests, and one of the points where the breaking off with traditional thought, whether it be that of Aristotle or Scholastic philosophy, is more evident. According to Aristotle's several definitions in his *Metaphysics*, the term "nature" may be applied to many things or processes: to a principle of being, to a principle of movement, or to a constituent element. But all these definitions have something in common: nature is the essence of beings which possess in themselves and as such, the principle of movement, and this movement is always directed to an end³. Even those who nowadays question that Aristotelian ethics and politics should necessarily depend on his teleological metaphysics, do not cast any doubts on the teleological character of his physics and metaphysics⁴. Later on, Scholasticism, in particular Thomas Aquinas, follow directly on this subject the statement of Aristotle in *Physics II*, asserting in his *Commentary* that "nature is nothing else but reason inserted in things, by which they move to a determinate end"⁵.

Contrariwise, Hobbes breaks off with the teleological world-vision on rejecting both formal and final causes, whereby nature is reduced to matter and the effect of efficient causality, mechanically conceived. He plainly holds in *De Corpore*: "The writers of metaphysics reckon up two other causes besides the *efficient* and the *material*, that is, the *ESSENCE*, which some of them call *formal cause*, and the *END* or *final*

² All of Hobbes quotations are taken from the Molesworth edition, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes* (E.W.) and from *Opera Philosophica Latina* (O.L.), London, 1839-1845, Scientia Verlag, 2nd. Ed., 1966. *Leviathan*-E.W. III, ix: "Nature, the art whereby God hath made and governs the world, is by the art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal".

³ Cp. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1014 b16-1015 to 13.

⁴ Cp. Andrés Rosler, "Hobbes y el naturalismo político en Aristóteles", *Deus Mortalis*, N° 1, Buenos Aires, 2002, p. 27-54.

⁵ Cp. Thomas Aquinas, *In Physicorum*, L.II, lect. XIV, 8. See also *Summa Theologicae* I-II, q.10, a.1, c y *Summa Contra Gentes* 4,35.

cause, both which are actually efficient causes”⁶. Movement, which for Hobbes constitutes the entire nature, does not aim at anything beyond itself. It just means the conservation of movement, which does not even have in itself a teleological reason, as it does not express anything different from what is already given⁷. The analytic method applied to the knowledge of natural bodies leads Hobbes to an identification of what is natural with what is primary and elementary. If true knowledge is causal knowledge and the only universal cause is movement, it is natural what derives directly and immediately from the movement of mechanical causes. What is natural is determined in relation to its spontaneous origin, to the way it is generated. But this merely expresses the necessity of natural phenomena, without any normative role being derived from it, neither the exemplary character that *Physis* might have for Plato, nor the teleological character it would have for Aristotle.

Starting from this new concept of nature, the semantic turn expands and evolves in the expression *human nature*. Hobbesian mechanism and materialism applied to human nature, are moulded in the Introduction to *Leviathan*, where Hobbes wonders: “¿For what is the *heart* but a *spring*, and the nerves but so many *strings*, and the *joints* but so many *wheels*, giving motion to the whole body, such as was intended by the artificer?”⁸. We must remember that these expressions appear in a context in which Hobbes presents man as the most excellent product of Nature, which is in its turn the art through which God, the artificer, has made and governs the world.

By denying it to have a substantial form, human nature is reduced to a set of powers, and human life is nothing but a moving system⁹. For Hobbes, nature does not express an essence, but a sum of faculties and powers. That is why in his treatise of *Human Nature*, first part of *The Elements of Law*, he defines man’s nature as the sum of his faculties and natural powers, such as nutrition, movement, generation, sense and reason¹⁰. Having rejected the notion of form, Hobbes cannot give an essential definition of man, but makes, as we have just pointed out, a description of human behaviour. The movements that make it up, as performed by man, are no different from other movements performed by natural bodies. In this way, there is no difference at all

⁶ Cp. E.W. I, p. 131.

⁷ *De Corpore*, E.W., I, p. 407: “But if vital motion be helped by the motion made by sense, then the parts of the organ (the heart) will be disposed to guide the spirits in such manner as conduceth most to the preservation and augmentation of the motion”.

⁸ E.W. III, ix.

⁹ *Leviathan*, E.W.III, ix: “For seeing life is but a motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal parts within”.

¹⁰ E.W. IV, p.2.

between action and behaviour. For Hobbes, in fact, man has no capacity to act or produce a different movement to that of other moving bodies, be they animate or inanimate. His capacity to reason, to desire what is desirable, even admitting that it belongs solely to man, is also explained on the basis of efficient causality. Everything in the world reacts to external stimuli, and man is no exception¹¹. The mechanistic view implies the denial of any intentional structure. In this way, without considering any finality in nature, the faculties cannot be conceived as operating powers, as having a reality different from their actual exercise. The doctrine of powers, characteristic of Aristotelian anthropology and, later, of scholastic anthropology, is deprived of any explanatory value in Hobbesian anthropology. One cannot speak of capacities, in a strict sense, because admitting that they have a potential or intentional character, means to deny them actual existence, because faculties justify themselves as powers, and these are such insofar as they exercise themselves.

Neither is there any difference between man and animal, since human behaviour is considered natural when it is determined by affections that are common with the rest of animals, because natural man is man considered as a mere animal¹². In *De Corpore* Hobbes had already outlined the general principles of psychology, showing that men only differ from animals in their ability to impose names, in their disinterested curiosity and in their desire to know the causes of things.

The breaking of the correlation between nature and end has as a consequence the impossibility of attributing to nature a normative role. Not being possible to interpret man's actions as directed to an end, which in its turn be perfectible, Hobbes deems natural everything that issues spontaneously from man, such as his passions, in so far as they are the result of the action of external things on vital motion, as he asserts in *Leviathan* VI¹³. In brief, what is natural in man is identified and reduced to passionate.

11 Cp. *The Elements of Law*, E.W. IV, p. 247: "Therefore, when first a man has an appetite or will to something to which immediately before he hath not appetite nor will, the cause of this will, is not the will itself, but something not in his own disposing".

12. Cp. *De Homine* X, 5

13. Cp. VI. E.W. III, p. 42: "That which is really within us, is, as I have said before, only motion, caused by the action of external objects, but in appearance...so, when the action of the same object is continued from the eyes, ears and other organs to the heart, the real effect there is nothing but motion or endeavour, which consisteth in appetite or aversion...This motion, which is called appetite, and for the appearance of it delight and pleasure, seemeth to be a corroboration of vital motion..."

14. See footnote 2.

Let us see, in what follows, how Hobbes links art and its derived notions, such as artifice and artificial, to nature. At first, such as the reference to art appears in the Introduction of *Leviathan*, it would seem that Hobbes keeps for this term the classic notion of “imitation of nature”, because he refers to the art of man as the power to recreate the given¹⁴. In the same text he calls Nature the divine art, through which God governs the world. In subsequent lines he refers to the “artificial animal”, to “artificial life” and to the “artificial soul”¹⁵ of the “artificial man”, all of them related to the creation of the great Leviathan, or Commonwealth, that is, the State men create for their own safety and defence. Although one notices the use of metaphoric language, it may also be observed that the appraisal is not pejorative, but rather that it transcends the artificial, as a result of a human activity that sets man on a level with God¹⁶. In this last nuance consists the subtle semantic turn that Hobbes applies to the concept of art. Unlike classical philosophy, for which art can take nature as a model and employ its principles to carry out its own work, without pretending to excel the perfection of nature¹⁷, Hobbes considers art precisely as superior, since it provides a certainty that we cannot obtain from nature, since we can only have an absolutely certain knowledge of such things as we ourselves make¹⁸. Fascinated by Euclidean geometry, Hobbes concludes that we can only have absolute certainty or scientific knowledge of those things which we ourselves have caused, or whose construction is in our power or depends upon our own will¹⁹. In what we ourselves create there is nothing which remains unknown, nor do we need any hypothetical argument as the ones used in natural sciences. The possibility of making up the principles of a science has a direct influence on Hobbesian politics, since this becomes a construction in which absolute

¹⁵ In the English text we read “artificial soul”, though in the latin text “artificial” is missing and we read just “anima”.

¹⁶ Cp. *Leviathan*, E.W. III, x: “*Lastly, the pacts and covenants, by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together and united, resemble the fiat, or let us make man, pronounced by God in the creation*”.

¹⁷ Cp. Thomas Aquinas, *In Politicorum*, Proemium, 2: “*Ars vero inscipere quidem potest ea quae sunt naturae, et eis uti ad opus proprium perficiendum; perficere vero ea non potest*”.

¹⁸ Cp. *Six Lessons to Professors of Mathematics*, E.W. VII, p. 184: “*The science of every subject is derived from a precognition of the causes, generation and construction of the same; and consequently where the causes are known, there is place for demonstration, but not where the causes are to seek for...But because natural bodies we know not the construction, but seek it from effects, there lies no demonstration of what the causes be we seek for but only what they may be*”.

¹⁹ Cp. *De Homine*, O.L. II, p. 92: “*Itaque earum tantum rerum scientia per demonstrationem illam a priore hominibus concessa est, quorum generatio dependet ab ipsorum hominum arbitrio*”.

Cp. *Six Lessons to Professors of Mathematics*, E.W. VII, p. 184: “*Geometry therefore is demonstrable, for the lines and figures from which we reason are drawn and described by ourselves; and civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth ourselves*”.

and arbitrary elements are combined. It was this possibility of building up and manipulating which caused Sheldon Wolin to call the Hobbesian view of science and politics despotic²⁰. As the geometer knows *a priori* in the figures what he himself has put into them as causes; according to Hobbes, the propositions of politics can also be demonstrated with absolute certainty, as we ourselves produce their principles, that is to say, their laws and contracts²¹. This makes him attach a higher value to art, as a human possibility of constructing what is demonstrable, than to nature, whose principles may be “capriciously” concealed from man, in order to prevent his attaining an absolute power. The valuation of the artificial reaches its highest point in the conception of an artificial person, identified with the mortal god, to whom we owe, under the immortal God, our peace and security, and to whom Hobbes entrusts salvation, because in the artificial person the state of nature is legally transcended²². The State-Leviathan is the result of a compact, a construction of reason. In order to build up the sovereign power man may use his natural force, and the effect will be a republic or state by acquisition (*commonwealth by acquisition*), or he may employ his rational calculus, and we shall have a republic or state by institution (*commonwealth by institution*)²³, but in both cases sovereignty is the effect of a human artifice and its essence is anything but natural. The instauration of the civil society disrupts the natural order and transforms the balance of forces. To the natural equality of individuals, the contract opposes the inequality between sovereign and subjects, the former being the one who imposes an absolute order and demands absolute subjection. For Hobbes, sovereignty is not achieved but in virtue of a transference of the natural rights of every man to the artificial man which is Leviathan.

We may wonder, whether it is merely an obsession with certainty that makes Hobbes incline to place art over nature, or if there may be some other reason. My answer would be: to the obsession with certainty we must add the yearning for

²⁰ Cp. Sheldon Wolin, “Hobbes and the Culture of Despotism”, in *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory*, ed. Mary Dietz, University Press of Kansas, Kansas, 1990, p. 9-36.

²¹ Cp. *De Homine* X, O.L. II, p.94: “*Praeterea politica et ethica, id est scientia justae et injustae, aequae et iniquae, demonstrari a priori potest; propterea quod principia, quibus justum et aequum et contra, injustum et iniquum, quid sint, cognoscitur, id est, justitiae causas, nimirum leges et pacta, ipsi fecimus*”.

²² Cp. *Leviathan* XVI and XVII.

²³ Cp. *Leviathan* XVII, E.W. III, p. 158-159: “*The attaining of this sovereign power, is by two ways. One, by natural force as when a man maketh his children to submit themselves, and their children to his government, as being able to destroy them if they refuse; or by war subdueth his enemies to his will, giving them their lives on that condition. The other, is when men agree amongst themselves, to submit to some man, or assembly of men, voluntarily, on confidence to be protected by him against all others. This latter, may be called a political commonwealth, or **commonwealth by institution**; and the former, a **commonwealth by acquisition**”.*

overpowering natural reality, characteristic of modern rationalism, and the Hobbesian obsession with security and peace. I base myself for this latter assertion on the text of the Dedicatory Epistle of *De Cive*, where Hobbes holds that if we knew the nature of human actions with the same certainty with which we know the nature of quantity in geometrical figures, the force of ambition and greed would become weaker and humanity might enjoy an everlasting peace²⁴. If we take into account that the first and fundamental law of nature is for Hobbes to seek peace, we shall understand the importance he might attach to the construction of a science that should warrant it. It might also be explained why he rejects so passionately the traditional political philosophy, which resigns itself to the limitation of its knowledge and the uncertainty of its results, which are unavoidable due to the indeterminate character of its objects, in so far as this political knowledge be understood as a prudential knowledge²⁵. The political science whose fatherhood he assumes, and which was to substitute for traditional politics, had to warrant the achievement of peace by starting the construction, organization and efficient sustenance of the State-Leviathan. Paraphrasing Wilhem Hennis, “what is particular of Hobbes’s political philosophy lies in the combination of a theoretical ideal of knowledge with *poietic* presuppositions”²⁶. Regarding the theoretical ideal, the Malmesburian philosopher is concerned with the rigorous necessity of its objects, which have in themselves the principle of movement. But, at the same time, this theoretical ideal is combined with “*poietic*” presuppositions, because, opposing tradition, for which society exists by nature so that men can and should live well, following virtue’s tracks, Hobbes’s man is the artisan who must build up civil society and the State, becoming a citizen by his own efforts on the basis of a political technique which implies ability and skill rather than prudence²⁷.

Summing up, the rupture with classical philosophy is accomplished substituting for traditional philosophy, which aims at the Common Good, through an upright and just behaviour, a *poietic* philosophy aimed at building up and efficiently creating peace and security.

We still have to analyse the third term, reason, and then see its connection with the Hobbesian notions of nature and art.

24. Cp. *De Cive*, Ep.Ded.,iv

25 Cp. Gianfranco Borrelli, *Ragion di Stato e Leviatano*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1993, p.230-234.

26 Cp. W. Hennis, *Política y filosofía prácticas*, Sur, Buenos Aires, 1973, p.56-57

27 Cp. *Leviathan* XX, E.W. III, p. 195: “*The skill if making and maintaining commonwealths, consisteth in certain rules, as doth arithmetic and geometry*”.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes defines reason as calculus²⁸. He was surely convinced of presenting an innovating definition that would reflect the influence of the Euclidean method of mathematics, which had so dazzled him and which, in its turn, should mean a rupture with the philosophical tradition. Without denying its foundation to that Hobbesian conviction, we may remark that calculus had already been considered by Aristotle himself as a part of reason²⁹. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, “*to logistikón*” is translated by the English scholars Ross and Barnes, as well as by the French Tricot, as the calculative part, which is one of the two parts of the rational soul. Both the English and the French versions, go on to assert that to deliberate and to calculate are one and the same thing. The semantic turn, in this case, consists in emphasizing that reason “*is nothing else but calculus*”, that is to say, it is identified with a reductionist notion of reason, because unlike classical philosophy, Hobbesian reason does not admit other parts; it is just calculus. Hobbes does not acknowledge the possibility of there existing something analogous to the Aristotelian “*nous*” or the scholastic “*intellectus*”, which open up the possibility of an intellectual intuition³⁰.

We may again be tempted to inquire what reason impelled Hobbes to adopt the paradigm of calculus for the whole of rationality. I think the reason is clear, in the light of what was developed above: to universalize the method of calculus as a homogeneous methodological plan for all the sciences, in order to warrant two fundamental aspects of the new modern science: certainty and practical power. Persuaded by the Baconian dictum: “*knowledge is power*”, Hobbes turns it into “*the end of knowledge is power*” (*scientias propter potentiam*)³¹. Due to this, Hobbesian reason is no longer a “natural light” of man’s, a power, such as it was presented by classical philosophy, reducing itself to a mere instrument for power, a far-sighted and calculating operation or function which reduces itself to its exercise, as is gathered from Hobbes’s definition of reasoning in *De Corpore*: “By reasoning I understand reckoning. Now, to reckon or calculate is either to join together the sum of many things that are added, or to know the result that remains when something has been subtracted from some other thing. Reasoning, therefore, is the same as addition and subtraction”³². Following the resolute-compositional method propounded by Hobbes, addition would be equivalent to synthesis

²⁸ Cp. *Leviathan* V, E.W. III, p. 30: “*For reason in this sense is nothing but reckoning, that is adding and subtracting*”.

²⁹ Cp. Aristóteles, *Eth. Nic.* L VI, 1139 al 12.

³⁰ Cp. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 79, a.8.

³¹ *De Corpore* I, 7

³² *De Corpore*, E.W. I, p. 3.

or composition and subtraction to the resolute analysis. The concept of reasoning, reduced to the two fundamental operations of addition and subtraction, is also stated in *Leviathan*, where he adds: "...if it be done by words, is conceiving of the consequence of the names of all the parts, to the name of the whole; or from the names of the whole and one part, to the name of the other part"³³. This reason-calculus is just a form of establishing relations, as may be deduced from the quoted texts, and no intellectual character is now attributed to it.

Finally, we shall briefly examine the relation between nature, art and reason, such as these notions and their derivatives are combined in Hobbes's works. Once Hobbes has presented the natural condition of humanity in *Leviathan*, or the state of nature in *De Cive*, he sets forward the way out from this sickly condition by two means, that is, either by way of the passions that induce to peace, and by means of reason, which calculates the convenience of laying down our rights to everything so as to preserve ourselves³⁴. It is to be observed, then, how reason, in its function of calculus and foresight, is applied to nature so as to dispose the things we must do or omit in order to preserve our life. From this ordering comes the law of nature which Hobbes defines in *De Cive* as the dictate of right reason³⁵. This allows us to hold that, paradoxically, the so called law of nature does not have nature as its immediate foundation, but reason in its functions of calculus and foresight. The order and measure established by reason are, for Hobbes, something artificial, with the positive meaning that, as we have seen, he attributes to this character, because order and measure ensue and impose themselves from outside to what is natural. That the law has its source in nature, means that what is natural as a disorderly impulse, is subjected by it to a rule. This regulation is the work of reason, that, such as Hobbes conceives it, only provides a capacity to control. The very lack of finality in nature, to which we referred before, has as a consequence to consider as not natural, that is to say, as artificial, everything that implies direction, order or regulation. Finally, the rationalization of nature is an extrinsic one, and therefore artificial; in a word, that it does not find its own foundation in what is natural, but only the matter upon which it operates.

³³ *Leviathan* V, E.W. III, p. 29.

³⁴ Cp. *De Cive* I, E.W. II, p.1-13

Cp. *Leviathan* XIII, E.W. III, p. 115-116.

³⁵ Cp. *De Cive* II, E.W. II, p. 16: "Therefore the law of nature, that I may define it, is the dictate of right reason conversant about those things which are either to be done or omitted for the constant preservation of life and members, as much as in us lies".

This last paragraph is a sample of the conceptual results which Hobbes achieves by the semantic turn it performs. The rupture with classical philosophy is evident. The “Hobbesian revolution” has, on the history of philosophy, the same impact as the “Copernican revolution” has on science. Both in philosophy and in science there is no “going back”; they will never be again what they were for classical antiquity and the middle ages.
