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THE 'LUST OF THE MIND': CURIOSITY IN HOBBS' *LEVIATHAN*



Thomas Hobbes includes "curiosity" to an extended catalogue of the passions that he principally distinguishes as beneficial or detrimental to human kind. In this light curiosity holds up a prominent position in his thought which he considers as the motivating factor that leads people to discover new worlds and broaden their horizons. An indicative definition of curiosity as found in Hobbes' *Leviathan* proceeds as follows:

Desire to know why, and how, curiosity; such as is in no living creature but man: so that man is distinguished, not only by his reason, but also by this singular passion from other animals; in whom the appetite of food, and other pleasures of sense, by predominance, take away the care of knowing causes; which is a lust of the mind, that by a perseverance of delight in the continual and indefatigable generation of knowledge, exceedeth the short vehemence of any carnal pleasure.¹

Curiosity regarded as 'the care of knowing causes' and as 'a lust of the mind' intrigues our own curiosity to further explore its meaning as conceptualized and developed throughout *Leviathan*. Curiosity, according to Hobbes, distinguishes humans from animals since humans seek to know the causes leading to human actions whereas animals are only concerned with the need for self-preservation. This distinction becomes both broader and more specific when Hobbes describes human actions as consequences precipitated by certain causes, hence giving the consequences precise meaning and significance.

¹ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter Form and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*, ed. W. Molesworth, *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, Vol. 3, London 1997, 44.

The train of regulated thoughts is of two kinds: one, when of an effect imagined we seek the causes or means that produce it; and this is common to man and beast. The other is, when imagining anything whatsoever, we seek all the possible effects that can by it be produced; that is to say, we imagine what we can do with it when we have it. Of which I have not at any time seen any sign, but in man only; for this is a curiosity hardly incident to the nature of any living creature that has no other passion but sensual, such as are hunger, thirst, lust, and anger.²

For Hobbes humans unlike any other beings have the ability to direct their thinking towards a purpose. Their intention to seek the cause of possible effects leads them unavoidably to a circle of

wonderings principally motivated by the need to know, namely curiosity: Curiosity, or love of the knowledge of causes, draws a man from consideration of the effect to seek the cause; and again, the cause of that cause; till of necessity he must come to this thought at last, that there is some cause where of there is no former cause, but is eternal; which is it men call God. So that it is impossible to make any profound inquiry into natural causes without being inclined thereby to believe there is one God eternal;³

Curiosity inspires scientific inquiry into the causes capable of producing calculated effects. Human mind for Hobbes is designed exactly for bringing beneficial purposes to a desirable end, and this is a process essentially characterized by love' of acknowledging causes. Indeed it is only rarely that Hobbes makes use of favourable emotional grammar to describe human characteristics. For Hobbes human nature is greedy, nasty and egotist, however when he comes to speak about science and 'scientific inquiry' things take a different vein. Science and religion constitute two divergent aspects of human life that must affect the whole process of human thought in completely different ways and degrees.

Kathryn Tabb acutely observes that the matter of curiosity in *Leviathan* presents not just as "[...] a delight in causes but an appetite for a particular kind of original knowledge: that of hitherto unexperienced effects of experienced causes."⁴ Hobbes links directly the passion of curiosity to that of novelty when saying:

² *Ibidem*, 13–14.

³ *Ibidem*, 92.

⁴ K. Tabb, "The fate of Nebuchadnezzar: Curiosity and human nature in Hobbes", *Hobbes Studies* 27, 2014: 23.

Joy, from apprehension of novelty, ADMIRATION ; proper to man, because it excites the appetite of knowing the cause.⁵

Admittedly the passion of novelty for Hobbes prompts people to new paths of scientific discoveries prospectively delightful and more beneficial for the human kind.

What we may say here is that Hobbes portrays curiosity in a sense similar to what David Hume made in a later stage more explicit in his distinction between ‘scientific curiosity’ and ‘trembling curiosity’. The former is principally associated with “pure love of truth” that prompts people into scientific inquiry. The latter refers to superstitious faith to religion that keeps people confined to a primitive state of thinking.⁶ Hobbes by his behalf encouraged people to search for the real causes of matters that prove for their knowledge foremost beneficial, though he never lost faith to God as to be the principal cause of all things existing. The believe that humans are curious beings and because of this reason they are never lead to decay and misery may be traced in the writings of Francis Bacon when he says that for “... knowledge there is no satiety, but satisfaction and appetite are perpetually interchangeable.”⁷ In Bacon’s case much like Hobbes “...the rhythms of curiosity were those of addiction or of consumption for its own sake, cut loose of need and satisfaction.”⁸

According to Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park among the early modern thinkers that appreciate the most the role that curiosity played to the progressive formation of the modern subject was undoubtedly Thomas Hobbes.⁹ Curiosity to ‘touch’ the causes of desirable or unfortunate effects in life forms what Hobbes calls an “appetite of knowledge”. The next argument that I am here call to deal with adheres to this: how does ‘epistemic curiosity’ in Hobbes theory gets politicized in the course of building up’ his Leviathan.

⁵ T. Hobbes, *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 45.

⁶ D. Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, Stanford University Press 1957, Section 2,3.

⁷ F. Bacon, *Advancement*, in: *Works of Francis Bacon*, Vol. 3, 317.

⁸ L. Daston and K. Park, *Wonders and the order of Nature*, New York: Zone Books New York, 307.

⁹ K. Tabb, *Hobbes Studies* 27, 307.

Curiosity and the attribution of manners

Chapter 11 entitled “Of the difference of manners” is of particular interest to our purpose. Hobbes begins this chapter by defining what he calls ‘manners’, namely “...those qualities of mankind, that concern their living together in peace and unity”. People are by their nature greedy desiring endless satisfaction of their needs but also desiring frequent confirmation that they do indeed experience a content life. The variety of ways by which people achieve ‘happy life’ differs according to the diversity of passions inscribed in each diverse human being. Furthermore, people achieve happy/content life, through their varied “... opinion[s] that each one has of the causes, which produce the effect desired.”¹⁰ In showing the importance of seeking for causes that guarantee peace and unity among individuals, Hobbes underscores the role that ‘ignorance’ plays to the expression of unhealthy symptoms and misbeliefs. People as he says are greedy enough “[...] to desire power after power that ceases only in death.”¹¹ The fact of their ignorance though creates an extra danger that prevents people from remaining confident about their goals in life which he identifies in five broad sets of reasons.¹² One set stems from people’s greedy nature which induces them to rely solely on their own scientific convictions and thus disregard the opinions of others. A second one is designated as the unwillingness of people to understand meanings correctly due to “ignorance of the (right) signification of words”.¹³ The third set relies on the fact that people’s judgments are most times explicitly aligned to their personal advantage. The fourth set is people’s partial understandings of their duties and responsibilities to the collective. While the fifth denotes people’s tendency to believe and disseminate lies of various sorts.

In all these reasons mentioned above Hobbes highlights ‘ignorance’ as to be the major constraint that prevents people from living together in peace and unity. For Hobbes ‘ignorance’ would gradually wither away if only curiosity could be directed accordingly towards the development of ‘manners’ namely – living together in peace and unity. For achieving this long-term goal people should remain closely committed to the idea of maintaining a commonwealth and their appetite for knowledge thoroughly aligned to that purpose.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 87.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 86.

¹² *Ibidem*, 90, 92.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 90.

In the section following next I focus on the second part of *Leviathan* entitled as the commonwealth with reference to the chapter of the passions and manners, in my attempt to understand the meaning of curiosity and how can we make sense of curiosity's political significance in the course of Hobbes' thought.

Curiosity getting politicized

Hobbes was particularly aware that peaceful coexistence could be possible only through a common understanding among people that 'passions' (at least the variety of them) perform a rather dangerous role in human life leading to grievance and constant war. In the avoidance of unforeseen consequences people should agree altogether to form a sovereign body capable of monitoring human passions and administering human life. In the process of building up this sovereign body called Leviathan, Hobbes comes face to face with a great challenge that is: to speak about the causes that weak or tend to the dissolution of a commonwealth.

It is my argument here that even though Hobbes has thoroughly delineated the passage of humans from natural state to civic state due contract, he never managed to give plausible solutions to the problem of how does 'ignorance' affects the course of knowing causes, namely 'curiosity', and consequently the development of 'manners', namely the matter of living together in peace and unity. This negative characteristic of human nature, namely ignorance that interestingly Hobbes lives aside from the list of passions, never withers away but rather intensifies in a great degree when the writer speaks about the causes leading to the dissolution of a commonwealth.

In the aforementioned chapter (23 of *Leviathan*) we notice that the matter of 'ignorance' comes back to the scene and plays a decisive role in misguiding the masses towards undesirable paths. People are tentative to turn against the commonwealth Hobbes argues, in a variety of ways and for a number of reasons. I will confine myself on making visible only one point which I believe indicates the matter of ignorance operating as a constraint towards the attribution of causes that Hobbes thinks fit for maintaining a steady commonwealth.

When Hobbes points out the causes leading to extensive state disorder, he believes that this happens primarily because people are yet in-mature to reckon what is beneficially 'good' for them and 'just' as a collective. Similarly they are led to believe that by replacing the form of their own government with that of a foreign state, things will prove considerably better in the near future. Hobbes

draws these conclusions by his experience of civil war as taking place in England between the years 1642–49. He was a chief defender of the current constitution of monarchy in England and believed that any attempt to establish different forms of government would prove in the long run essentially catastrophic.

For Hobbes a considerable amount of people in England believed that “change” in governmental policy could only be achieved through the adoption of other forms of government that come from neighboring nations. His opinion sounds too confident when saying:

And I doubt not, but many men have been contented to see the late troubles in England out of an imitation of the Low Countries; supposing there needed no more to grow rich, than to change, as they had done the form of their government. For the constitution of man's nature, is of itself subject to desire novelty. When therefore they are provoked to the same, by the neighborhood also of those that have been enrich by it, it is almost impossible for them, not to be content with those that solicit them to change ; and love the first beginnings, though they be grieved with the continuance of disorder ; like hot bloods, that having gotten the itch, tear themselves with their own nail, till they can endure the smart no longer.”¹⁴

An important idea that is of an interest to us is simply in passing here: Hobbes bares recognition to the fact that people seek not only conceptual changes in their lives but also political ones when they are in the need to or influenced by other factors. Hobbes never seize on reminding us that people's nature is designed in such a way so as to desire novelty. But when the matter becomes urgently political, that is of saving a commonwealth from its ultimate distraction Hobbes appears skeptical and in a sense controversial. He equates the importance of something being new with that of mere imitation of the Low Countries' forms of government. He now sees people's expressed curiosity to make sense of other forms of government as potentially dangerous for the stability of monarchical state.

This intrinsic shift of people to turn against the commonwealth that they themselves have created indicates as I believe the various ways and grades that ignorance operates in the Hobbesian system of thought as a constraint towards the development of manners proper for maintaining peace and stability. In that sense the intentions of the curious learner to find out more about other states of living and forms of government, takes the character of a contempt action that if practiced will unavoidably lead to unforeseen consequences.

¹⁴ T. Hobbes, *The English works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 314.

This presentation is a project under study that seeks to reevaluate the meaning of curiosity in Hobbes' political theory and further on to enrich the weaponry of conceptual understanding in Hobbes studies. Though Hobbes might be the most widely discussed theorist in the tradition of modern political theory there are certain aspects of his thought that are systematically neglected either ignored presumably considered as far too complex for our understanding of contemporary politics. The matter of curiosity should be considered as one of them. The study of Hobbesian curiosity has only just begun.

References

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