

## Sects and Violence: Hobbes' and Descartes on the Political Problem of Disagreement

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Given Descartes' importance to the development of western philosophy, the relative lack of attention paid to him by political theorists is striking. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate this paucity. Sheldon Wolin's *Politics and Vision* contains chapters on Luther, Calvin, Machiavelli, and Hobbes but not Descartes; Leo Strauss did not devote even a single essay to explicating Descartes' ideas; neither Voegelin's *History of Ideas* or *Order and History* have dedicated Descartes chapters; finally, Quentin Skinner has focused on renaissance political thought, Hobbes, and the history of liberty but has paid relatively little attention to Descartes' role as an early modern political thinker.

Naturally, there are exceptions. Some of Strauss' students have applied the hermeneutics of esotericism to Descartes (Lampert 1993; Kennington 2004). Michael Oakeshott sees Descartes as one of the originators of the modern rationalist approach to politics (Oakeshott 1991). Perhaps the most notable treatment of Descartes as a political thinker is Antonio Negri's *Political Descartes* (2006), which finds in Cartesian metaphysics the project of establishing the hegemony of the bourgeois class.

This paper will highlight another way in which Descartes ought to be taken seriously as a thinker with properly political concerns. My contention is that the infamous Cartesian method of

radical doubt served more than just the philosophical purpose of answering metaphysical questions with certainty. The structure of Descartes' epistemological method was influenced by social and political concerns, which have often gone unnoticed in the literature. A comparison with Hobbes will highlight Descartes' concern with realizing peace and social order between groups divided along theological and philosophical lines. I want to suggest that Descartes shared with Hobbes an understanding of, and the need to find solutions to the problem of violence stemming from intractable disagreement. However, his solution is radically different. Whereas Hobbes' solution could be called statist, in that it is the task of the sovereign to keep the peace and enforce the law, Descartes attempted to provide a method for resolving theological disputes outright, which if effective would stamp out religious violence at the source and eliminate the need for an absolutist state in the first place. Descartes' epistemological method, my argument therefore entails, was developed primarily for socio-political purposes.

### **Hobbesian: Private and Public Conscience**

Thomas Hobbes was concerned with the problem of political disorder. The state of nature from which the Leviathan is man's salvation was not a pre-historical condition but an ever-present possibility, of which a healthy fear is necessary (cf. Minogue 1990: 77-78). At the basic level Hobbesian nature is defined by difference, which causes strife. Most well known is the fact that men are at odds with each other in the competition for recognition and scarce resources (Hobbes 1987: 61),<sup>1</sup> but equally important is the dangerous effect of intellectual and religious diversity that festers if not extinguished by the sovereign. In the 29<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Leviathan* Hobbes lists among the things that tend toward the dissolution of the commonwealth

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from *Leviathan* are to the original 1651 pagination.

the fact “that every private man is judge of good and evil actions” (*Ibid.*: 168). Later, he laments the reliance on private conscience that allows men to disobey civil law whenever they see fit. The “diversity” (*Ibid.*: 169) of private consciences is something that tears the commonwealth apart, if it is not limited by the sovereign. It is because difference, and thus sedition, are natural that the sovereign must be given absolute power (*Ibid.*: 167).

If nature is a condition of *difference* and *diversity* leading to inevitable sedition, civil war, and strife, the Leviathan must then be characterized by *uniformity*. At the institutional level, this means that the state has absolute authority and that there is no division of powers. Moreover, the state must also produce uniformity of thought and action among the citizenry. If the exercise of private conscience leads to sedition, there must be a public conscience that all men are obliged to follow:

But seeing a Common-wealth is but one Person, it ought also to exhibit to God but one Worship; which then it doth, when it commandeth it to be exhibited by Private men, Publiquely” (*Ibid.*: 192).

In other words, if the use of private judgement results in diversity and sedition, citizens must no longer be permitted to exercise it.

Sheldon Wolin brings this element of Hobbesian nature to the forefront, noting the doubly anarchic condition of the state of nature: legal and linguistic (Wolin 1960: 262-265). The immediate danger is the physical uncertainty in a world without law and enforcement, but Wolin notes that the linguistic or intellectual anarchy is no less dangerous. Knowledge of and obedience to law requires clear language, and the state of nature, lacking as it does a “sovereign definer” (*Ibid.*: 265) to enforce a stable set of meanings, is a state of subjectivism and perpetual disagreement. Part of the social contract is thus that men agree to give up their *intellectual* freedom as well as their *moral-political* freedom (*Ibid.*: 259). Private conscience, which produces diversity and disagreement, must be replaced by public conscience. Moreover, Wolin

suggests that much of the impetus for Hobbes' concern with eradicating private judgement came from the religious disputes of his day: "All England seemed ablaze with inner lights. To Hobbes, however, these diverse opinions had shattered the outward unity of belief so necessary to political peace" (*Ibid.*: 258).

Much of this has been established by scholarship of Hobbes' use of civil religion, namely the importance he gave to wedding religion to the state for political purposes.<sup>2</sup> It is not my intention here to contribute anything new to this debate, but simply to distill the essential points and the way in which they highlight what Hobbes took to be the central problem to be solved, namely the destructive effect of religious and political disagreement. The problem is the violence and conflict that will arise if men are not sufficiently kept in check by sovereign power. As Hobbes points out in the famous discussion of the state of nature, this results from competition, diffidence, and the desire for glory (Hobbes 1987: 61). However, this account is supplemented by later discussions of the causes of the political breakdown, one of which is the multiplicity of opinions that results from the widespread use of private judgement. Intellectual diversity, then, is a political problem. The Hobbesian solution to this is to remove private judgement from the equation, by giving the sovereign the authority to decide intellectual, philosophical, and linguistic matters (Hobbes 1987: 87; Hobbes 1999: ch. 21; Wolin 1960: 265-272). In sum, the problem of disagreement is solved by using the coercive and educative power of the sovereign to enforce the law, punish lawbreakers, and render binding decisions on all

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Beiner (2010). Beiner disagrees with Wolin on the issue of whether the content of sovereign-enforced truth matters. Wolin appears to suggest that it is not the specific content that is important, but simply the uniformity (Wolin 1960: 260), whereas Beiner argues that Hobbes had a desired theological reinterpretation of Christianity in mind, specifically one that neutered the other-worldly aspirations (Beiner 2010: ch. 5).

matters of relevant belief.<sup>3</sup> Doing so avoids the natural diversity that is so conducive to violence and sedition, and brings about the desired unity, peace, and order.

### **Descartes: Method and Consensus**

Hobbes' focus on the political problem of intractable disagreement brings us to familiar Cartesian territory. In order to make clear what Descartes hoped to accomplish, it will be helpful to draw attention to the few social conditions to which he alerts readers of his *Discourse on Method*. After noting how the so-called Cartesian method forms a response to these social conditions, we will be in a position to understand the purpose that he sets for inquiry.<sup>4</sup> Before presenting his method, he explains his reasons for writing the *Discourse*, and for not publishing *The World*, which had been written first. At the beginning of part two he makes reference to “the wars which are not yet at an end” (Descartes 1997: 77). This refers to the Thirty-Years War, which was largely fought along religious fault lines. Later, he cites “the long-continued war” as his reason for settling in Holland (*Ibid.*: 91).<sup>5</sup> The immediate relevance of these references is not made explicit in the text, although the backdrop of religious violence sheds light on his ultimate goal, which was to provide a means of settling philosophical disputes with such authority and persuasiveness that there could be no doubt about their truth and, therefore, no legitimate grounds for dispute.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the educative aspect, see Bejan (2010: 614):

“Once this natural diversity in judgment is reduced to the unity of the sovereign's public reason [i.e. through education], the civil laws will become the rule of all men's actions and the final authority in controversial matters, such as 'whether they be right or wrong, profitable or unprofitable, virtuous or vicious' or (especially) just or unjust.”

<sup>4</sup> Marleen Rozemond begins her 1998 study *Descartes' Dualism* by observing that “consideration of historical context is very instructive about [Descartes'] views and arguments” (Rozemond 1998: xii).

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Reiss tentatively dates the writing of part I of *The Discourse* at precisely the midpoint of the Thirty-Years War, between 1627 and 1637 (Reiss 1991: 112).

Timothy Reiss' work on the socio-political context of Descartes' thought is helpful here. In it he attempts to correct what he takes to be the tendency among commentators to interpret Descartes' philosophy a-historically, as "having sprung fully developed from his subjective brow" (*Ibid.*: 108). As a corrective, Reiss suggests that Descartes' method was formulated at least in part in order to contribute to the resolution of social problems. For example:

By the end of the 1640s Descartes had an equally clear idea of the consequences of Method applied to political dilemmas. In other words, he thought his Method could order authority in a state society, as well as power relations between sovereign and subjects, and among subjects themselves. It is by no means clear that he did not already think this as he wrote the Discourse (*Ibid.*: 112).

My interpretation is largely in accord with Reiss', especially concerning the connection between political disagreement and method. Since there seems to be no record of Descartes explicitly confirming such a connection, we are left to make educated guesses. However, the timing of the writing, the obvious contrast between the *instability* of his social situation and the *stability* of method, when combined with Descartes' repeated references to the importance of utility for scientific and philosophical thinking, make this assumption a plausible one. Reiss makes the following suggestion:

From all of this we may safely assume, since the philosopher himself chose to emphasize the events, that during the writing of the Discourse, the instability of the sociopolitical situation, in 1637 no less than in 1619-20 at the very beginning of his original thinking, could be seen only as counter to the stability desired of Method (Reiss 1991: 113).

Though we get no direct affirmation of this from the pen of Descartes, Hobbes' himself suggests that mathematical method is a better guarantee of agreement and stability on account of its reliance on "figures and motion only," instead of the passions and interests of men (Hobbes 1999: 19). Lacking the results of his method, he continues, "government and peace have been nothing else, to this day, but mutual fear" (*Ibid.*: 20). Thus, if government is founded on his principles, which are in turn derived from his mathematical method, peace might be achieved.

The method that Hobbes describes is similar to Descartes' on a number of important points. Both are based on mathematics, both consist of breaking complex questions down into the smallest possible particulars, and both attempt to provide certain knowledge of matters hitherto subject to doubt and therefore disagreement. The fact that the only political condition Descartes explicitly mentions in the discussion of his aims and intentions is violence occasioned by theological and metaphysical disagreement adds plausibility to the claim that one of the desired effects of his method was political stability. Similarly, the reason given for devoting an entire treatise to proving the existence of God and the soul, namely the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, was that by grounding such theological issues in his philosophical method all would agree to accept them – that is, to minimize theological disagreement. One of his motives, then, seems to have been to make philosophical and theological agreement easier to attain.

The second piece of context given in the *Discourse* is the condemnation of Galileo, with whom Descartes secretly and to a large extent agreed. A common interpretation of the Galileo affair is that he was put on trial for denying geocentrism.<sup>6</sup> More recent histories of the event have downplayed the extent to which cosmological beliefs were at issue, and instead point to more general political concerns or Galileo's lack of respect for ecclesial authority.<sup>7</sup> However, Pietro Redondi offers an explanation of the episode that sheds helpful light on Descartes' concern.<sup>8</sup> Redondi makes the interesting argument that Galileo was in trouble not for denying *geocentrism*, but for jeopardizing the metaphysical basis of *transubstantiation*. By late

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<sup>6</sup> John Brooke and Geoffrey Cantor call “the popular mythology of the Galileo affair” the idea that he was condemned for proposing heliocentrism and thereby defying Church teaching (Brooke and Cantor 1998: 106). The last chapter of Harry Frankfurt (2008), entitled “Truth and Reality: The Galileo Controversy,” argues that the issue in question was whether the earth or the sun was at the centre of the solar system. This view received its first English-language exposition in Andrew Dickson White's now infamous *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (White 1897: 130-170).

<sup>7</sup> “[W]hat does the Galileo affair actually reveal? It most certainly demonstrates that powerful organizations often do abuse their power” (Stark 2003: 165).

<sup>8</sup> Redondi's argument is discussed in Lampert (1993: 183-187).

scholasticism, hylomorphism had transformed from the nuanced relationship between form and matter given by Aristotle into a clear doctrine of matter and form as distinct substances.<sup>9</sup> One of the central issues of religious dispute at this time was the doctrine of transubstantiation, the belief that the bread and wine of the eucharist become the literal body and blood of Christ. In 1551 the Council of Trent declared that the scholastic understanding of substance and accidents was to become the official explanation of transubstantiation, and that any physics must be able to account for change in substance occurring without a corresponding change in accidents. The new materialist physics was unable to account for such change. Visible and sensible qualities of each thing are simply epiphenomena of their material constituents, such that any change in underlying substance would necessarily produce a change in outward or visible accidents. Indeed the very terminology of substance and accidents is misleading in the context of materialism.

Pope Urban VIII knew of Galileo's materialist physics, and even made him his official scientist (Lampert 1993: 185; see also Stark 2003: 164). When changing political circumstances forced the Pope to go after Galileo in 1632, despite the fact that he was a known heliocentrist long before, he was condemned only for heliocentrism instead of materialism as a way of reducing his punishment (Lampert 1993: 185). The implication is that denying the basis of transubstantiation was a far graver heresy than challenging the relationship between the sun and the earth, and the reason Galileo was charged with the latter was to save him from even worse

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Garber summarizes the scholastic doctrine of substance in (1992: 68-70). Also helpful is Rozemond's discussion of the elements the scholastic doctrine of substance as it relates to Descartes in (1998: 103-111). See especially Rozemond's point about Transubstantiation: "Transubstantiation clearly posed problems for Descartes. Various of his correspondents asked how, on his view of qualities, the miracle of the Eucharist should be understood" (*Ibid.*: 107).



punishment. In other words, the danger of persecution came not from heliocentrism but from the new materialist philosophy espoused by Galileo, Descartes, and others.<sup>10</sup>

One benefit of Redondi's argument is that it draws a clear enough connection between Galileo's new ideas and the sources of political disorder that one can clearly understand why he was targeted. The issue raised by heliocentrism, namely whether the earth or the sun is the centre of the solar system, has very little explicit bearing on the theological dispute between Catholics and Protestants. Transubstantiation, however, and thereforehylomorphism, was at the heart of "the wars which are not yet at an end" (Descartes 1997: 77). The denial of the metaphysical basis of the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation is a boon to the Protestants, and was thus understandably treated as a serious threat by the Catholic Church. This makes the reasons for Galileo's trial, and Descartes' worries, intelligible, especially since an argument can be made that Descartes did not actually claim that the earth moves.<sup>11</sup> If the real problem was not the motion of the earth, but the denial of hylomorphism, then Descartes has a much bigger problem on his hands. He could claim plausible deniability for the motion of the earth, by a clever sleight of hand in *The Principles of Philosophy*, but the core of his physics of matter in motion is a denial of hylomorphism. His central materialist claim that matter alone is constitutive of all things violates the council of Trent's declaration that substantial and accidental change must be distinguished, insofar as change in the physical properties of matter – i.e. accidental change – is all there is.

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Roger Ariew names atomism as a lasting and important threat to late scholastic and early modern ecclesial authorities primarily because of the challenge it posed for the doctrine of transubstantiation (Ariew 1999: 144).

<sup>11</sup> Part 2, Articles 24-25 of *The Principles of Philosophy* argues that motion is best understood in relative terms: "We can say that [the same thing] moves and does not move at the same time. For he who is seated in a ship setting sail, thinks he is moving when he looks at the shore he has left, and considers it fixed, but not if he regards the vessel he is on, because he does not change his position in reference to its parts (Descartes 1997: 320-321). The doctrine of relative motion is technically compatible with geocentrism."

Descartes does not specify that heliocentrism is the reason for Galileo's trial, writing only that the church "had disapproved of a physical theory published a little while before by another person" (*Ibid.*: 110). However, as Redondi suggests, Descartes was aware of the true cause of Galileo's condemnation; though this is not confirmed, it is left open, by Descartes' vague description of Galileo's alleged error. Like the importance attributed to the Thirty Years War, no explicit confirmation is given by Descartes. However, Redondi's argument, which seems plausible, suggests that Descartes was attuned to the way in which theological, metaphysical, and even scientific disagreements were at the root of the social disorder his world was experiencing. Without a solution to the seemingly intractable disagreement between hylomorphists and materialists, there seemed to be no way forward.

These two contextual clues provide important insight into what Descartes saw as the problems of his time. Theological disagreements had devolved into geopolitical disorder, and to make matters worse, one of the central theological claims under dispute – transubstantiation – was based on a physical theory that he believed to be false.

Descartes therefore believed that disagreement was a pressing socio-political concern. However, he did not think that disagreement and diversity of opinion inescapably followed from the exercise of private reason, as Hobbes did. It was not private conscience, *per se*, that produced conflict, just the absence of certainty. Certainty, for Descartes, was therefore not simply of epistemological significance; interspersed throughout part one of the *Discourse* are numerous remarks linking certainty to utility.<sup>12</sup> For example: "By their means [i.e. letters] a

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. John C. McCarthy: "'Utility' and 'certainty' are the two watchwords of Descartes' most programmatic writing, the *Discourse on the Method*" (McCarthy 1994-1995: 248).

Compare also Blaise Pascal's fragment directed against Descartes: "Descartes useless and uncertain" (Fragment #78 in Pascal 1952). The simple act of combining these two demonstrates the extent to which Descartes was understood to ground utility in certainty.

clear and *certain* knowledge could be obtained *of all that is useful in life,*” and “I was delighted by mathematics because of the *certain*ty of its demonstrations...but I did not yet understand its true *use*” (*Ibid.*: 73, 75; my emphasis). Immediately after comparing ancient philosophy to a castle built upon sand, he tells the reader that “I always had an excessive desire to see clearly in my actions and to walk with confidence in this life” (*Ibid.*: 77). In other words, previous philosophers’ lack of certainty had negative consequences.

So far I have shown that Descartes shared Hobbes’ concern with the political problem of disagreement. Among his motivations for writing are the religious wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the debate between transubstantiation and materialist physics which had claimed Galileo among its casualties. At the heart of these conflicts was the apparent unattainability of consensus. Descartes’ strategy for creating politically useful consensus brings us to his disagreement with Hobbes, and to the political importance of Cartesianism. Instead of adopting Hobbes’ statist method of replacing private conscience with the enforced decisions of the sovereign, Descartes proposes a method of knowing that would allow agreement among all those who reason rightly. Put another way, rather than *abolishing* the politically dangerous reliance on private judgement, Descartes provides a way of *correcting* it.<sup>13</sup>

The details of Cartesian method have been discussed ad nauseum elsewhere, so only a brief summary is needed here. The important point is that by eliminating doubt and providing sure rules for reasoning, the method will allow everyone who closely follows it to reach the same indubitable conclusions. The specific method laid out in embryonic form in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* and clarified in *The Discourse* is as follows. The first rule is to “accept

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<sup>13</sup> Some clarification is perhaps necessary here. In a sense, Descartes also gets rid of private judgement insofar as the strict rules of his method leave no room for discretion or guesswork. Contra Hobbes, however, the important point is that it is still up to the individual to carry out the method, rather than submit to the public conscience of the sovereign.

nothing as true which I did not clearly recognize to be so” (*Ibid.*: 82). This involves withholding judgment in matters of doubt and uncertainty, and avoiding prejudice entirely. The second rule is to “divide up each of the difficulties which I examined into as many parts as possible” (*Ibid.*: 82). The third is to move in order from “the most simple and easy to understand...to knowledge of the most complex” (*Ibid.*: 82). The fourth and final rule is to “make enumerations so complete and reviews so general that I should be certain of having omitted nothing” (*Ibid.*: 83). For ease of discussion, they can be called, in order, the rule of *certainty*, the rule of *division*, the rule of *order*, and the rule of *enumeration*. The first three rules constitute the method proper, and the fourth is a means of quality control and proofreading to ensure that no mistakes or oversights have been made in carrying out the first three rules. He summarizes the nature and utility of his method as follows:

[P]rovided only that we abstain from receiving anything as true which is not so, and always retain the order which is necessary in order to deduce the one conclusion from the other, there is nothing so remote that we cannot reach it, nor so recondite that we cannot discover it (*Ibid.*).

He demonstrates the utility of his method by the radical doubt of everything except the fact of his existence as *res cogitans*, and subsequent reconstruction of knowledge on this indubitable basis. This process is recapitulated with minor variations in the *Discourse*, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and *The Principles of Philosophy*.

### **Conclusion**

We thus have two diametrically opposed solutions to a very similar articulation of the same problem. Both thinkers trace the problem of political violence to the natural diversity of belief – that is, to disagreement. Hobbes proposes eliminating public disagreement by contractually transferring intellectual rights to the sovereign. The monarch quite literally decides

religious and philosophical disputes and subjects must assent or face punishment. This can be described as the absolutist solution, in which the private judgement of each man is replaced with the public judgement of the sovereign.

Descartes' path to socially beneficial consensus was to give every man the methodological tools to think properly, and hence arrive at the truth on his own. If this were to prove possible, no absolutist state would be needed, at least not to address the problem of disagreement. More work needs to be done to sort out the specific political implications of Descartes' alternative to Hobbes, but if my argument is correct, it appears that Descartes is implicitly making an argument for a liberal individualist politics. Authoritarian states are not needed to keep the peace between warring parties, as long as the people have been taught to reason rightly. It is to philosophical method and rigour that one must look for for earthly salvation, not the absolute monarch.

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