Some of Hobbes’s thoughts on nature and its conquest are much more familiar than others. My aim in this essay is to take a broad look at Hobbes’s view in its totality, but I will begin from those thoughts that are well known to many readers of Hobbes. Although it may seem initially as if I am merely rehearsing the obvious, my reason for beginning in this way is that the thoughts in question—which concern the basic practical problem that nature poses for man—are a crucial part of Hobbes’s position on the matter under consideration. That they are not the whole of it, however, should become clear as I proceed.

Hobbes’s most famous statement on man’s natural condition is in Chapter 13 of *Leviathan*, the chapter that has come to be known as the “state of nature” chapter, even though its actual title is “Of the Natural Condition of Mankind, As Concerning Their Felicity and Misery.” In this chapter, Hobbes advances his signature claim that life in the state of nature is a wretched condition of unrelieved anxiety, misery, and war, in which one must continually struggle for survival against natural deprivations and the dangers posed by other men. If “the life of man” in such a condition is solitary, poor, nasty, and brutish, it is almost a good thing that it is also short (see *Lev.* 13.9); only the supreme importance of mere life, for Hobbes, keeps its brevity from being a virtue.¹ Now, one purpose of this bleak account of our natural condition is to undermine what Hobbes regarded as the

¹ All parenthetical citations in the text are to Hobbes’s works (see “Works Cited” for the editions used). Translations from Hobbes’s Latin works are my own. In my quotations from both Hobbes’s Latin and his English works, I have modernized capitalization, spelling, italics, and punctuation, except where doing so might obscure an important aspect of Hobbes’s meaning or emphasis. Unless otherwise noted, all italics are in the original texts.
comforting but illusory belief that men are cared for by benevolent forces beyond man. Hobbes sought to undermine that belief, not only because it is illusory, but also because it is debilitating, for it tells human beings that they need not be overly concerned with taking steps to protect themselves, watched over as they are by “invisible powers.” Hobbes’s account of our natural condition, by contrast, is meant to be about as comforting as a slap in the face of a man who has had too much to drink. And it has a similar aim: Hobbes seeks to bring men to their senses, to sober them up, and to make them feel in their bones that the only providence in the universe is that which human beings exercise of their own behalf against nature. Moreover, just as Hobbes sends the message that the only providence is that exercised by human beings, so too he indicates that the only beneficial order is that created by human endeavor. The state, understood as the man-made Leviathan (see *Lev.*, Introduction, 17.13), is the only thing that can genuinely protect human beings from violent death at one another’s hands, the terrible but predictable end of the lives of those in the state of nature who manage to ward off other natural dangers long enough to become a threat to other human beings. In short, nature is the problem, and man’s conquest of it through the construction of the mighty Leviathan is the solution.

This simple picture is what comes immediately to mind for many people when they think of Hobbes’s basic position on nature and the human condition. There are, however, several complications that need to be taken into account in order to appreciate the argument that lies behind Hobbes’s chilling portrait. The first complication is that the problem that nature poses for men is a problem that lies, in large part, *within* men, that is, it is a problem of men’s passions, which Hobbes argues are not naturally directed towards peace and community. In Hobbes’s view, it was one of the great mistakes of earlier moral philosophers, especially those who took their bearings from Aristotle, to assume that men are naturally political in the sense of being naturally suited for society. Men, according to an assertion Hobbes makes even more bluntly in *De Cive* than in
Leviathan, are naturally selfish and concerned above all with their own advantage and honor (see De Cive 1.2). As others have pointed out, Hobbes treats the latter of these two concerns as the more problematic, both because honor is a good that cannot be shared and because at least some men have an insatiable desire to exalt themselves by lording their superior power over other men.2 Similarly, although Hobbes contends in Leviathan that there are in the nature of man “three principal causes of quarrel”—competition, diffidence, and glory (see 13.6)—he does not describe them as equally pernicious. The first two—that is, each man’s desire to secure nature’s meager resources for himself (competition) and his fear of his rivals (diffidence)—can be channeled in peaceful directions; the same cannot be said of the desire for glory, which in some men becomes a pathology that leads them to value triumph over security (see Lev. 11.1-4; De Cive 1.2-4; Elem. 9.1). By Hobbes’s account, then, some men are even less suited for society than others, and these lupine men, like nature’s Romans, render peace as impossible for men in the state of nature as it was for Rome’s neighbors during the period of Rome’s expansion (see De Cive, Ep. Ded.). It is tempting to say that at least these most irredeemable of men, if not all men, are evil by nature in Hobbes’s view. That temptation would seem to have to be resisted in light of his contention that evil and sin are meaningless notions in the state of nature (Lev. 13.10, 13.13; De Cive, Pref., 1.10). But if he denies that any men are evil by nature, Hobbes certainly stresses that all men are dangerous, and he indicates that he regards some as more culpably so than others (see, e.g., De Cive 1.4; Elem. 16.10, 19.2). It especially with such men in mind that he declares that, outside of civil society, man is a wolf to man (De Cive, Ep. Ded.).

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Of course, as this sketch has already begun to indicate, the natural enmity among men rooted in their natural passions is not Hobbes’s last word on the necessary relationship among men. The second complication in Hobbes’s position is that, even as our natural passions are regarded as the source of the problem, they are also the source of the solution. At any rate, they are one source of the solution. After vividly describing the evils of the state of nature, Hobbes concludes his account of it in this way: “And thus much for the ill condition which man by mere nature is actually placed in, though with a possibility to come out of it, consisting partly in the passions, partly in his reason” (Lev. 13.13). On the heels of this remark, by way of transition to his account of the laws of nature, Hobbes then declares that “the passions that incline men to peace are fear of death, desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living, and a hope by their industry to obtain them” (13.14). That Hobbes regarded fear above all as “the passion to be reckoned on” (Lev. 14.31) is well known, as is his view that the laws of nature emerge through the cooperation of the passions and reason, as reason seeks out the necessary means to the end to which fear and the other peace-seeking passions incline us (see Lev. 13.14, 15.40-41; De Cive 3.31-33; Elem. 15.1). It is not necessary for present purposes to examine these aspects of Hobbes’s account in detail. More important is the broader point that Hobbes’s account of the state of nature is not meant merely as an articulation of a problem, and certainly not as a counsel of despair. Far from it: Hobbes intends to give men a reason for hope, and to spur them on toward the rational efforts that can remedy their condition. It is not simply true, then, that Hobbes describes nature as brutal and harsh. For at least it must be said of nature that she does not leave men with any problems that she does not also equip them to solve.

This further step in Hobbes’s argument raises a question, however. If men are well equipped by nature to solve the problem that nature poses, why did they not solve it long before Hobbes ever wrote a word? That Hobbes thinks they did fail to solve it—at least adequately—is
sufficiently indicated by his severe criticism of all earlier moral philosophers, and by his bold proclamation that he is the first to raise political philosophy to the rank of a science and to make it truly beneficial to mankind (see *De Corp.*, Ep. Ded.; *De Cive*, Ep. Ded., Preface). Human beings, Hobbes suggests, have never seen their way to the political solution they so desperately need. They have built commonwealths, of course, but never on the firm foundation of a genuinely rational doctrine of morality and politics (see *Elem.*, Ep. Ded., 1.1; *De Cive*, Ep. Ded.; *Lev*. 31.41). If one reason for this failure is that they have had worse than useless guides in the pre-Hobbesian moral philosophers, that is not the only reason. In Hobbes’s view, other problematic forces have intervened, forces that have exacerbated men’s most pernicious passions and inflated certain hopes and fears beyond their reasonable and safe measure. In fact, the earlier moral philosophers could not have done as much damage as they did had they not nourished a more basic tendency of men toward dangerous delusions (consider *Lev*. 2.8-9, 12.1-6, 29.15, 44.2-3, 46.18). This is the primary reason that Hobbes intended for his sobering teaching about the state of nature to be disenchanting and to bring men to their senses. For he thought that only if men could be freed from the power of crippling delusions would their natural passions lead them to do the constructive work necessary to create enduring commonwealths. But precisely if this is the case, and precisely if it is natural for men to begin from delusion rather than clarity, then Hobbes must acknowledge that what he is calling for is an unnatural act, a break with the natural course of things. It suffices here to think of Hobbes’s account of how prevalent and problematic “superstition” is among men, especially but not only in primitive societies. If superstition is natural to man but also an obstacle to a rational solution to the human problem, then what Hobbes calls for cannot be described as a simple activation of a natural potentiality. He calls, rather, for the creation of something new, something that requires enlightenment and enterprise as well as the cooperation of certain passions and reason. He calls men, in other words, to a project that is more rational than natural.
II.

To this point, many readers will probably find nothing too surprising in my description of Hobbes’s position. My account thus far is likely also to be uncontroversial, at least for those who do not think that Hobbes was sincere in his declarations that he was a believing Christian. This last qualification must be added for two reasons: there are some scholars of Hobbes who do accept his explicit claims about his own faith, and my foregoing account rests on the assumption that they are mistaken. (To give just one indication of the latter point, I have suggested that Hobbes believes, and wants to convince others to believe, that human enterprise, not guilt or repentance, is the fitting reaction to the harsh natural condition in which man finds himself—and it may be added here that he says not a word about that condition being a divine punishment for human sin.) Now, I am not going to marshal further evidence that Hobbes was so far from being a sincere Christian that he was in fact an atheist. Although some aspects of my account are already suggestive of that conclusion, admittedly none of them is decisive; but it would take me too far afield to try in this brief essay to address adequately the much-debated issue of Hobbes’s faith or lack thereof. Instead, let me focus on another issue that arises for those who regard Hobbes as an atheist. For, at some point, such students of Hobbes must ask about the basis of his (supposed) atheism, which, given that his atheism is an essential premise of the position I have already sketched, is at the root of his view that man must take matters into his own hands if his condition is to be made into something livable. Let me also venture here the broader suggestion that, not only for Hobbes, but for the early modern development more broadly, the relationship between the emerging call to conquer nature and the rise of modern atheism was not one of accidental coincidence—just as, on the other side, it was not mere whim that led the biblical God to disapprove of the construction of Babel.
But what of Hobbes’s atheism? What is its basis? The answer that first suggests itself is the mechanistic materialism of his natural philosophy. The first principles of Hobbes’s natural philosophy are that the only true beings in the world are bodies, and that all motion and change arise from the collisions and constant rearrangement of these bodies. According to Hobbes, the very notion of an incorporeal substance is an absurdity, and there can be no cause of motion for any given body other than the motions of a body that is contiguous and itself moved by another body (see *De Corp.* 3.4, 9.6-7; *Lev.* 4.21, 34.2, 46.15-21; *ElW* VII, 85-86). Now, it is not too hard to see how this conception of reality, or of the universe (see *Lev.* 34.2, 46.15), undergirds the outlook and reinforces the message sketched in the first section of this essay. The universe as Hobbes describes it, consisting of nothing but bodies and their continual motions, is not such that it ought to call forth our reverence or gratitude. And just as the fitting response to the dangers we pose to one another is to try to find a way to overcome them, the fitting response to a silent universe of matter in motion would seem to be, perhaps to feel a certain dread before it, but certainly to get to work conquering it as best we can. Once again, then, Hobbes’s doctrines are meant to be at once sobering and inspiring, at once a dose of bitter disenchantment and an emboldening call to enterprise. It is true that there is a certain difficulty with this suggestion as it applies to Hobbes’s natural philosophy, that is, with the thought that Hobbes’s mechanistic materialism sends the message of a call to arms for human beings. For although such a vision of reality exalts man as the most advanced being in the universe, and the only being capable of using his inventive powers to transform his condition, it also reduces him to nothing more than a body, or a temporary arrangement of smaller bodies, as determined by forces beyond his control as any other. Are not even man’s constructive efforts on his own behalf dictated by complex chains of mechanistic causation? Hobbes’s answer to this question, to remain consistent with his principles, must be yes. And yet that need not simply negate the positive message that man can take matters into his own hands and act to conquer nature. For it
is possible to conclude that, at a certain epoch in the history of the universe, for fundamentally accidental reasons, certain combinations of bodies arranged themselves in such a way as to allow, not only for man’s emergence, but also for his development and even his ingenuity. That is not to say that free will emerged, nor that the emergent property of certain combinations of bodies that is man’s capacity for inventive thinking entails a radical freedom from nature; but it is to say that man’s inventive capacity—his capacity to think of what he can do with something once he has it (see Lev. 3.5)—remains undeniable and gives man the ability to make a world within the world, even if, in man’s construction of that world, nature is in a paradoxical sense conquering itself. Rousseau argues that man can be thought of as perfectible, even if he is not free.3 Hobbes would agree, although he understands the meaning and vector of man’s perfectibility differently.

If it is possible in this way to reconcile Hobbes’s call for man to conquer nature with the determinism of his mechanistic materialism, there is a more basic but ultimately deeper difficulty that besets his natural philosophy. Simply put: How certain was Hobbes—how certain did he think he had a right to be—that his materialistic account of the universe is true? Admittedly, it may be surprising to raise this question, since Hobbes presents his view with supreme confidence in some passages. Consider, for example, this remarkably bold declaration from Chapter 46 of Leviathan:

The world (I mean not the earth only, that denominates the lovers of it worldly men, but the universe, that is, the whole mass of all things that are) is corporeal (that is to say, body) and hath the dimensions of magnitude (namely, length, breadth, and depth). Also, every part of body is likewise body, and hath the like dimensions. And consequently, every part of the universe is body, and that which is not body is no part of the universe. And because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing (and consequently, nowhere). (46.15)

Can the man who wrote this passage, and others like it (see, e.g., Lev. 34.2; De Corp. 8.20), really have had any doubts about the conception of the universe it so starkly expresses? As already mentioned, Hobbes regarded the very notion of incorporeal substances as an absurdity, and he seems to have

3 See Second Discourse, 113-15
been firm in his conviction that the only intelligible view of substances is that they must be bodies. He also expresses his basic axioms of motion—the central principles of his mechanism—with just as much confidence as he does his central claim about bodies—the core of his materialism (see, e.g., *ElW* VII, 85-86; *De Corp.* 6.5, 9.6-10; *OL* V, 217).

And yet Hobbes’s most confident proclamations do not reveal his full thought, for he was also aware of a difficulty that arises from the fact that human beings do not have direct access to the bodies that underlie and cause our experience. Hobbes himself stresses, after all, that our perceptions are only of “phantasms” or “fancies” that arise as mere offshoots of the collisions between unknown and unknowable bodies (see *De Corp.* 25.1-2; *Elem.* 2.7-9; *Lev.* 1.4). The world given to us through perception—which Hobbes regarded as the necessary starting-point of all thought—is only a compilation of epiphenomena caused by but hardly identical to or reliably representative of the more substantial world of bodies in motion. When thought through, however, this situation—our situation—renders it questionable or unknowable, not only what the true characteristics of the underlying bodies are, but even whether or in what way they may intelligibly be called “bodies.” For Hobbes at any rate, it proves to be much harder to say even what a body is than one would expect it to be for so confident a materialist as he appears to be. In fact, it turns out that the notion of body, which is the centerpiece of Hobbes’s natural philosophy, is a kind of black box whose contents Hobbes struggles to define adequately. Although he defines a body as “that which, without any dependence on our thought, is coincident or coextended with some part of space” (*De Corp.* 8.1; see also 8.20, 8.23; *Anti-White* 3.2, 4.3), this definition is not entirely satisfactory, even by Hobbes’s own lights. For it does not succeed in doing what an adequate definition should do, namely, “by a speech as brief as possible” raise in the mind of the listeners “a perfect and clear idea or conception of the things named” (*De Corp.* 6.13). There are two problems
with Hobbes’s quasi-Cartesian definition. First, there is a gap between extension understood as the real magnitude of the body, which, like the body itself, exists apart from our thought of it, and extension understood as our mental conception of the place occupied by the body, which is a mere image in our minds. If the former is “true extension” (extensio vera) and the latter “feigned extension” (extensio ficta), it would seem to be only “feigned extension” that allows us to place the body in imaginary space and thus to form a conception of it as extended, whereas it is only “true extension” that exists outside of our minds (De Corp 8.5; see also 8.1-4, 8.8, 7.2-3, Anti-White 3.1-2).

Second, even in the case of true extension, Hobbes resists a simple equation of body and extension or a reduction of body to extension. Extension is only one accident of any body, and thus a body “is not extension, but a thing extended” (De Corp. 8.5; see also 8.2-3, 5.3; Lev. 5.10). Similarly, since magnitude is the same as extension, it can be said that a body “has magnitude,” but “not that it is magnitude itself” (Latin Lev., Appendix, 1185; see also De Corp. 8.15, 15.1; EW VII, 227). We remain in the dark, then, about the nature of bodies, and that means that we do not really know what lurks behind or beneath the world of our experience, as the true material and efficient causes of the phenomena we perceive.

Now, it will be said—or, at any rate, could be said—that Hobbes thought that, despite its partial obscurity, the answer “bodies” remains the most plausible answer to the question of the identity of the fundamental constituents of reality and the deepest causes. That, I believe, is true—he did think that. Even so, however, the plausibility and semi-intelligibility of this answer does not remove entirely the question mark hovering over the bodies. And more important, the lack of perfect clarity of Hobbes’s own answer—of the answer that he himself accepts—opens the door even wider than it would otherwise be to the radical alternative that some kind of divine will, rather than the aimless motion of bodies, is in fact the deepest source of all being and change. It is partly

4 Compare Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, 1.53, 1.63, 2.4-11, 2.64.
in recognition of the fact that he cannot rule out this alternative, I believe, that Hobbes takes a set of
interrelated steps in his natural philosophy. First, he acknowledges that the causal explanations
offered by a mechanistic physics can never be more than hypothetical (see De Corp. 25.1, 30.15; see
also De Hom. 10.5; EW VII, 3, 184). If one reason for this is that there are severe limits on what
human beings can know of what we cannot perceive (see De Hom. 10.5; De Corp. 6.2, 26.1, 27.1; EW
VII, 78), another is that it cannot be ruled out that some kind of divine will might sever the
mechanistic chains of causality. Second, Hobbes acknowledges that, although his mechanistic
natural philosophy rests on the plausible assumption that nothing can move itself or be moved
except by that which is already moved, it is impossible to exclude the possibility that the world was
created *ex nihilo* and thus, again, that (further) miracles can occur (see De Corp. 26.1-3 with 26.7, 27.1;
*Anti-White* 27.1, 27.22; EW V, 176; De Hom. 1.1, 10.5, Latin Lev., Appendix, 1171). Third and
finally, Hobbes suggests that it is not essential to natural philosophy, after all, to be certain of the
existence of underlying bodies as the causes of the phenomena we experience, for it is possible to
move forward *as if it were the case*—that is, on the mere assumption—that the phenomena we
perceive are caused by bodies, and to rely on such concepts as we ourselves make or on principles
that are admittedly human constructions (see De Corp. 7.1, 24.8. 25.1, 26.5; EW VII, 183-85). To the
extent that Hobbes acknowledges that the key definitions in *De Corpore*, in particular, do not depend
on the actual existence of any bodies, because he is merely constructing a conception of nature
according to which the bodies and their motions are *regarded as* the fundamental reality, it would
seem that he retreats from his most robust and confident statements about the nature of the
universe to something more skeptical, tentative, and suppositional. Leo Strauss captured this retreat
in the memorable formulation: “Hobbes had the earnest desire to be a ‘metaphysical’ materialist.
But he was forced to rest satisfied with a ‘methodical’ materialism.”

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5 *Natural Right and History*, 174.
Now, whether or in what way Hobbes did “rest satisfied” with a merely “methodical” (i.e., methodological) materialism can be questioned. For, as already noted, he certainly seems at times to express himself as a robust metaphysical materialist. It is probably more accurate to say, then, that he wavers over the matter: as certain difficulties press upon his thinking, he retreats to a methodological materialism; but the position from which he is retreating remains his core conviction, and that conviction is on less ambiguous display at other moments, when he is not confronting the problems that drive him in a more skeptical direction. More important, however, than his wavering—and a key source of it—is that it would not have been possible for Hobbes to rest satisfied with a merely methodological materialism, at least not if “resting satisfied” is taken to mean regarding it as satisfactory. Hobbes must in fact have been quite dissatisfied with any approach that entails a renunciation of the hope that natural philosophy can decisively settle the most important of all metaphysical questions, and that thereby leaves it an open matter whether we do in fact live in a universe that consists of nothing but bodies and their wholly determined motions.

Still, dissatisfied as he must have been with a natural philosophy that cannot answer the question of greatest concern to him, Hobbes had to face the fact that he did not think it was possible to do better. In some sense, then, he did rest satisfied—or dissatisfied—with a merely methodological materialism. By way of conclusion, let me consider a few of the consequences of Hobbes’s less-than-satisfactory conception of natural philosophy and of the physics he thought possible on its basis. This consideration brings us back to the main theme of this essay, because the most important consequence is that Hobbes moves towards a more practical or utilitarian conception of the aim of science, a conception according to which science is directed more toward the conquest of nature than its understanding. As he puts it in a famous remark in De Corpore, scientia propter potentiam (“science is for the sake of power”) [De Corp. 1.6]. I have already mentioned one
reason for this movement: if nature is a regarded as a meaningless flux of moving bodies, one has no reason to contemplate it with reverence and every reason to get to work transforming it for the relief of man’s miserable estate (see page 7 above). Hobbes joins other early moderns, such as Bacon and Descartes, in calling for science to be put into the service of augmenting man’s power over nature. But this much follows—for Hobbes, at any rate—merely from his mechanistic materialism; it does not depend on his skepticism. Hobbes’s skepticism too, however, plays a role in impelling him toward a more utilitarian conception of science. For the more one comes to accept that there are severe limits on what can be known of nature, the more difficult it is for knowledge for its own sake to remain the end of science. In this sense, theory’s loss becomes practice’s gain, especially because the limits of our knowledge of nature are not such as to prevent us from making great strides in controlling it. Indeed, since man’s neediness is a problem that can be at least ameliorated, if not perfectly solved, it is in some sense even a welcome thing that the concern to address this problem is ready to step in, so to speak, to fill the space vacated by the disappointed desire to know.

*Scientia propter potentiam*, however, is not Hobbes’s last word on the end of science, or at least not the whole of it. For theory, too, has something to gain from the advance of the new physics, even if it rests on a merely methodological materialism. After all, the progressive conquest of nature promises to do more than to provide men with benefits and relieve their suffering; it promises also to give philosophy or science itself, if not the certainty it seeks, then at least ever-increasing confidence that the central principles of mechanistic materialism are sound. Hobbes envisioned a great civilizational advancement, and not only does the new physics have a crucial place in that vision, but it dovetails in its aims with his political philosophy: both are aspects of the project by which man can use his ingenuity to exert an unprecedented control over his condition. The allure of this vision is theoretical as well as practical, for it promises, with every new advance, to make the
doubts about the fundamental assumptions on which the project rests fade ever further into a dark and musty past that has been left behind by the progress of enlightenment and civilization.

The allure of this vision does not mean, however, that, for Hobbes himself, as he contemplated such a prospect, the doubts could ever fully disappear. Nor does it mean that, for those of us who live in the wake of the early modern attempt to remake the world, and for whom at least the most important doubts have faded further, the transformation in our consciousness should be seen as an advance in all respects. For the doubts rested on an awareness of the most challenging alternative to what would become the modern scientific outlook, and thus their fading marks the loss of that awareness.


Hobbes, Thomas:


*De Hom.* = *De Homine* in Vol. 2 of OL (see below).


