

Title
Description
Presenter(s)
Recording
Keywords
Part of series

Contributor Okay, now we come to another great figure; Thomas Hobbes. Much less celebrated in the 17th Century, rather notorious. In fact he was called the Monster of Malmesbury. His various works assigned Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury.

Hobbes incidentally is claimed as an alumnus by Hertford College because he attended Magdalen Hall which was an earlier name of the college.

Well Hobbes took this mechanist view of nature to its extreme. He said yes, material substance does work in more or less the way that Dekart thought, but that's all there is. The only thing there is in nature is physical stuff. There is no immaterial substance at all. So, he denied immaterial substance, he denied witchcraft. He was denied the existence of magic, that kind of thing. He denied that we should rely on religious revelation.

Instead, he wanted to say that the world was basically a mechanical system and he asserted universal determinism accordingly. Everything acts in accordance with deterministic physical laws. So one thing follows another by a causal pattern in which every detail is inevitably determined by what went before.

Famously, he also said that one should obey a Sovereign in everything. Both in religion and morals. And the work he is most famous for is not a work in theoretical philosophy, it's work in political philosophy. Leviathan, 1651, this is a very famous frontest piece of Leviathan. So Hobbes is particularly notorious for announcing this very pessimistic view of human nature. Human nature left to itself is a war of all against all, we're all desperately striving for what we can get. So the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

How do we avoid that? Well according to Hobbes political theory, the only way of avoiding it is for us to club together and agree to erect an absolute Sovereign who will have power over us and whose role is to keep the peace.

It helps to understand Hobbes political theory if you realise he was around during the English civil war. He saw the avoidance of civil war as the ultimate thing, the thing more important than anything else. And in order to avoid that civil war, it was worth subjecting oneself to absolute Sovereignty.

Hobbes is still very much studied today amongst political theorists, he's left a legacy in things like game theory. He's notable because he attempts to understand society as a system which has grown out of the solution of practical problems. He doesn't want to appeal to divine revelation.

Why not? Because as we saw last time, different interpretations of divine revelation can lead to people going round killing each other. He doesn't want to appeal to any sort of God given authority of a King for the same reason. Very practical, he wants to establish political authority on purely naturalistic foundations.

So as I have said, Hobbes is a materialist and this is the thing more than anything that made him notorious at the time. So Dekart remember had distinguished between material and immaterial substance. The physical world is made of stuff whose essence is pure extension. But does that mean that there's no place for mind. No. Dekart thought, that mind, whose essence is thinking, is made of immaterial substance.

But Hobbes would have none of that. So he gives this example of abuses of words. When men make a name of two names whose significations are contradictory and inconsistent, the result is but insignificant sounds. As this name, an incorporeal body, or, which is all one, an incorporeal substance.

Now you might think that Hobbes is having a bit of a joke at Dakar's expense here because he's giving us an example of an abuse of words, the combination of body and incorporeal. Corporeal means bodily, material. So he's simply saying an incorporeal body is a contradiction in terms. And so when Dakar tries to appeal to the idea of an immaterial substance as making room for mind, Hobbes just denies it.

What about free will? If we are essentially material, if everything we do is determined by material causation, does that leave any room for freedom? Well you might think not. Many people think not. But Hobbes was a compatibilist. He thought free will and determinism are compatible. And he achieves that by defining freedom in an appropriate way. Liberty or freedom, signify properly the absence of opposition. By opposition I mean external impediments of motion. A free man is he that in those things which by his strength and wit, he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to.

So suppose there is something I want to do. I want to take a drink of water for example. Well, am I hindered in doing so? No. I am able to do it, so I am free. The fact that my wanting that and all the movements of my body in achieving it, were physically determined, doesn't in any way prevent my being free according to Hobbes definition. So Hobbes is the first classic compatibilist. We will be seeing that later when we come to discuss free will, a very, very influential position.

Now materialism is obviously rather difficult to reconcile with traditional religious beliefs. Most people do not think of God and the angels as being material. Hobbes did, or seems to have done. Clearly there is a major problem with immortality if you believe that everything is material. We know what happens to material bodies after people die. If the material body is all there is, it's hard to see how there can be any after life, let alone immortality.

So it's not surprising that many at the time took Hobbes to be atheist. In 1666, the English parliament cited his atheism as the probable cause of the plague and the fire of London. So there was a debate in parliament as to whether he should be arrested and punished for having been the cause of this divine displeasure.

In 1683, his books were publically burned in Oxford because of their damnable doctrines, false, seditious and impious and most of them also heretical and blasphemous and destructive of all government.

A rather amusing episode in Cambridge, well not amusing for Daniel Scargill who got expelled from his fellowship for being a Hobbist, in other words a follower of Hobbes. He tried to get it back by recanting. By saying, "Okay, I fess up, I was a Hobbist, but I'm not anymore." And his recantation is really rather funny. "I have lately vented and publicly asserted diverse wicked, blasphemous and atheistical positions, professing that I gloried to be a Hobbist and an atheist. Agreeably unto which principles I have lived in great Licentiousness, swearing rashly, drinking intemperately, corrupting others."

So the assumption at the time of course, was that if you were an atheist, there was nothing to make you moral. Morality most people assumed comes from God. And moreover the safe guarded morality is punishment in an afterlife for those who are wicked. So most people at the time tended to assume that if you were an atheist you were bound to be wicked. And here Daniel Scargill was going along with that idea.

So Hobbes was very much a bogeyman and he remained a bogeyman for a long time. Even David Hume, who was influenced quite a lot by Hobbes in various ways, hardly mentions him. If you were influenced by Hobbes you didn't say so. Hobbes was only to be mentioned in order to be refuted. Hence, Monster of Malmesbury.

So how was he to be refuted? Well the main argument that was used against materialism was to insist that there were certain things that matter could not do. Remember the key role of inertia. Aristotle thought that things have natural desires, strivings that lead them to do certain things, like striving to reach the centre of the universe.

Galileo and Descartes replaced that with the idea of inertia. Matter is passive. It just keeps going in the same direction at the same speed until it is acted upon by a force. So remember the sledge moving over flat ice. What requires explanation is not why it keeps going, but why it stops.

Well if matter is necessarily passive and that seemed very much to be supported by the physical theory, then activity cannot come from matter. Activity must come from mind. So there must be something other than matter. And in particular, mental activity thought seems entirely beyond the capacity of matter. Matter, well that's just bits of stuff in motion, bashing into each other and so forth.

How can that give rise to thought? And this argument was a very popular one. I mean look at those dates. And these were just the big figures. Okay, there were dozens of people writing against materialism by appeal to this sort of argument.

© 2010 University of Oxford,

This transcript is released under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 2.0 UK: England & Wales Licence. It can be reused and redistributed globally provided that it is used in a non-commercial way and the work is attributed to the licensors. If a person creates a new work based on the transcript, the new work must be distributed under the same licence. Before reusing, adapting or redistributing, please read and comply with the full licence available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/uk/>