

Materialism

For S.A. Lloyd (ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Hobbes*
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Corrected version, 6 December 2011

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first person cited using ‘materialist’ is Henry More, in whose 1668 *Divine Dialogues* one character is described as “A young, witty, and well-moralized Materialist”. In his 1659 *The Immortality of the Soul* More had argued at length against “Mr. Hobbs, that confident Exploder of *Immaterial Substances* out of the world”.¹ Hobbes was not the only materialist in seventeenth-century England, but he was undoubtedly a prominent one, and one whose philosophical views had been developed in a detailed and public way. For More and other philosophers, Hobbesian materialism was something that had to be taken seriously, however misguided it appeared.

One might think of the debate over materialism as the debate over whether human beings have an incorporeal soul. Hobbes, the materialist, said ‘no’, while his opponents said ‘yes’. Characterized in this way, the debate is exemplified by Descartes’s *Meditations*, Hobbes’s Objections to them, and Descartes’s Replies. Descartes argued prominently that human beings are (in part) incorporeal thinking substances. Hobbes opposed this, apparently arguing that “the mind will be nothing more than motion occurring in various parts of an organic body”.²

There are other issues to attend to in characterizing the debate. One is a question of scope. If someone is a materialist, what are they a materialist about? Human beings? All of nature? God as well? Secondly, there is a question of what the material or corporeal is, and how to distinguish it from the immaterial or incorporeal. Hobbes, like Descartes, thought that incorporeal substances would be unextended ones. Hobbes’s critic More, however, thought that incorporeal substances would be extended too, and the key differences between the corporeal and the incorporeal concerned divisibility.

Hobbes’s materialism broadened in scope over time. This is revealed most dramatically by his changing claims about God. In his Objections to the *Meditations*, Hobbes said that “we have no idea of God, and [...] God cannot be conceived of”.³ God, in the Objections, is a being of a truly mysterious nature. Later in his career, however, in the 1662 *Answer to Bramhall’s The Catching of Leviathan*, Hobbes described God as “a most pure, simple, invisible spirit corporeal. By corporeal I mean a substance that has magnitude”.⁴ Hobbes’s materialism had thus reached the point of including even God. One might even argue that it had reached this point by 1651, and the English edition of *Leviathan*. Certainly there are suggestions of materialism about God there, though there are also suggestions of Hobbes’s earlier view that God is mysterious to us.⁵

¹ Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (London, 1659), p. 64.

² CSM 2.126.

³ CSM 2.133.

⁴ EW 4.313.

⁵ These discussions are further complicated by the need to consider the view that Hobbes in fact was an atheist, and his talk about God thus not to be taken literally.

God aside, Hobbes appears to have been a thoroughgoing materialist by the time of *Leviathan*.⁶ Human beings and all the rest of nature were, for him, merely bodies in motion. This suggests many questions about how various features of the world – most notably, human thought – arise from the motions of bodies. Hobbes was convinced that there were materialist answers to these questions, even if he did not know all the details. But why was Hobbes a materialist? Did he have any arguments for his materialism?

There is an implicit argument for materialism in texts in which Hobbes presents a story about how human beings and their minds work. In those texts, such as the early chapters of *Leviathan*, Hobbes attempts to explain all the functions of the human mind without any reference to incorporeal substances. The best and simplest explanation invokes only the corporeal.

There are various other arguments, or suggestions of them, scattered throughout Hobbes's work. Several involve the notions of conceivability and signification. See for instance the comment that “*though* men may put together words of contradictory signification, as *spirit*, and *incorporeal*; yet they can never have the imagination of any thing answering to them”.⁷ We think, according to Hobbes, using the imagination. But it is impossible to have an image, mental or otherwise, of an incorporeal substance: that would be an image of an unextended thing. Thus Hobbes apparently thinks that, despite appearances, we cannot believe in incorporeal substances, because we cannot think about them. Another argument involving the signification of words appears later in *Leviathan*: “*substance* and *body*, signify the same thing; and therefore *substance incorporeal* are words, which when they are joined together, destroy one another, as if a man should say, an *incorporeal body*”.⁸ One puzzle here – one that More raises, in fact – is that this argument seems to assume the truth of materialism, in order to support the premise that ‘substance’ and ‘body’ signify the same thing.⁹

One can find other arguments elsewhere in Hobbes's work. More, for instance, thought that Hobbes's deflationary explanations of ghosts, visions, and other supernatural phenomena involved arguments for materialism.¹⁰ Hobbes argued explicitly against Aristotelian beliefs in incorporeal substances.¹¹

Perhaps, however, the most striking thing about Hobbes's materialism is not any of those arguments, but simply that fact that he was so strongly convinced that this must be the right way to understand human beings.

⁶ In the earlier *Objections to the Meditations*, the *anima* – “something within the human body which gives it the animal motion by means of which it has sensations and moves” (CSM II.129) – is apparently in the same category as God, being a mysterious thing that we nevertheless know to exist.

⁷ *Leviathan* 12.7.

⁸ *Leviathan* 34.1.

⁹ More, *Immortality*, p.64.

¹⁰ See for instance the discussion of *De Corpore* 25.9 in *Immateriality*, pp. 65-7.

¹¹ *Leviathan*, Latin edition 46.17.

Further Reading

Stewart Duncan, "Hobbes's Materialism in the Early 1640s", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13 (2005), 437-48.

Samantha Frost, *Lessons from a Materialist Thinker: Hobbesian Reflections on Ethics and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

Thomas Holden, *The Architecture of Matter: Galileo to Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).