2. HOBBES'S THEORY OF NATURAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Thomas Hobbes was quite explicit about the objective of his philosophic enterprise. There were, he argued, moral, social, and political philosophies to spare. The reason they were useless was because, however plausible they might seem to subscribers, there was no way in which they could be guaranteed to command assent (EW I, 9). This is because they were epistemologically unsound (EW III, 33). Hobbes’s central concern was with civil conflict, and arbitrary conjectures about society and civil duties, he felt, divided society into factions of supporters and opponents. His principal task was the attempt to avoid dissension. What was thus of fundamental importance was that a civil philosophy be one from which we could not rationally dissent. The first problem that Hobbes confronted therefore was how such a task might be performed. That is, how may it be possible to construct a civil philosophy that is epistemologically defensible?

Unfortunately, this problem, the critical one for Hobbes, has since received little consideration. The startling character of Hobbes’s civil philosophy, his thesis regarding the self-interest of individuals, his conclusion about the necessity of ‘sovereign’ power in the state, as well as his metaphysical position, have captured attention from his day onwards. In the wide-ranging eagerness to disagree with Hobbes’s premises about human nature and conclusions about the nature of society, what is generally overlooked is that it was not Hobbes’s aim simply to present us with yet another political philosophy. His stated objective was to discover how to construct an epistemologically defensible one. How did Hobbes fare in this aim? This is a question about Hobbes’s epistemological method and its findings. It might be tempting to think that if we disagree with Hobbes’s political conclusions, the method used to arrive at such can hardly be defensible. Perhaps such a thought might lie behind the unwarranted neglect of Hobbes’s epistemological analysis. But as Hobbes himself might have argued, if we do not understand clearly why he came to the conclusions he did, we do not really understand them.

Recently some have felt that we need to understand Hobbes’s method, or what he meant by ‘science’, to perceive what he was trying to do. However, attempts to examine his method so far have led to confusing results. McNeilly attributes confusion to Hobbes himself, and claims that

a number of desperate and incompatible elements might be included in Hobbes's account of science, and that no single account is likely to emerge.  

This is a serious claim, particularly in view of Hobbes's assertion that it was only by virtue of a coherent method that his civil philosophy – an attempt at a 'science' of society – should be taken seriously (EW I, 9). My aim in this essay is twofold. First, I want to argue that Hobbes's notion of science was far from confused. Indeed, it is far more sophisticated than is generally recognized. Second, I want to examine the advantages and disadvantages of Hobbes's theory of science.

1. Geometry and Civil War

Oakeshott has lamented Hobbes's preoccupation, along with other major philosophers, with problems of the society around them.  

His advice is to sanitize their work of such concerns. I intend, instead, to focus on Hobbes's problem as he saw it. As we shall see, a somewhat different perspective than the usual one opens if we do. What exactly is Hobbes's problem?

Throughout his work, there is one overriding concern that reappears over and again in Hobbes's thinking, and that is the disintegration of society through civil war. This is part of his experience, and he feels he understands why the crisis of his era came about,

    when this nation very lately was an anarchy, and dissolute multitude of men, doing every one what his own reason or imprinted light suggested (EW IV, 287).

Hobbes finds the cause of social breakdown: the private judgments of individuals. The issue is simple: 'that private men being called to councils of state desired to prostitute justice' and degrade it to no agency than 'their own judgments and apprehensions' (EW II, xiii). The claims of private judgment are fundamentally knowledge claims:

    Lately, how many rebellions hath this opinion been the cause of, which teacheth that the knowledge whether the commands of kings be just or unjust belongs to private men; and that before they yield obedience, they not only may, but ought to dispute them! (EW II, xii).

The social danger arising from individuals exercising their arbitrary judgments has not been seen by other philosophers. It is this lack of understanding whence

    they have begotten those hermaphrodite opinios of moral philosophers, partly right and comely, partly brutal and wild; the cause of all contentions and bloodsheds (EW II, xiii).

But though the cause of social breakdown is the intractability of the individual,