

interpretation

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The Life of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury

TRANS. J. E. PARSONS, JR., AND WHITNEY BLAIR

Our Savior, the Man-God, was born fifteen hundred and eighty-eight years ago. The renowned enemy fleet was standing in Spanish ports, soon to perish in our waters. It was early spring. The fifth day of April was beginning. It was then I was born, a little worm, in *Malmesbury*. I received baptism from my father, a minister, and he gave me his name. Malmesbury is a tiny little town, but it had many things worth telling about, especially a famous monastery and a fort (unless it should be called two forts) situated on a hill almost completely surrounded by two rivers. Malmesbury adds two burgesses to the council of the realm; to this day that ancient glory of the place persists. Here, too, are buried the bones of noble Athelstan, and over the tomb he himself lies sculpted in stone. Here, too, by Aldheim the Latin Muse was brought, and here the Latin tongue had its first school. He, who stained the neighboring fields with the blood of the Danes, gave the people the rewards of his valor. There is no reason for me to be ashamed of my country, but I complain of the evil times and the countless misfortunes that accompanied my birth. For the rumor went everywhere through our towns that the last day for the nation was coming by fleet. And at that point my mother was filled with such fear that she bore twins, me and together with me fear. From this, I believe, arises my hatred of the enemies of my country. I love peace along with the Muses and easy companions. By the age of four I learned to speak, to read, to cipher, and also to form the little letters—but not well. By the age of six I pressed my contest with the words of Greek and Latin, and at fourteen I was sent to Oxford. Coming here I was admitted to Magdalen Hall, and placed in the lowest class of logic. And I was especially diligent with my tutor. Although beardless, he read with seriousness: *Barbara, Celarent, Darii, Ferio, Baralypton*—the first figure has these moods, he said. Also *Caesare, Camestres, Festino, Baroco, Darapti*: this figure is a variation with the same number of moods. *Felapton, Disamis, Datisti, Bocardo, Ferison*—once again there are the same number of prescribed moods. These I learned slowly; nevertheless, I learned them and I rejected them; and I was allowed to prove each and every thing in my own way. I applied myself to physics, and my teacher pointed out that all things are conflated with substance and form as component parts; and he also taught that the appearances of things in flying through the air give visual images to the

The Open Court edition of the original Latin has been followed except where noted. (See Thomas Hobbes, *The Metaphysical System of Hobbes*, ed. M. W. Calkins [La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1963], vii–xvii.) The footnotes by Hobbes are rendered with an asterisk; those of the editors in Arabic numerals. Particular thanks is due to Seth Benardete for his painstaking criticism of an earlier draft of this translation.

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eyes and sounds to the ears. He attributed to *sympathy* and *antipathy* many effects and many such things beyond my comprehension. Therefore, I turned to more pleasant things and perused books, in which I had been previously instructed, though not well taught. I fed my mind on maps that copied the world, viewing the appearance of earth and the painted stars: I took delight in following the sun as companion and discerning in what way he makes the days right for earth-dwellers. I viewed the path on which Drake and Cavendish girdled the Ocean, and the regions they approached.

And if I could, I took delight in gazing on the tiny habitations of men and painted monsters in unknown regions. But at the appropriate time when I was a B.A.—for this was the first degree of arts—I left Oxford, and set forth to serve the generous and illustrious house of Devonshire. A letter from the Master of our College recommended me. I was accepted; I remained there on agreeable terms. And soon, a young man myself, I tutored a young man.

At that time he was subject to the authority of his father. I served him diligently for twenty years: he was not only a master, but a friend as well. This was by far the most agreeable period of my life, and now I often have pleasant dreams of it. Throughout this time, he offered me leisure as well as every sort of book for my studies. I turned my attention to the Greek and Latin historians and to ours. I also read the poets, Horace, Virgil and Homer, Euripides, Sophocles, Plautus, Aristophanes and others, and I was also familiar with many writers of history. But Thucydides delighted me more than the others. He pointed out how inadequate democracy is, and how much wiser one man is than the multitude.¹ I translated Thucydides in order that he might tell the English to shun the orators they were intending to consult. Throughout this same period, I saw foreign cities: I visited German, French and Italian ones. Not much later my master fell sick and died, but, believe me, destined to return on the last day. Nevertheless before he died, he saw to it that I, who always lived moderately, would not have to be in the service of anyone. Too much disregarded, I left with the agreement of the house and spent eighteen months in Paris. Then I was recalled to be the tutor of my master's son, the Earl of Devonshire. It behooved him to learn the meanings of Roman expressions, how to write Latin sentences in what way, how the rhetoricians are accustomed to deceive those uninstructed, and what the orator does and what the poet does, and I taught the rules of demonstrative speech and the appearance of the earth and its manifold circular course. I showed him by what proper² rule he could put an end to those disputes which *more*, *less* and *equal* make for. And I taught him these things diligently for seven years, and what he learned, he retained. Nevertheless, we did not spend all this time on books, unless you should say that the world is a substitute for a book. We saw many cities of Italy and

1. For Hobbes's preference for absolute monarchy, see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 19.

2. We read *justâ* (as in the original edition—see Thomas Hobbes, *Vita*, London, 1681, p. 231) instead of *usta* in the Open Court edition.

France and the sweet solitudes of Savoy. But I, whether I was being transported by boat or coach or horse, continually reflected upon the nature of things. And the physical universe seemed to me the only true thing in the entire cosmos, although falsified in many ways. Indeed, it is the only true thing but that which is the basis of those entities which we mistakenly say to be something.³ They are like the fugitive things of dreams; and the kinds of things I can multiply by means of glass, I can do by my own will. Fancies are the offspring of our brain: they are not outside us, and there is nothing within us except motion.⁴ From this circumstance derives the fact that whoever wants to learn physics ought to have learned well beforehand what motion can do. Therefore, I revealed the arcana of matter in motion. Thus I whiled away my empty hours in Italy. I wrote nothing and took no notes, for the teacher who taught me was always at my side.

We left Italy and again returned to the lofty walls of Paris and its magnificent buildings. Here I made the acquaintance of Mersenne, and I shared with him my thoughts about the motion of things. Mersenne approved my thoughts and recommended me to many. From that time on, I, too, was counted among the philosophers. Returning to my homeland again after eight months, I thought about weaving together my conceptions. I went from the variety of motions to the dissimilar appearances of different things and the deceptions of matter; and to the internal motion of human beings and the hidden fastnesses of the human heart, and at length to the benefits of dominion and justice. And I buried myself in these studies. For body, man, and citizen comprise the whole class of philosophy.⁵ I resolved to write three books on these subjects, and every day I gathered materials for myself. Meanwhile, there arose the detestable villainy of war, and my studies fell upon hard times.⁶

It was now A.D. 1640, when an amazing plague swept through our land, as a result of which countless of our learned men later perished. Whoever was infested by this plague thought that he alone had discovered divine and human right. And now war was in readiness. I shrank from this prospect and betook

3. "I say, therefore, there would remain to that man ideas of the world, and of all such bodies as he had. though they be nothing but ideas and phantasms, happening internally to him that imagineth; yet they will appear as if they were external, and not at all depending upon any power of the mind." (Thomas Hobbes, *Works*, ed. Sir William Molesworth [London: Bohn, 1839], 1, 92.)

4. Hobbes renders fancies as "phantasms" or ideas, for which see the above quotation. "Sense, therefore, in the sentient, can be nothing else but motion in some of the internal parts of the sentient; and the parts so moved are parts of the organs of sense. For the parts of our body, by which we perceive any thing, are those we commonly call the organs of sense. And so we find what is the subject of our sense, namely, that in which are the phantasms; and partly also we have discovered the nature of sense, namely, that it is some internal motion in the sentient." (Thomas Hobbes, *Works*, ed. Sir William Molesworth [London: Bohn, 1839], 1, 390.)

5. Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Works*, ed. Sir William Molesworth (London: Bohn, 1839), 1, 12 (= *Elements of Philosophy: Concerning Body*, chap. 1, sec. 9.)

6. Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (Oxford University Press, 1849), vol. I, pp. 186ff.

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myself to my beloved Paris. After two years I produced the little book *De Cive*, which pleased the learned and was all new. It was translated into various languages and read with praise, and I was widely known by name among the nations. England, though in the clutches of the Furies, praised it and also those men to whose judgement I was known to be hostile. *Does anyone think that what is not useful to our present aims, however just, can be good?*

During the next four years I considered night and day the form in which the book *De Corpore* should be composed. I compared bodily masses, and I considered what could cause change in the form of things seen. I inquired by what bonds of reason I could restrain Proteus in order that he might confess by what art he conceals his trickery. My loyal friend Mersenne of the Minims was there, a learned man, wise, and exceedingly virtuous, and his chamber was much to be preferred to all the schools. They all swell with the ambition of Professors. Whoever by chance had discovered some worthwhile corollary or a new principle, would bring it to Mersenne. Mersenne was a man of signal and appropriate speech, devoid of rhetorical figures, aphorisms, ostentation and guile. He gave to the learned who were willing the opportunity of weighing that principle either at once or at home. And he published all the best things from many discoveries, indicating each thing by the name of its author. The whole constellation of science revolved around Mersenne as if he were their pole.

The civil war had raged for four years; it had worn down the English, Irish, and Scots.⁷ Perfidious fortune remained in its criminal camp, and the virtuous fled by whatever means they could. The very heir of the realm, Charles, came to Paris accompanied by his retinue with the arms and excellence of illustrious men. He came to Paris, waiting until the bad times should pass and the nation's fury should cease. At that time I decided to write the book *De Corpore*, all the material for which was ready. But I was forced to postpone it. *I am unwilling to allow great and foul offenses to be ascribed to the commands of God*, and I decided as soon as possible to show that the divine laws are innocent. And I did this gradually, and was anxious for a long time. When I was attending the Prince in the study of mathematics, I was not always able to mind my own studies. Then I fell sick for six months, prepared for approaching death, but did not expire and death went away. I finished the book in my native tongue so that it could be widely read by my fellow countrymen to their own advantage. My well-known book *Leviathan* sped swiftly from the press at London to neighboring regions, and the book now serves all kings and those who enjoy regal power under whatever title. Meanwhile the Scots sold a king (Charles I) and the English killed him (Charles I).⁸ And now Charles II, living in Paris, held the regal right. The rebel throng seized the royal power and now ruled the nation without law.⁹ They took for themselves the name of Parliament, though few in

7. See Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, vol. IV, pp. 138ff.

8. Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, vol. IV, pp. 232, 541.

9. Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, vol. IV, pp. 545ff.

number, and they sated themselves with the blood of the nobles. They tore off the Bishops' mitres and did not strengthen the Presbytery. Clerical ambition found no profit there.

From England many scholars came to Paris to the King, driven from their native land, sad, in need, and a burden. Up to this point there was peace for my studies, for them increasingly to prosper during the eight years I was in Paris. But as soon as that book of mine (*Leviathan*) had been read by those scholars, the gates of Janus flew open; for I was accused falsely before the King as if I approved the heinous deeds of Cromwell and justified his crime. The charge was believed and I appeared to be on the opposite side. I was ordered to stay away from the King's palace forever. Then I recalled Dorislaus and Ascham*¹⁰ as if terror was everywhere present for the proscribed. And no one was allowed to complain about the King, *for at that time he, a young man, trusted those whom his father previously had trusted.*

I returned to my homeland, not quite sure of my safety. But in no other place could I have been safer. It was cold; there was deep snow; I was an old man; and the wind was bitter. My bucking horse and the rough road gave me trouble. Coming to London, in order to avoid the appearance of having arrived secretly, I had to be reconciled to the *Council of State*. With this accomplished I immediately retired in utter peace, and I devoted myself to my studies as before. At that time, *Parliament* alone ruled in name; there was no chief executive and no leading statesman. The army was everything; it demanded that everything be entrusted to one man. Secretly it was Cromwell alone who was that one man. To one who is attempting to defend the royal rights with his pen, who can impugn these rights, attacking them for their weakness? Each man had the liberty to write what he saw fit and to live in the satisfied manner of the place. But *Leviathan* had made all the clergy my foe. *Each nest of theologians was hostile.* While I was dealing with the troublesomeness of the Papal Kingdom, I was thought to be harming the others (although they were separated). At first they wrote angry diatribes against the *Leviathan*, and these were the cause of its being read all the more.

And from there on it stood stronger, and I hope that it will endure through all time, itself championed by its own strengths. If it is taught, it will be the measure of justice, the jewel of ambition, the citadel of kings, and peace for the people. Previously I published two little books, of slight size, and the charm of these little books is not insignificant. The former† teaches the motions of the soul and the fancies of the senses. *It does not allow healthy men to fear spirits.* But the latter** explains the most sacred rights of power and the sacred

*Infamous regicides, the former an envoy from Parliament to the Dutch and the latter an envoy to the Spanish, perished by the swords of the royalists.

†The book *De Natura Humana* (*On Human Nature*).

**The book *De Corpore Politico* (*On the Body Politic*).

10. See Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, vol. V, pp. 27, 151.

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bonds which bind unschooled peoples. And finally I finished the book *De Corpore*, the subject and presentation of which is geometrical. Then the Algebra of Wallis was published to the applause of the whole crowd of algebraists. That scourge of geometry which had begun more than one hundred years before now raged everywhere. There had been an art of finding the unknown number. Then Gheber taught it, and Diophantus had it. Then Vieta taught that through this art alone all problems of geometry could be solved. Oxford's Savilian Professor Wallis added a much better-known theory: that there is indeed a limit to infinite masses, and that the finite also has parts without limit. All those who were impatient to be geometers were driven to distraction by these two opinions. This is reason enough for me to write my little book. (I was seventy-two years old.) In my six discussions in this book I touch not gently but just as they deserved on these new geometers. But I accomplished nothing: the error was sustained by men of great authority. Thus the medicine yielded to the sickness. Then, too, I wrote two little books in English against (Bishop) Bramhall. The only question is *by whose will we choose, ours or God's*. Bramhall follows the school, but my guide is reason. A little later I wrote *Six Problems*, a small book, but a little source of pure physics. For I showed in what way nature dislodges lofty stones from their place and other weighty matters. I showed by what bailing device the sun draws up the waters; how the wind creates cold and in what way the winds blow; by what means the sterile clouds are suspended and flit about in the air, and by the loss of what support when full they burst; and with what glue the parts of hard things cling together; and what force makes hard things soft again. I showed what the origin of the thunder in the heavens is and by what means snow and ice are made and how a bolt of lightning flashes from the deep waters. I showed what joins subtle atoms scattered through the atmosphere and in what way Phoebus makes the day warm. And by what grasping device the loadstone of Hercules attracts iron and fixes on each pole of earth its mother; and I showed why the sea rolls to the shore with unequal waves; and with what year and month and day it twice increases its waters; and why a ship moves against the wind under the effect of the wind. It is these things that the little book holds and shows. And I think these things will prevail with time, since now they remain irreproachable among so many critics. I wrote another little book on the nature of air, against the concept of a machine that can create a vacuum. Then leaving physics behind, I turned to my beloved mathematics, for the enemy had at long last left my field (mathematics). *Only to a stone could I not have taught the truth, no one would expect to teach the noisy schools*. Nevertheless I published a little book *On Principles*, and I made sure that nothing could be clearer. In this, I set forth the nature of reason in such a way that no one might say that it was not clear and right. My victory in this regard was well-known to everyone; in other regards the critics pretend great errors. They were lacking in courage, but I kept after them in their weakness, and I mounted the highest peaks of geometry. I made public the circle as equal to the square; furthermore I showed the

proposition of the Pythian god was elucidated. And I hoped to be able to overcome by a new method, but not with the same reasons, things previously demonstrated. But I did not succeed; these demi-mathematicians who were embarrassed to yield stood in the way, shield upon shield. Therefore I decided not to waste my efforts any further, waiting for the intractable flock to be able to learn. Then I wrote a book which I called by the name *A Rose Garden*, filled above all with the flower of geometry. Wallis fought against it; and I appeared defeated to the schools of the algebraists and the theologians. And at the same time the whole horde of Wallis, confident of victory, was brought out of camp triumphant. When I saw them standing in the rough fields where there was a thick, difficult, and tough root, I decided to fight and I turned. Though his (Wallis's) number was infinite, in a moment of time, I scattered him, cut him down and routed him. You have heard of my struggles. What more did you want to be told? How rich, that is, how wise I was? Or is it of interest how many fields I had or how many thousands of coins? And if perchance a questioner will make this inquiry, I had a small estate—one left to me as my own, which out of affection I gave as a present to my brother. A small habitation, but it used to produce many thousand grains of wheat, for it was good land. It was extensive enough for the desire of kings.

And if it had not been wholly run down, I myself would now be considered a great king. As soon as I sniffed the odor of civil war and saw that the winds had stirred the fickle populace, I sought a more suitable place for my studies and my life. Hence I brought myself and my funds to Paris. I had counted out for myself five hundred pounds when in flight I left the shores of my native land behind: to these funds were added later on two hundred pounds more,* and at the same time, an immense and sempiternal grief (oh! Godolphin, you lie there; oh! lover of pure reason, beloved soldier of justice and truth, farewell!). And every year a fixed pension came to me from my country. It consisted of eighty pounds.** And then my King, who was restored, allowed me a hundred additional pounds from his own purse—a sweet gift. I disregarded the abuse of other men, since I was judged to be of good character, the King himself being witness. I live content with these, and I prefer no more. What man of sound mind would want to be less than his achievement? I reckon up my estate in your *pennies* so it may become greater, whenever pleasing; if this is not sufficient, I make a count in *silver*, and I appear to surpass in riches the Croesuses and Crassuses. You know my character, oh! honest Du Verdus [1625–89], and along with you, all men who read my writings. For my life is not incompatible with my writings. I teach justice and I cultivate it. *No one who is not greedy can be base, and no greedy man has produced a noble work.* I have lived out eighty-four years already, and the long comedy of life is almost done.

*From the legacy of Sidney Godolphin.

**From the gift of the Earl of Devonshire.