



Introduction

A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside of it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*

Thomas Hobbes is not who we think he is. Or, to make the point more precisely, his work does not say what we have thought it says. I make this claim not in the guise of an expert exhorting the generalist to attend to the marvelous complexities revealed by careful study of Hobbes's philosophy. There are plenty of rich and detailed studies of Hobbes's work; what is at issue is not whether people read his texts closely or carefully enough. Nor do I offer this claim as an intrepid archeologist having unearthed precious gems of text that heretofore have been passed over by other professional excavators of Hobbes's oeuvre. The texts I draw on are those of Hobbes that are widely read and generally drawn upon by experts and nonexperts alike; what is at issue is not a (re)introduction of a new or forgotten piece of writing. Rather, I forward the proposition about our collective misrecognition of Hobbes and his thinking as a provocateur who has realized that we have a particular way of seeing and reading Hobbes's political theory that we do not yet recognize *as* a particular way of seeing and reading.¹ In fact, one of the central claims of this book is that the habits of apprehension that frame and constrain our encounters with Hobbes also shape and delimit how we make sense of personhood and ourselves more generally. In making these habits explicit and visible, I hope to effect a

gestalt shift in the way we look at and understand both Hobbes and ourselves and thereby to elucidate intriguing possibilities for thinking about ethics and politics.

So one of the tasks of this project is to unmask the iconographic Hobbes—the Hobbes, that is, who articulates a distinctively modern brand of calculating, self-interested individualism and who paints such a dismal portrait of the inevitability of violent conflict that his political theory is seen as justifying or even as appealing for unsavory authoritarian forms of governance. This Hobbes and the “Hobbesian individual” who is seen as having sprung full-formed and ugly from the philosopher’s head have gripped public and scholarly imaginations for centuries, serving as easy references for any pundit or serious thinker who seeks to deplore the violence of war, analyze the causes of conflict, criticize the destruction wrought by the instrumentalist, consumerist mind-set, or champion the virtues of broad-based citizen action. One of the arguments I put forth in this book—most specifically in the first three chapters—is that underneath the vision of self and politics conjured by the mere mention of Hobbes’s name is someone else, *another* iconic figure, namely, the Cartesian subject. It is René Descartes’s rendering of the self as split into two ontologically distinct but practically related entities of mind and body that gives to the iconic Hobbes his hard-core individualism and the accounts of rationality, desire, and political absolutism that are its corollary. Indeed, if we read Hobbes’s work through his materialist metaphysics, which is to say through a philosophy resolutely opposed to that articulated by Descartes, we not only see that the iconic Hobbes is something of an impostor born of Descartes’s imagination and philosophical categories. A materialist reading of Hobbes’s philosophy also undermines what we have taken to be the centrality of the individual for his thinking about politics and brings into focus the pacifism that drives his ethical and political work. Put differently, what emerges through this way of seeing Hobbes is a thinker whose appreciation of our embodiedness or materiality issues in a complex portrayal of our profound interdependence and a compelling account of the ways and means to peace.

Related to the interest in recasting Hobbes and his work, an additional aim of this book concerns the habits of self-perception and understanding that accompany our implicit and unavowed adoption of the terms

of Descartes's ontology. For a good while now, thinkers in the West have been held captive by a Cartesian picture of the human subject: a person split internally into mind and body. To be sure, many theorists and philosophers have rejected the mind/body dualism that has come to serve as the abridgment and signature of Descartes's philosophy. Yet, even as scholars have redescribed the relationship between mind and body, refiguring what it is to be an embodied person, we have not yet been released from the captivity of the dualist picture. This is not to say that we have fallen short in our portrayal of the imbrication of mind and body in a human being, as if what is at issue is the accuracy or fullness of our representations. Rather, although we have largely transfigured the subject from mind-in-a-body to embodied-mind, we have not yet changed the broader picture or framework through which we recognize or understand what being a subject or a person means. That is to say, even as theorists and philosophers might offer different claims about what a person is—"we are embodied minds"—the constellation of concepts we generally use to talk about personhood remain profoundly Cartesian. And when we repeat this language in our discussions of subjectivity, ethics, and politics, we are recaptured by Descartes's picture of the subject even as we think we have left it behind.² This book represents an effort to trace the outlines of an alternative picture or framework for understanding the thinking, rationality, desire, and action of a non-Cartesian subject.

In many respects, then, this project is an experiment in reading. That is, it is an attempt to satisfy a curiosity about what might happen were we to grant to Thomas Hobbes his materialism. What I mean by the term "grant" here is not the mere acknowledgment that he develops a materialist philosophy, an allowance that requires the periodic gesture to the mechanistic worldview that is presumed generally to go along with a materialist metaphysics. What I mean, rather, is a thoroughgoing concession, a giving-over in which Hobbes's materialism is articulated in all its depth and breadth, in which its implications for our conception of ourselves and our world are elaborated as fully and as trustfully as a generous imagination can accommodate.³

As is intimated in the opening paragraphs, the reason such an experiment requires a generous imagination is that to give oneself over to Hobbes's materialism is to have to face serious challenges to our conception of what

it is to be a person. What confronts us here is not the prospect that his materialism figures people as something akin to automata—at this point in time, such a figuration is hardly credible enough to pose much of a challenge. Rather, when spun together into a coherent argument, Hobbes's materialism compels us fundamentally to rethink our conceptions of self-consciousness, reasoning, desire, and action, of what an "individual" is, and of what collective ethical and political life might and should be.⁴ In other words, taken seriously, Hobbes's materialism calls into question what Sheldon Wolin has called our "tacit political knowledge," the "complex framework of sensibilities built up unpremeditatedly" that we draw upon in our reflective inquiries, the broad tradition of understanding that "tells us what is appropriate to a subject and when a subject matter is being violated or respected by a particular theory or hypothesis."⁵ In fact, we could say that in calling into question the commonplaces that orient our thinking, Hobbes's materialism—or this reading of it—violates the "norms of minimal intelligibility" that Jacques Derrida claims serve as the ground upon which exegesis, analysis, and criticism take place and make an interpretation recognizable to others as a commentary on a common text.⁶ So one must be generous in order to be open to apprehending the sensible in a train of thinking that we might at first be inclined to presume will lead to utter nonsense.

Of course, it is important to note here that, as a metaphysical orientation, Hobbes's materialism was neither strange nor incomprehensible to his contemporaries: materialisms of different kinds were gaining intellectual currency and attracting critical attention in the early modern period.⁷ Like many other philosophers in seventeenth-century Europe, including Descartes, Pierre Gassendi, and Marin Mersenne, Hobbes reconsidered and responded to the political, moral, and theological problems posed by ancient thinkers.⁸ In doing so, he drew on the atomism of ancient skeptics such as Epicurus to formulate the mechanistic account of the movement of matter at the heart of his materialism.⁹ Similarly, Hobbes was far from alone in having his thinking shaped by the broadly influential if bitterly contested mechanistic natural philosophy developed by Galileo.¹⁰ Further, in his moral and political work, Hobbes leaned heavily on the insights of Hugo Grotius, for whom the principle of self-preservation served as a bulwark against skeptical moral relativism and as scaffolding for theories of

state.¹¹ In addition to this broad philosophical context, the proliferation of Reformation Christian doctrines provided the conditions for the development and intelligent reception of his materialist accounts of the self. That is to say, Hobbes's materialism had affinities with strands of Lutheran and Calvinist Protestant Christian denominations that denied the soul outlived the flesh, that affirmed the materiality of the spiritual world, and that subscribed to deterministic doctrines of predestination.¹² In other words, the philosophical priority Hobbes gives to the materiality of the world, his effort to describe the self and human action "according to the principles of matter in motion,"¹³ and the ethical and political significance he attributes to the living human body share antecedents and common philosophical ground with other arguments developed in the period in which he wrote. Indeed, it was precisely because his materialism was intelligible to his contemporary audience that Hobbes was excoriated for the religious, ethical, and political entailments of his arguments.¹⁴

So although Hobbes's materialism was not widely accepted in the seventeenth century, it was not deemed incomprehensible. From our perspective, the intelligibility of Hobbes's metaphysics and its entailments can be ascribed to the fact that he wrote his materialist philosophy before the remarkable ascendancy of Descartes's philosophy—or to be more precise, *during* what Jonathan Israel calls the "Crisis of the European Mind," the period of intellectual upheaval in mid-seventeenth-century Europe in which the Cartesian "mechanical philosophy" rose and spread.¹⁵ To make the point more precisely, Hobbes formulated a materialist account of self, society, and politics both against and before the Cartesian framework for conceptualizing what it is to be a person had become so thoroughly dispersed and entrenched as to stand as an unacknowledged commonplace in our thinking about consciousness, desire, and action.¹⁶

Read through the ubiquitous penumbra cast by Descartes's philosophical system, Hobbes's materialism has (somewhat understandably) been dismissed as illogical, incoherent, wrong, or irrelevant.¹⁷ However, as the ontological status of mind/body dualism has been called into question by developments in feminist and contemporary political theory, philosophy, science, and cultural studies,¹⁸ as the constellation of concepts we use to figure subjectivity and social interaction have been critically analyzed and reformulated,¹⁹ and as other materialist philosophies from the

early modern period have come to be reassessed,²⁰ it has become possible to think beyond the panoply of concepts that together compose the Cartesian picture of the self. That is, the contemporary intellectual context is such that we can read Hobbes's materialism and receive the complex and extraordinary insights about subjectivity, ethics, and politics that he offers.

The analytical starting point of Hobbes's entire philosophy is the axiom that "the World, (I mean not the Earth onely, that denominates the Lovers of it *Worldly men*, but the *Universe*, that is, the whole masse of all things that are) is Corporeall, that is to say, Body."²¹ Everything that exists is matter: there is nothing else. Such a thoroughgoing materialism has generally been thought to entail a crude mechanistic account of action that condemns us to a deterministic behaviorism or to some such mode of acting that makes us unrecognizable to ourselves.²² That is, in saying that matter is all there is, Hobbes is thought to have jettisoned the immaterial soul or mind and to have left us with a body whose features are inadequate to account for the extraordinary complexity of what it is to be a thinking, feeling, choosing person.²³ However, as I argue in the chapters ahead, the sense that the material body alone cannot give us a sensible account of what it is to be a person derives from an implicit adherence to the terms of Descartes's philosophy. What we imagine Hobbes to have done in articulating his materialism is to have attempted to account for how a self might be conjured from essentially unthinking matter. But of course, as Stanley Cavell points out in his own meditations upon the ways in which Descartes's dualism continues to haunt philosophy, to proffer a materialist account of the subject by pasting the attributes of mind onto matter is to shift the weight of the "self" to the inert "matter" side of Descartes's dualism—which is not to reject the terms of dualism at all but rather merely to make a conceptual move within the confines of those very terms.²⁴ To put the problem a little differently, because we are (sometimes unwittingly) bound to a Cartesian-type conception of matter, we cannot very easily recognize—or even see—the alternative understandings of self and society Hobbes proposes. In spite of ourselves, we tend to be Cartesian in our understanding of what a wholly material self might be.

Hobbes eschews a Cartesian understanding of matter. Instead, he formulates what, in the first chapter of this book, I call a "variegated materialism." According to this materialism, matter is varied rather than uniform

in its characteristics: whereas some matter is inert, other forms of matter are animate and thinking. In these latter cases, of course, Hobbes is referring to people. In his view, liveliness and thinking do not need to be added to otherwise inert matter to make a person, for they are essential aspects of what some matter simply is. In making such a claim, Hobbes obviates many of the conjuring exercises presented by materialist portrayals of the subject that are founded on the “matter” side of the Cartesian binary: how can we figure blank, indurate, mute matter as capable of thought, feeling, and self-movement? Starting with the presumption that there are indeed such things as “thinking-bodies,” Hobbes develops a complex account of thinking, desire, and action.²⁵ And unsurprisingly, the conception of the self that he develops from this notion of animate, thinking matter is radically different from the conception of the self we get through relying on either side of the Cartesian binarism.

As will become clear as the argument of this book unfolds, what is at stake in Hobbes’s materialism is the concept of the self-sovereign individual we generally associate with his political work—the selfish, calculating “possessive individual” of political theory lore.²⁶ When Hobbes elaborates the processes that constitute thinking, desire, and action in a being composed of “matter in motion,” he produces a figure whose orientation to time and whose relationship to the material world have a profound effect upon its sense of self as well as upon the tenor and course of social interactions. To state the point briefly, Hobbes’s subject is not an autonomous, self-defining, integrated, and internally unified individual. Indeed, in many respects, the very concept of the individual is displaced as a central unit of his political analysis. For the self that emerges through Hobbes’s materialism, thoughts do not spring from some well within; likewise, desires are not, as Jean Hampton claims, “*intrinsic* properties.”²⁷ Rather, thoughts and desires are constituted and reconstituted intersubjectively and in relation to the material environment. In fact, for Hobbes, to speak of the intersubjective nature of our existence is not enough. In his analysis, the patterns of our reasoning and desire and our very capacity to act are such that we must speak of action and interaction in terms of our interdependence. We could say, then, that with his materialist metaphysics Hobbes gives us an account of self and society that has at its center the principle of heteronomy.²⁸ So Hobbes’s materialism challenges not only our sense of

how to imagine what a person is. It also challenges the habits of thinking that are operative in our use of the autonomous individual as the central figure in our theorizing about ethics and politics.

The habits of thinking broached and challenged in this effort to recast the substance and implications of Hobbes's materialism are as follows. First, we tend to think that matter, in itself, cannot be self-aware. In other words, self-consciousness is difficult to imagine if we confine ourselves to the realm of matter.²⁹ In Chapter 1, I draw out Hobbes's accounts of sensation and perception to suggest that, for him, some forms of matter can be self-aware and that this self-awareness takes the form of memory. This figuration of self-awareness as memory disrupts the immediacy implicit in the Cartesian model of the self-conscious subject and instead portrays the subject as able to know itself only through a longer temporal frame than the present moment. In other words, Hobbes's argument suggests that a subject's self-consciousness—and its broader sense of self—must be thought in connection to the past and the future. As will become clear in the pages ahead, this temporal shift at the very center of the conceptualization of the individual subject has implications for our imagination of the subject's relation to others as well as its engagement with the world more broadly.

Second, we tend to think that thinking and reasoning are activities undertaken by an active agent of thought, an agent who is sovereign of or who has direct control over the thinking process. However, this model of the thinking-self's self-mastery rests upon the presumption of the thinking-self's incorporeality. According to Hobbes's materialist accounts of perception, thinking, desire, and reason, we are not and cannot be masters of our thoughts as they occur. As I explain in Chapter 2, in his view, the processes that constitute our thoughts and that move us from one thought to another are so complicated and fast that we can only say that "thoughts happen" without our immediate awareness and direction. This is not to say that we do not have any control over our thoughts whatsoever. For Hobbes, a complex combination of desire, language, and habit enables us to recognize, organize, and give sensible structure to our thought patterns. To acknowledge this aspect of his argument, however, is to have to give up the notion that reason is a source and sign of our autonomy and instead to see the process of reasoning itself as conditioned by

desire, language, and habit—and the various social, cultural, and political forms that shape them.

Third, as is intimated in its disruption of our presumption of the autonomy of reason, Hobbes's materialism compels us to rethink what we mean by the concept of determinism. Although in all likelihood not many contemporary theorists would claim that our thoughts, desires, and actions emerge solely from a source within us—a true self, a pure soul—there is a general theoretical reluctance to think about determinism because our habits of thinking and our conceptual vocabulary make determinism something of a thief: it seems to steal our agency, our sense of our personal effectiveness, or our ability to proclaim, “It is *I* who did this.”³⁰ In other words, a deterministic materialism such as Hobbes's is presumed to position subjects as utterly passive objects of forces that are unilinear in their movements, totalizing in their effects, and beyond any one person's control. As I argue in Chapter 3, however, Hobbes's materialism is irreducible to the deterministic, mechanistic models of it.³¹ In fact, his account of determinism disrupts the binarism of free will and determination that is central to the Kantian formulation of the problem of freedom and necessity that in many respects conditions our aversion to deterministic theories of willing and action.³² What distinguishes Hobbes's determinism from the kinds of determinism to which many theorists feel allergic is his attention to the temporality of the subject. To preview the argument, for Hobbes, each particular person embodies a particular lived history, the causal trajectory of which is distinct from the history and series of historical determinants in the world in which he or she moves. Action occurs at moments when these temporal and causal trajectories coincide. According to Hobbes's analysis, although each of these trajectories is determined by prior causes, the conjunctions or points of contact between them that produce action are unpredictable and indeterminable. So, although each action is, in fact, determined, each is also distinctive and creative.

As the formulations in the sketch of determinism begin to indicate, Hobbes's arguments about willing and action displace the notion that the individual is the single origin of his or her action. Instead, they foreground the combined effects of memories, other people, and contexts upon individuals' plans, desires, and actions. Importantly, such an analysis of the thoroughly intersubjective and material constituents of our selves entails

a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between self and others and more particularly of the ethical imperatives that should guide our interactions. Hobbes's ethics is generally read through the presupposition that the subject is a rational, autonomous individual.³³ In some cases, Hobbes is seen as having portrayed ethical activity as selfless compliance with rationally derived principles. His ethics is understood here as a precursor to a Kantian deontic account of duty.³⁴ In other cases, Hobbes is seen as having portrayed ethical activity as obedience to imperatives that are the product of a reasoned and self-interested consideration of a structure of disincentives. In this view, prudential advisories are elevated to the status of moral dictate on the command of the sovereign.³⁵ However, Hobbes's materialist portrayal of thinking, desire, and action both displaces the individual and makes it impossible to isolate reason as a single determinant of action. Accordingly, his ethics entails neither that individuals adhere in their actions to rational rules nor that they consider their own advantage as if in opposition to that of others. Rather, as I elaborate in Chapter 4, Hobbes's ethics enjoins people to attend to their relations with others through time. More precisely, he calls on us to consider how our relations with others bear on the prospects for peace. For him, the pursuit of peace is, or at least should be, our primary ethical concern.

Hobbes's portrayal of the intersubjective and material conditions of thinking, desire, and action also requires that we rethink his account of power. We generally conceive of Hobbesian power as a brute capacity for exploitation and domination, a resource in a zero-sum game in which gains to one's advantage are necessarily a loss to another's disadvantage. The political story entailed by such an understanding of power—a story that is not coincidentally the iconographic Hobbesian story of conflict—is one in which the scramble to acquire power produces splintering chaos, war, and the need for a superior power to quiet and quell the anxious and violent tumult. However, as I argue in Chapter 5, with his materialist portrayal of thinking, desire, and action, Hobbes refigures power not as something that an individual might have or acquire to the detriment of another but rather as the conditions for action. At once drawing upon and affirming his analysis of the intersubjective nature of our thoughts and passions, Hobbes portrays power as arising from as well as consolidating our interdependence. Giving a social and political elaboration of the heteronomous

character of action, Hobbes proposes that power is the conjunction of the individual, social, and contextual causes that both prompt an action and enable the realization of a person's initiative in the form of an effect.³⁶ In other words, power conceived as the conditions for action comprises not only people's particular capacities but also their relations with one another through time and the material environment in which together they act and interact. In fact, Hobbes's various discussions of power suggest that, in his view, neither individuals nor the sovereign can act except with the assistance or cooperation of others. His insight into this profound interdependence reinforces his claim that the effort to foster the conditions for peace must be at the center of everything we do.

Before moving ahead to elaborate the argument of this book in its detail, let me address a set of questions that inevitably will press because of the book's focus on embodiment. In contemporary theoretical scholarship, and especially in feminist, critical race, and queer theory, a focus on embodiment involves careful attention to the norms, institutions, and discursive practices through which gendered, racialized, and sexualized subjectivities are produced. That is to say, the body is considered to be a node in a network of power relations in and through which identities are specified, reiterated, and contested. For theorists engaged in such work, the body is rarely considered as simply "the body," as if there were a singular and generic phenomenon about which general statements could be made. Rather, a body is construed as knowable or conceivable only in terms of its political specificities: a body is always a particular kind of body, a product of historically specific relations of gender, racial, and sexual power. For political theorists, this emphasis on the specificity of bodies has entailed analysis of the ways in which explicit statements as well as ideas implicit in a text's logics, paralogisms, silences, and asides produce forms of embodied subjectivity that instantiate, explain, and justify social and political inequalities. Given such theoretical practice, to read Hobbes's arguments about materiality and bodies without searching for their gender, racial, or sexual implications seems to be a sign of political obtuseness and naïveté if not willful stupidity. One might ask: does one not elide a history of rich political insight in reading Hobbes's claims about "body" at face value and without suspicion? Shouldn't one presume, as some feminists have done, that Hobbesian "body" is figuratively female? that what Hobbes says about

embodiment might well serve as a signpost to the gendered, racial, and sexual presumptions that underwrite his political vision?³⁷

These are important questions. But my sense of Hobbes's materialism is that to use such categories of analysis in reading his work is actually to circumscribe rather than to open up the possibilities for political insight. It is quite clear that for Hobbes the category "body" is not implicitly feminine or racially marked for exclusion: for him, the entire universe—and everything in it—is body, or matter. To presume out of habit that this broad claim is best read as a clue to uncover his production of sexualized or racialized forms of subjectivity seems to me to reaffirm the very associations that critical theorists seek to challenge.³⁸ Indeed, Hobbes's materialist insistence on every subject's thoroughgoing embodiedness, his dismantling of the myth of the self-sovereign individual, and his account of the complexities of social relations and political action suggest that we might learn more about power, inequality, and the pernicious effects of dualistic thinking by reading his claims about embodiment as broadly ontological rather than as surreptitiously and narrowly normative.

To put the point another way, this book does not take the body as the target of representation and the repository of symbolic meaning nor does it analyze the panoply of forces and the forms of violence that produce identities and make particular bodies socially or politically intelligible (or unintelligible). Rather, this book takes the body as it lives, experiences, negotiates, creates, and rejects different aspects of the social and material world in which it exists. It is concerned with the phenomenology of material subjectivity, with the possibility of providing a coherent account of how a wholly material organism perceives, engages, and moves around in a wholly material world.³⁹

As we shall see, what emerges from this rereading of Hobbes's philosophical and political work is a radically different picture of this notorious thinker. Because the figure of the autonomous, rational individual is not at the center of his theory, his work cannot really be counted as liberal or even protoliberal. This is not to say that in Hobbes's thinking, individuals and their identities are subsumed to and merely a precipitate of an organic community.⁴⁰ Hobbes acknowledges the singularity—or what Richard Flathman calls the "unicity"—of each individual.⁴¹ The issue is that, in his view, individuals are not discrete actors. To the contrary, his

work demands that we think of individuals—and their thoughts, desires, and actions—in terms of their relation to and effect upon the collective of which they are inevitably a part. Indeed, Hobbes's analysis of our intersubjectivity and our interdependence points to the dailiness of the actions through which we affirm and reaffirm the extant political order—and through which we might disrupt it.⁴² In other words, his materialist analysis of power prompts us to think of him not as giving us an origins story but rather as giving us an anatomy or a constitutional analysis of a peaceful polity. This very anatomy foregrounds the complex networks of mutually transformative relations between the material environment, the social and political contexts of our actions, and ourselves. In so highlighting the relationships that are both the condition and the consequence of our actions, Hobbes's work pushes us to reject the narrow instrumentalism in relation to natural and social resources that he has heretofore been thought to advance. To the contrary, through his materialism, Hobbes provokes us to consider carefully the extent to which our current actions will nourish or destroy the economic, political, and environmental conditions of possibility for our actions in the near as well as the distant future.