

Politics and *Salus Populi*: Hobbes and the Sovereign as Physician of the State

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In his masterpiece *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes used a series of rhetorical devices in order to persuade the English reader of the truth of his political theories and of his civil science. The first rhetorical device is the engraved frontispiece of the book, where the sword of justice held by the sovereign is also a powerful sword of rhetoric (as shown by the table depicting Rhetoric in a Martianus Capella's manuscript owned by the Duke of Urbino). Moreover, Hobbes employs *directly* the metaphor of the state as a body politic and the analogy of the sovereign as the soul of the state and he also refers—though *indirectly*—to the Platonic analogy of the sovereign as physician of the state, evoking political thinkers, such as King James VI & I and Edward Forset.

Keywords: Hobbes, Plato, Forset, James VI & I, rhetoric, body politic, diseases of the body politic, physician of the body politic, the safety of the people (*salus populi*)

“Salus populi (the *people's safety*) its [the sovereign's] *business*”
“*Salus populi, pro negotio*”
(Hobbes, 1651, Introduction)

“The end of [the subjects's] obedience is protection”
“*Obedientiae finis est protectio*”
(Hobbes, 1651, Introduction, Chapter XXI)

The choice of the subject¹ for this research paper has been made as a result of the present situation, with a pandemic that resembles in its effects the tragic plague of Athens described by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* that was translated by Thomas Hobbes.

The philosopher of Malmesbury has become very popular during the Coronavirus pandemic, and his theories related to authority and liberty, and the connection between the two, have been quoted by several scholars and journalists in various articles and books: beginning with the article published in *The Guardian* by David Runciman of the University of Cambridge, entitled “Coronavirus has not suspended politics—it has

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revealed the nature of power” (27 March 2020); up to the latest text: *In the Realm of Corona Normativities. A Momentary Snapshot of a Dynamic Discourse*, a text of various authors edited by Werner Gephart and financed by the German Ministry for Education and Research (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2020).

Given the Hobbes-related rhetoric of the present Coronavirus crisis, we might even say that Hobbes has become “the philosopher of pandemic”.

In this context, it is not inappropriate to deal with a subject, such as politics and medicine, and the metaphor of the sovereign as physician of the state.

In reality, Hobbes does not use the expression “the Sovereign as Physician of the State”, but my thesis is that this metaphor emerges from his own argument in *Leviathan*.

My aim is to show that Hobbes wanted to re-create this specific image in the mind of the learned reader, and, in so doing, he referred *indirectly* to this classical image—emerging especially from Plato’s dialogues and made familiar by Renaissance philosophers and political thinkers, one of them being no less than King James VI & I (1604) who defined the king as “the proper Phisician of his Politicke-bodie” in *A Counterblaste to Tobacco*.

In his masterpiece of political science, *Leviathan*, Hobbes wanted to influence his own age and especially the politics of his own country. In order to do so, he used the powerfully persuasive weapons and devices of rhetorical language. As highlighted by Professor Quentin Skinner in his important study *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*: “Although Hobbes continued to pursue his scientific aspirations in *Leviathan*, he undoubtedly exhibits a new willingness in this final version of his civil philosophy to combine the methods of science with the persuasive force of eloquence” (Skinner, 1996, p. 343).

In order to capture the minds of the learned English, Hobbes was prepared to employ rhetorical tools and the very first device he used was the image engraved in the frontispiece of the book. This is a depiction of the Hobbesian Commonwealth, evoking the ancient analogy of the city as *body politic*, found in Plato’s political dialogues, in Aristotle’s *Politics* and in many subsequent works leading, through the Middle Ages, to the Late Renaissance (Hale, 1971).

In what follows, I will try to show how Hobbes used the metaphor of the “body politic” and also the sub-analogies of the sovereign as the “soul” of the body politic itself and as “physician” of the Commonwealth/State, referring to the first two *directly* and evoking the third only *indirectly* through the analogy of the diseased body politic and the sovereign as the provider of the health (*concordia*) and safety of the people (*salus populi*).

In fact, through instruction, justice, and good laws (“in the making and executing of good laws, to which individual persons may apply their own cases”, Hobbes, 1651, XXX, p. 2)—the sovereign attends to the subjects’ protection and well-being.

Hobbes is very clear about the fundamental *office* of the sovereign; “office” meaning both its duty (from the Latin *officium*) and its job—as indicated by the expression found in the Introduction: “*salus populi* (the people’s safety) its *business*” (in Latin: *negotium*). In Hobbes’s own words:

The office of the sovereign, be it a monarch or an assembly, consisteth in the end for which he was trusted with the sovereign power, namely the procuration of *the safety of the people*, to which he is obliged by the law of nature, and to render an account thereof to God, the author of that law, and to none but him. But by safety here, is not meant a bare preservation, but also all other contentments of life, which every man by lawful industry, without danger, or hurt to the commonwealth, shall acquire to himself. (Hobbes, 1651, XXX, p. 1)

This affirmation is perfectly symmetrical with the end of the construction of Commonwealth, as Hobbes had stated seven Chapters before, at the very beginning of the second part:

The final cause, end, or design of men (who naturally love liberty, and dominion over others) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, in which we see them live in commonwealths, is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby. (Hobbes, 1651, XVII, p. 1)

Self-preservation and the possibility of living a good life is indeed the aim of all particular men when they authorize a sovereign to rule (Commonwealth by institution) or when they subject themselves to an external winner and former enemy (Commonwealth by acquisition); “the end of obedience is protection” (Hobbes, 1651, XXI, p. 21). It is important to emphasize that the Hobbesian sovereign, though entrusted with an absolute power, is not a sort of totalitarian tyrant, since it is bound to obey the laws of nature and to follow the moral principle of equity (Curran, 2007; 2019):

The safety of the people, requireth further, from him, or them that have the sovereign power, that justice be equally administered to all degrees of people; that is, that as well the rich, and mighty, as poor and obscure persons, may be righted of the injuries done them; so as the great, may have no greater hope of impunity, when they do violence, dishonour, or any injury to the meaner sort, than when one of these, does the like to one of them: for in this consisteth equity; to which, as being a precept of the law of nature, a sovereign is as much subject, as any of the meanest of his people. [...] The consequences of this partiality towards the great, proceed in this manner. Impunity maketh insolence; insolence, hatred; and hatred, an endeavour to pull down all oppressing and contumelious greatness, though with the ruin of the commonwealth.[...] To equal justice, appertaineth also the equal imposition of taxes. (Hobbes, 1651, XXX, pp. 15-17)

The Hobbesian sovereign is not a tyrant; it resembles instead a Platonic philosopher-ruler who applies justice and the idea of the Good to the laws of the city.

Hobbes does not refer to Plato (“the best philosopher of the Greeks”) very frequently, but he does that in some significant passages, such as in the following, closing the second part of the book (“Of Commonwealth”) just before opening the third (“Of a Christian Commonwealth”), where he compares his *Leviathan* to Plato’s *Republic*:

And thus far concerning the constitution, nature, and right of sovereigns; and concerning the duty of subjects, derived from the principles of natural reason. And now, considering how different this doctrine is, from the practice of the greatest part of the world, especially of these western parts, that have received their moral learning from Rome, and Athens; and how much depth of moral philosophy is required, in them that have the administration of the sovereign power; I am at the point of believing this my labour, as useless, as the Commonwealth of Plato; for he also is of opinion that it is impossible for the disorders of state, and change of governments by civil war, ever to be taken away, till sovereigns be philosophers. (Hobbes, 1651, XXXI, p. 41)

Hobbes aims at persuading the reader of *Leviathan* of the truth of his political theory and the very first *visual* tool he employs is the engraved frontispiece, showing the figure of a crowned giant who holds in his hands the sword of justice and the religious crozier, wearing an armour made by little subjects “embodied” in the upper part of the sovereign’s body (Skinner, 2018, pp. 222-315).

Since he wishes to reinforce science with rhetoric, the singular position of the sword of justice in the sovereign’s hand is probably *also* a visual reference to the sword of rhetoric.

The sword of rhetoric is depicted in the same position, held by Rhetoric herself, in the table inserted as an illustration of one of the seven liberal arts in Martianus Capella’s manuscript of the *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii—The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, meaning the marriage of science and eloquence (Capella, 1977).

This is the structure of the book: Book I: *The Betrothal of Philology and Mercury*; Book II: *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*; Book III: *Grammar*; Book IV: *Dialectic*; Book V: *Rhetoric*; Book VI: *Geometry*; Book VII: *Arithmetic*; Book VIII: *Astronomy*; Book IX: *Harmony [Music]*.

The illustrations of the seven liberal arts first appear in the precious manuscript copy prepared for the library of the Duke of Urbino, Federico di Montefeltro, at the end of Quattrocento (Peruzzi, 2008; 2014). The codicological situation being: Antigraph: Ms. Laurenziano S. Marco 190: 11st century; copy: Vat. Urb. Lat. 359—for the Duke of Urbino, Federico di Montefeltro: 1474-'82; copy: Marcianus Lat. Cl. XIV 35—for the king of Hungary, Matthias Corvinus: *around* 1490; copy: Laurent. Pl. 51, 13—for the “Signore” of Florence, Lorenzo de’ Medici: *around* 1490 (Labriola, 2008).

Accompanying the illustration of rhetoric, included as a table within the manuscript of Urbino together with the other liberal arts (MS Urb. Lat. 329 f 64v—preserved in the Apostolic Vatican Library), we find this inscription:

Rethorica gladio ceu pugnans tenor acuto,
 Causas civiles dirimens hominum quoque lites,
 Pro veris callens interdum falsa reponens;
 Fraus in fraude latet, simplex in simplice claret.
 Tullius in topicis fert imme premia laudis,
 Verbi astutus ceut egminelincisopertus.
 Suprascriptarum sum tercia quippe sororum:
 Heque non promunt, per me cursim patefiunt.

I, Rhetoric, I am depicted as a fighter holding a sharp sword,
 while settling civil causes as well as men’s disputes,
 being an expert in truth and sometimes repelling falsehood;
 deception is hidden in deception, loyalty lights up in loyalty.
 Tullius [Cicero] in his *Topics* offers me the rewards of glory,
 shrewd in the word as covered in a lynx pelt.
 I am certainly the third of the sisters mentioned above [Grammar, Dialectic, Rhetoric]:
 and these do not show themselves: through me, they are quickly revealed.

The manuscript circulated widely in the courts of Italy and Europe and we may suppose that Hobbes—who visited Venice and other cities as well as their bookshops—was aware of the meaning of the sword of rhetoric, shown in that particular gesture, in the right hand of the liberal art (“I, Rhetoric, I am depicted as a fighter holding a sharp sword, while settling civil causes as well as men’s disputes”) and that the sword of justice in the frontispiece of *Leviathan* was also a visual reference to this sword: “The sword of justice being also a sword of rhetoric”.

Another element that the two figures—one female, one masculine—have in common is the crown, that in the frontispiece of *Leviathan*, represents sovereignty (see below: (**)).

However, as already mentioned, sovereignty cannot stand and operate in the State unless it is supported by the power of eloquence and rhetoric. In this case, too, Hobbes is in line with Plato. In the *Phaedrus*, in particular, we find a critique to rhetoric, which seeks persuasion, in favour of dialectic, which is *philosophy* seeking the truth. But Plato is forced to admit the power of rhetoric:

[Socrates speaking to Phaedrus] But could it be, my friend, that we have mocked the art of speaking more rudely that it deserves? For it might perhaps reply, “What bizarre nonsense! Look, I am not forcing anyone to learn how to make

speeches without knowing the truth; on the contrary, my advice, for what it is worth, is to take me up only after mastering the truth. But I do make this boast: even someone who knows the truth couldn't produce conviction on the basis of a systematic art without me. (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 260D)

Hobbes is aware of this—translating Aristotle, in *A Briefe of the Art of Rhetorique*, he defines this art as “that Faculty, by which we understand what will serve our turne, concerning any subject, to winne beliefe in the hearer” (I, p. 2); and he adds: “The end of *Rhetorique* is victory; which consists in having gotten *beleefe*” (I, p. 3)—and he is probably is thinking of the *Phaedrus* when in the “Review and Conclusion” of *Leviathan*, he writes that he wants to employ the power of eloquence too in order to fortify civil science, but he does not make an explicit reference to Plato quoting his dialogue. In fact, he is coherent with his own stylistic choice: “That I have neglected the ornament of quoting ancient poets, orators, and philosophers, contrary to the custom of late time, (whether I have done well or ill in it,) proceedeth from my judgement, grounded on many reasons” (Hobbes, 1651, *Review & Conclusion*, p. 15).

It is precisely the unconventional choice of not citing ancient and modern authors (with one exception to the rule: the long refutation of Cardinal Bellarmino's theses in the forty-second chapter) and therefore proceeding with *pure* philosophical reasoning, which conveys the meaning of a *scientific* and *non-doxographic* philosophical writing (that is not historical or poetic but *logical*). Despite this, Hobbes is prepared to evoke in the mind of the reader some familiar images and tropes.

Political philosophy is, for Hobbes, a science in so far as it is “the knowledge of consequences”. This *scientiacivilis* investigates the properties (“accidents”) of the state; more precisely, as we read in the table annexed to Chapter IX in the English version of *Leviathan*: “the consequences from the accidents of *politic* bodies”.

In fact, the metaphor he uses is that of the body politic—artificially created by men—as similar to the natural *human* body. We find here the image of the artificer that in the mind of the learned reader in the 17th century must have evoked another dialogue by Plato: the *Timaeus* (Santi, 2014).

In the “Introduction” of *Leviathan*, Hobbes explains the human *artificial* creation of the state using a metaphor. It is useful to consider the elements that he puts forward in a synoptic way:

The artificer → Man

The production → through Covenants

(“the *pacts* and *covenants*, by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together, and united”) (**)

The art → Natural Laws (the principles of Politics/Civil science)

The artefact → the Commonwealth or State/*Civitas* (Artificial Man/Mortal God)

made of *sovereign* (king or assembly) and *subjects*

both having *rights* and *duties*

The end → “protection and defence” of the natural man

The model imitated:

The Creator → God

The Creation → through the *Fiat* (given the omnipotence of God)

(“*Fiat*, or the *let us make man*, pronounced by God in the creation”) (**)

The art → Nature (“the art whereby God hath made and governs the world”)

The artefact → the world

Man as the “rational and most excellent work of nature”

(**) To produce / create means to give life:

“life is but a motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal part within”.

And in this Commonwealth as “body politic”

(mixing here the elements of comparison in the Introduction with those found in chapters XXII-XXIV):

the *sovereignty* → is an artificial *soul*, as giving life and motion to the whole body; (**)

the *magistrates*, and other *officers* of judicature and execution → are artificial *joints*;

the *public ministers* → are the *organs*;

the *systems* (including subordinate bodies politic) → are the *muscles*;

reward and *punishment* (by which fastened to the seat of the sovereignty, every joint and member is moved to perform his duty) → are the *nerves*, that do the same in the body natural;

money → is the *blood*;

the *wealth* and *riches* of all the particular members → is the *strength*;

counsellors, by whom all things needful for it to know, are suggested unto it → are the *memory*;

equity → is an artificial *reason*;

laws → are an artificial *will*;

salus populi (the *people’s safety*) → is its *business*;

concord → *health*;

sedition → *sickness*;

civil war → *death*.

(**) Three quotations about sovereignty as the *soul* giving life to the body politic:

1. The sovereignty is the soul of the commonwealth; which once departed from the body, the members do no more receive their motion from it. (Hobbes, 1651, XXI, p. 21)

2. For the sovereign, is the public soul, giving life and motion to the commonwealth; which expiring, the members are governed by it no more, than the carcass of a man, by his departed (though immortal) soul. (Hobbes, 1651, XXIX, p. 23)

3. [...] the sovereign, which is the soul of the commonwealth; which failing, the commonwealth is dissolved into a civil war, no one man so much as cohering to another, for want of a common dependence on a known sovereign; just as the members of the natural body dissolve into earth, for want of a soul to hold them together. (Hobbes, 1651, XLII, p. 125)

We must distinguish what Hobbes actually writes *expressis verbis* from what he refers to indirectly, through evoking an idea, an image or a notion in the mind of the reader. He asserts that the sovereign is like a *soul*, “the soul of the commonwealth” (sovereignty being “an artificial soul”) but he also wants to evoke the idea of the sovereign as *physician* of the Commonwealth.

The (told) simile of the sovereign as soul and the (untold) simile of the sovereign as physician of the State are framed by the wider metaphor of the body politic resembling the natural (human) body.

The main classical reference is again Plato. In the 10th book of his late dialogue in 12 books, *The Laws*, we find a description of the soul as the principle of movement and a reference to the Statesmen as physicians:

[Athenian] Haven’t we got ourselves a satisfactory proof that soul is identical with the original source of the generation and motion of all past, present and future things and their contraries? After all, it has been shown to be the cause of all change and motion in everything. (Plato, *Laws*, X, p. 896)

[Athenian] Take a doctor who has been given the entire body to treat. Will he ever get good results if he neglects the individual limbs and tiny parts, in spite of being willing and able to look after the major organs?

[Clinias] No, never.

[Athenian] Nor yet will helmsmen or generals or householders, nor “statesmen” or anybody of that ilk, succeed in major day-to-day matters if they neglect occasional details. You know how even masons say the big stones don’t lie well without the small ones. (Plato, *Laws*, X, p. 902)

Also, in the *Republic* (III, 389B and V, 459CD), Socrates calls the rulers physicians of the city. It is however in the *Statesman* that Plato makes the more extensive use of the analogy *politikós—iatrós*:

[Visitor] On this principle it is men who possess the art of ruling and these only whom we are to regard as rulers. It makes no difference whether their subjects be willing or unwilling; they may rule with or without a written codes of laws, they may be poor or wealthy. It is the same with doctors. We do not assess the medical qualification of a doctor by the degree of willingness or unwillingness on our part to submit to his knife or cautery or other painful treatment. Doctors are still doctors whether they work according to written rules or without them, and whether they be poor or wealthy. So long as they control our health on a scientific basis, they may purge and reduce us or they may build us up, but they still remain doctors. The one essential condition is that they act for the good of our bodies to make them better instead of worse, and treat men’s ailments in every case as healers acting to preserve life. We must insist, I think, that this alone constitutes the true criterion of the science of medicine—and of any other true art of ruling as well. (Plato, 1992, pp. 64-65)

In late Renaissance England, it is King James VI & I who re-uses the analogy in *A Counterblaste to Tobacco*, published in 1604 and again in 1616 within the monumental book *The Workes*. For him, the king is “the proper Phisician of his Politicke-bodie” (James VI & I, 1616, p. 212).

The analogy is also used at length by Edward Forset (1553?-1630) in *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politic* (1606), a text well known to Hobbes, which inspired the frontispiece of *Leviathan* (as shown by Prior, 2004). We find Forset’s book listed in the *Old catalogue* of the Hardwick Library of the Cavendishes compiled by Hobbes himself (Talaska, 2013, p. 83).

Forset describes the “Soveraigne[...]” as the principall Phisicion for the redressing or remedying the maladies of the bodie politique” and considers at length the diseases of the body politicon (pp. 62-94), which constitute nearly one third of the book. The solution to political problems lies in good government and the sovereign is seen as “the principall Phisicions” of the State, while the governors are a sort of subordinates physicians or “subphisicions” (Forset, 1606, pp. 73-74).

In Forset’s view, “The political Phisicion [...] from the axioms & conclusions of learning, he doe so aplice his cogitations to the discrepance of occasions”, using “Discretion in state business” (Forset, 1606, pp. 87-88). Forset thinks that the statesman must be an “Anatomist”, one who knows perfectly the anatomy of the body politic, and a “rationall Phisicion”, one who knows what medicine must be given, to whom, and when—whereas “the rash unskilful Empiricke” physician may risk finding a cure that is worse than the disease (Forset, 1606, pp. 79, 86).

Like Forset, who uses the king-physician similitude, and compares the illness of the body politic to those of the natural body, in Chapter XXIX of *Leviathan*, Hobbes discusses the *infirmities* of the Commonwealth (*), sometimes comparing them to the real diseases of the natural body.

(*) *Infirmities*

“The greatest”:

Want of absolute power—Private judgment of good and evil—Erroneous conscience—Pretence of inspiration—Subjecting the sovereign power to civil laws—Attributing of absolute propriety to

subjects—Dividing of the sovereign power—Imitation of neighbour nations—Imitation of Greeks and Romans (regicide)—Ghostly (spiritual) authority against the civil—Mixed government;

“Not so great; which nevertheless are not unfit to be observed”:

Want of money—Monopolies, and abuses of publicans—Popular men—Excessive greatness of towns—Multitude of corporations—Liberty of disputing against sovereign power—Insatiable appetite of enlarging the dominion (*boulimia*).

Among the serious diseases listed by Hobbes, the most quoted by scholars is that of *hydrophobia*, which corresponds to *tyrannophobia* (an obsessive fear of the tyrant) in the body politic. This political disease ends in the killing of the king—this killing being nothing but an unlawful regicide masked as a lawful tyrannicide (Santi, 2019).

Another infirmity is the *epilepsy* of the body politic deriving from the pernicious idea that there is a temporal (*civil*) authority and also a spiritual (*ghostly*) authority, being like two souls in one and the same Commonwealth. And when “these two powers oppose one another, the Commonwealth cannot but be in great danger of civil war and dissolution”. Hobbes explains:

And this is a disease which not unfitly may be compared to the epilepsy, or falling sickness (which the Jews took to be one kind of possession by spirits) in the body natural. For as in this disease, there is an unnatural spirit, or wind in the head that obstructeth the roots of the nerves, and moving them violently, taketh the motion which naturally they should have from the power of the soul in the brain, thereby causeth violent, and irregular motions (which men call convulsions) in the parts; insomuch as he that is seized therewith, falleth down sometimes into the water, and sometimes into the fire, as a man deprived of his senses; so also in the body politic, when the spiritual power, moveth the members of a commonwealth, by the terror of punishments, and hope of rewards (which are the nerves of it,) otherwise than by the civil power (which is the soul of the commonwealth) they ought to be moved; and by strange, and hard words suffocates their understanding, it must needs thereby distract the people, and either overwhelm the commonwealth with oppression, or cast it into the fire of a civil war. (Hobbes XXIX, p. 15)

The *pharmakón*, the antidote and the cure for the diseases of the body politic is exactly the civil philosophy explained by Hobbes in the *Leviathan*. Thus, the Hobbesian sovereign (king or assembly) is a sort of “philosopher-ruler” and “physician of the State”.

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