“Experience Concludeth Nothing Universally:”
Hobbes and the Groundwork for a Political Theory of Risk

Emily C. Nacol
Vanderbilt University

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On the heels of Thomas Hobbes’ famous depiction of the “natural condition of mankind” in *Leviathan*’s Chapter XIII comes an everyday example meant to secure the assent of his less philosophical readers. Hobbes notes that it may not yet seem obvious that people are thrown into a condition of profound insecurity without an absolute sovereign to rule by law and force, even after working through *Leviathan* XIII’s detailed, scientific analysis of the causes of conflict in the absence of strong authority. For the reader, however, a brief pause to consider his own daily practices should reinforce the veracity of Hobbes’ scientific proof. Should he resist the implications of *Leviathan*’s scientific account of the causes of war and its accompanying description of life under these conditions, Hobbes issues to him the following challenge:

Let him therefore consider with himself—when taking a journey, he arms himself, and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his doors; when even in his house, he locks his chests, and this when he knows there be laws, and public officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall be done him—what opinion he has of his fellow subjects, his children and servants, when he locks his chests. Does

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1 Chapter-in-progress. This is a draft of the second chapter of a longer book project, *Governing Risk: Politics and Economy in Early Modern Britain*. Please do not cite or circulate this draft without permission. Comments are very welcome and can be sent to emily.c.nacol@vanderbilt.edu.
he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions, as I do by my words? (L. XIII.10)

This representation of the daily, perhaps even somewhat unconscious, habits of a prudent citizen in *Leviathan* XIII points to the core pairing that motivates Hobbes’ political theory of the state—the relationship between uncertainty and political insecurity. For Hobbes, life in an improperly ruled commonwealth is profoundly uncertain and thus feels dangerous, and moreover, this passage suggests that he expects all readers also know it to be such in a commonsensical way. Chapter XIII’s prepared citizen is not experiencing a robbery in any of the given scenarios, nor is he even sure he will meet with harm. Rather, he is facing uncertainty about what will happen to him at the hands of his fellows. To cope with the fear and anxiety uncertainty generates, he deploys assorted strategies for preventing the theft he anticipates, perhaps based on unfortunate past experiences or knowledge of harms done to others. In other words, he is relying on a personal, makeshift account of a fundamentally unknowable future as a guide for anticipation, action, and control.

The anxieties that haunt this particular citizen, here figured as a stand-in for the reader, are really not so different from those Hobbes predicts will affect all of the members of a poorly governed polity in *Leviathan* XIII, that is, one that is not held together under the auspices of absolute rule. This citizen’s prudential practices suggest that, from past experiences, he has cobbled together the same perspective on common life that Hobbes aims to present with more scientific clarity—that humans fear each another and feel compelled to plan for the possibility of harm and violence in the future. Inexact prudence and Hobbes’ more precise account of vulnerability and conflict can lead

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2 For citations of Hobbes’ work, I will adhere to the following shorthand:
- *Behemoth* will be cited as *B*, followed by page number.
- *De Corpore* will be cited as *DC*, followed by book and chapter.
- *Elements of Law* will be cited as *EL* followed by book, chapter and paragraph.
- *Leviathan* will be cited as *L*, followed by chapter and paragraph.
- The introductory materials to Hobbes’ translation of *The Peloponnesian War* will be cited as *TPW*, followed by page number.
readers to identify the same challenge in the future—self-preservation in the face of profound uncertainty and insecurity. As such, in chapter XIII, Hobbes draws on two forms of political knowledge—the experiential and the scientific.

But, upon further reflection, the mutually supportive relationship between Hobbes’ scientific rendering of the natural condition and his representation of the cautious citizen also exposes a real difference in the types of evidence Hobbes is using to mount his case. If we take the example a little further, the armed citizen does not know with any certainty what will happen to him in the next instant, but instead acts on the probability that he will meet with harm. Hobbes’ account of mankind’s “natural condition” in chapter XIII is meant, however, to offer something more—a demonstrable argument for the certainty of conflict in the future. In the space between Hobbes’ logical rendering of the inevitability of war and his supporting example of the prudent citizen, one basic dynamic of Leviathan unfolds, the dynamic between forms of knowledge that are more and less certain. Hobbes’ purpose is first to remind readers of their experiential awareness of their precarious positions and then to prove to them beyond doubt that they are indeed very vulnerable. He tacks back and forth between these two approaches to garner assent for his project: If uncertainty and vulnerability are the background conditions of political life, then Leviathan will displace this uncertainty altogether with a fundamentally knowable order, in which political authority and scientific authority are joined and enforced from the top.

For the purposes of this book’s argument about the rise of risk in early modern British thought, the prudential citizen’s ruminations and preparation for another night in the commonwealth are interesting not simply for their depiction of the fears that characterize political life, but for their vivid renderings of uncertainty, probabilistic thought, and action—hallmarks of the problem of living with risk. This chapter argues that while Hobbes is best known for his attention to the pivotal role the passions—particularly the passion of fear—play in the generation of conflict
and the formation of a secure commonwealth, uncertainty is really the human condition that underwrites his account of instability and motivates his theory of an absolutist state. Moreover, this chapter presents Hobbes as a critical early figure in the emergence of risk as a critical concept in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British political writing. Throughout his corpus, but in *Leviathan* especially, Hobbes sets all of the elements of a robust consideration of the relationships among uncertainty, risk, and projects of political security in place. To be sure, Hobbes himself does not use the word “risk” in his work on future-oriented epistemology or politics, although it would have been in circulation by the time he was working. But his study of political life is animated by a preoccupation with the problem of uncertainty and the struggle to acquire secure political knowledge for the future. His work also weds his concerns about the stability of knowledge and the stability of the state to generate a novel methodology for a civil science that can design and support a regime that quashes all forms of epistemological and political conflict and the uncertainty these generate. In all of Hobbes’ political work, but *Leviathan* especially, his efforts to construct a unified sovereign power that eliminates insecurity rest on his sensitivity to the problem of deep epistemological uncertainty. Indeed, we can interpret his entire political project as an effort to displace any and all political conflicts that are caused by limited knowledge.

This chapter maps Hobbes’ efforts to secure the political future by reconstructing his commitment to a science of politics modeled on the methods of geometry, which he argues for by contrasting it with other ways of knowing about politics that are more subjective (e.g. experience, prudence, and history). Hobbes chooses a geometric method for his science of politics because he

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3 There are, to my knowledge, three references to “risk” that appear in the notes to Hobbes’ translation of Thucydides’ *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, and these are comments from early editors who find that Hobbes’ descriptions of danger or uncertainty are actually better captured by the word “risk.” But, the word itself is not really part of Hobbes’ lexicon. My argument in this chapter is that his work expresses the clear stakes of a struggle with uncertainty in politics and a consideration of how far prudential and experiential reasoning can go, not that he offers a well-developed theoretical treatment of “risk” *per se*. 
believes it allows him to present a certain, inconvertible proof for a particular kind of absolutist political system—one that will adopt and buttress Hobbes’ approach to knowledge acquisition in return. The idea is that science and absolutist politics can reinforce each other’s authority to create a system without conflict. Ultimately, however, Hobbes’ system of mutual authority turns out to be quite fragile, revealing the futility of his efforts to displace uncertainty from political life. At the end of *Leviathan*’s proof for a particular kind of state, in which epistemological and political authorities are bound together, the problem of judgment still remains. I do not wish to suggest that this is a flaw in Hobbes’ line of argumentation for an absolutist state, although it might be. Instead, I suggest that as prudence and judgment creep back into the very system that Hobbes designs to avoid them, we are reminded that uncertainty is an intractable problem for politics.

Hobbes’ work is thus of crucial value if we want to understand the emergence of risk as a critical concept for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political life. His work raises a vexing question that sets an agenda for the thinkers who follow him: Can uncertainty, suffering, and fear ever be truly overcome by political planning and more rigorous approaches to the acquisition of scientific knowledge about collective life? While Hobbes puts the relationship between epistemological and political uncertainty on the table as *the* major source of political insecurity, his work leaves readers with the conclusion that uncertainty can never be removed from political life. The thinkers after him—for the purposes of this study, Locke, Hume, and Smith—take a different path and accept what he cannot brook. In their embrace of uncertainty as an immutable condition of human life, they turn instead to probability and judgment rather than demonstrable knowledge as a major resource for securing political stability and economic profit. Hence, they are prepared to live with a future characterized by risk, in which thinking probabilistically about an unknown future is the only tool humans have for avoiding loss or generating profit.
With this claim about Hobbes as something of a forerunner to more developed British accounts of the relationship between risk and politics in mind, this chapter examines moments in his body of work in which we can recover Hobbes’ own struggle with the problem of knowing the future. The first part of the chapter picks up a discussion of prudence that recurs in many of Hobbes’ texts, with prudence always figured as something of a rival to the scientific reasoning he espouses, albeit a worthy rival that at times supplements and informs that reasoning. Part two considers the scholarly discipline that grows out of prudence—history—as a potential resource for political actors who must choose wisely for the future. As with prudence, Hobbes views history with some ambivalence. Even as he appreciates its uses and indeed writes and translates histories himself, historical knowledge fails to displace the uncertainty in the way that Hobbes might like. The third part of this chapter evaluates Hobbes’ solution to the problem of uncertainty in politics, at the levels of both knowledge and of practice—a civil science modeled on geometry. This section explores the basis for Hobbes’ preference for geometric approaches to knowledge production in general, while asking whether such approaches can truly be adapted to the raw materials generated by social and political life. Hobbes’ own work suggests that this relationship may have to work the other way around—that is, the raw materials of political life, the people themselves, may find cause to adapt to civil science’s contours and claims when faced with an absolute sovereign who oversees the production of knowledge and the management of politics. As such, politics secures science for itself. Although Hobbes chooses this path to secure a certain future for individuals mired in political uncertainty and its accompanying dangers, this chapter suggests that his work is more interesting for what it reveals about the impossibility of such an audacious project and for the remainders it leaves for the thinkers who also wish to contend with uncertainty and risk as core problems for politics and political economy.
Ways of Knowing the Future? The Limits of Prudence

In *Behemoth*, Hobbes’ imaginative history of the English Civil War, he settles on the insufficient political knowledge of subjects as a main cause of the conflict he describes, as he notes that “the people in general were so ignorant of their duty, as that not one perhaps of ten thousand knew what right any man had to command him, or what necessity there was of King or Commonwealth” (*B* 4). He suggests that had the people been properly educated about the necessity of political order and their responsibilities as subjects of Charles I, they would have been able to navigate the competing claims to authority of Crown, Church, and Parliament, and order might have been preserved. This question of what counts as proper knowledge is perhaps the question of Hobbes’ corpus, and a comparative study of the resources available for acquiring this knowledge is part of his analysis. In particular, the availability of reliable knowledge seems an especially urgent concern for politics, as Hobbes reflects in *Behemoth*. Without it, people are doomed to suffer, either psychologically or physically, at the hands of others who rely on partial or incorrect understandings of the political world.

In keeping with a long tradition in political thought, Hobbes scrutinizes very carefully the most immediate and personal resource individuals have for guiding action and choice—the capacity for prudence that they possess at birth.Significantly, however, Hobbes’ account of prudence is largely divorced from a robust consideration of virtue, such as we might find in ancient treatments of prudence or practical wisdom, or even in some early modern sources like Adam Smith’s *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Instead, Hobbes is keenly interested in the temporal dimensions of prudential thinking. He conceives of prudence primarily in these terms, as an attempt to imagine the future in relation to a known past. For him, prudence is a matter of conjecture based on experience, or more precisely, on careful consideration of patterns and signs that remain in memory from past experience. As he defines it in *Leviathan*, “When the thoughts of a man that has a design in hand,
running over a multitude of things, observes how they conduce unto that design, or what design they may conduce unto, if his observations be such as are not easy or usual, this wit of his is called Prudence” (L VIII.11). The ability to make suppositions about the future or to reconstruct the past based on patterns is no easy task, but it is something all people develop over time, perhaps even without much attention or concentrated effort.

In addition to its emphasis on the temporality of prudential reasoning, Hobbes’ account of prudence also focuses on the cognitive work that constitutes it as a “wit.” His definition in Leviathan draws out the human curiosity regarding patterns or relationships that may be used to predict future outcomes. It does not, however, give much weight to what we might call the moral dimensions of prudence—conducting one’s affairs with caution, planning carefully for the future with preservation and security in mind, and behaving responsibly with one’s goods. These dimensions are arguably present in the examples of prudential thought and action Hobbes gives, but his definition is strictly cognitive and focuses on the relationship between past and future. In many respects, it presages the later accounts of probability that will shape the theories of risk in politics and political economy put forth by thinkers like Locke and Hume. That is to say, Hobbes’ account of prudence corresponds closely to probability—imagining a future based on patterns from an experienced past, and using the resulting calculus to inform choice and action. Like probabilistic thought, Hobbist prudence can only yield partial and predictive knowledge of a future that has not yet arrived, even when it has a very strong chance of turning out to be correct.

Elsewhere, in Elements of Law, Hobbes uses the example of weather to illustrate the character of prudential reasoning as he constructs it, and here we see that his emphasis is largely on the inherent limits of prudence. If people see clouds, for instance, they are likely to expect rain in the future; if they see that it is already raining, they may surmise that clouds preceded the storm. In either case, they are likely to be correct, especially if they dwell in a rainy climate and have witnessed
their fair share of heavy clouds followed by rainstorms. Furthermore, they have a better chance of guessing correctly than a group of people who rarely experience rain. In spite of their ability to predict the weather with some confidence, however, Hobbes stresses that they cannot conclude with certainty that clouds *always* bring rain, for “experience conclueth nothing universally” (*EL* Liv.9). Partly this is because human beings cannot experience all there is, so people make unfounded presumptions about the future based on the partial information they have acquired thus far. Unsurprisingly, for those who have lived longer and observed more, prudence is somewhat more reliable. People with more experience can choose how to act in the present with *more* certainty about future outcomes than can humans with little, but the major point for Hobbes is that no one can conjecture with “certainty enough” (*EL* Liv.10). Moreover, when making prudential judgments, people access the past with some difficulty. It lives in fading memory, and people also interpret these “faded” sense perceptions in the context of present conditions.

Hobbes does not deny that prudential knowledge carries significant weight for people as they move through a changing world. Yet, he stresses the contingent and limited nature of this knowledge derived from experience, and thus the inability of the products of prudential thinking to stand as reliable and certain truth claims for all time. In fact, much of the trouble with prudence lies with what it tries to know—the future. While depending on prudence may help people plan more successfully for the future than they otherwise might, no one can know with certainty what will happen there. The future by definition does not yet exist, and any attempts to predict it must at best be tentative and provisional (Springborg 2000, 44). As Hobbes explains in *The Elements of Law*, “no man can have in his mind a conception of the future, for the future is not yet. But of our conceptions of the past, we *make* a future; or rather, call past, future relatively” (*EL* Liv.7). While people make plans for the future from knowledge of the past, the future itself is marked by an
absence of knowledge. Hence, even when people act prudentially, they still take chances and invite the unexpected into their lives.

In some cases the stakes of relying on contingent knowledge claims to plan a safer future are not terribly high, but Hobbes wants his readers to think carefully about the consequences of making social or political choices for the future armed only with prudence and experience. To revisit Leviathan XIII’s example of the prudential citizen who fortifies himself in anticipation of danger, we might insist that this careful man’s precautionary stance harms no one, and that it is better to try to secure a safe future now than to be sorry later. On Hobbes’ read, however, the future, despite its nonexistence, also shapes the present. When the Hobbist citizen acts with the future in mind, he changes his social world in the process. If he passes through the streets armed to the teeth or is spotted bolting his door, others are likely to see him and conclude that he has learned to protect himself based on his past experiences as the victim of violence or crime. To prepare prudently for the possibility of a violent future, he may unwittingly create a fearful and perhaps even less safe present, by silently modeling for others a need to anticipate the worst and prepare accordingly. Efforts to tame uncertainty do not simply generate more uncertainty, then, but perhaps also undesirable social and political changes as well. Hobbes thus suggests that social and political knowledge needs to be certain knowledge, because the stakes of confronting the future with anything less are simply too high in the context of common life.

Hobbes thus suggests that personal experience and prudential reasoning on the part of individuals ought not to be the basis of truly authoritative knowledge about the natural or civil world. But personal prudence is not the only available source of political knowledge, and people can search elsewhere for answers about how best to conduct themselves in the present while bearing the future in mind. In fact, Hobbes perceives the abundance of publicly established but conflicting

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4 Cf. Beck 1999, 137.
sources of knowledge to be a problem, and part of his project in *Leviathan* and elsewhere is to evaluate the foundations of multiple intellectual disciplines—history and theology, for instance—to determine whether they will help humans cope with uncertain conditions. He finds all but science to be deficient in this enterprise and hence unworthy to be given the last word on how social and political relationships should be studied and managed.

**The Uses of History**

The collective and disciplinary counterpart to Hobbes’ treatment of individual experience prudence is, of course, history. A translator of ancient histories in his early career and a writer of modern ones in his later years, Hobbes gives historical knowledge some weight but is unwilling to endorse it as a certain guide for political actors. While it may help those who study it hone their prudential abilities, history can do little more than add to its readers’ existing store of human experience. While this is no small contribution, for Hobbes, what matters is that history can never yield propositions that are universal and can be followed confidently. History, like first-hand experience, deals in particulars rather than universal propositions that will always be true. Hobbes’ ambivalence regarding history as an authority or source for political actors shapes his advocacy for scientific approaches to the study of politics and theories of political order, as we can see from his scattered writings about history across his body of work. But, the relationship between history and science turns out to be somewhat complicated more complicated than a clean opposition.

Hobbes defines “history” as “the register of knowledge of fact” in Chapter IX of *Leviathan*. While not especially novel, his definition confines the historian to dealing in an absolute knowledge acquired by sense and memory. The knowledge conveyed by the historian is “the knowledge

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required in a witness,” which Hobbes distinguishes significantly from the knowledge of the philosopher-scientist, who deals in conditional, universal knowledge.6 A philosopher engages in causal reasoning about bodies and their properties, either by working from a cause to its effect or by working from an effect to its cause. The historian’s work is squarely outside the scope of philosophy, because “such knowledge is but experience…and not ratiocination.” Although Hobbes repeatedly suggests that history is distinct from philosophy, he still thinks they have a relationship, even insisting that history is “useful (nay necessary) to philosophy” (DC I.8). The clear implication is that history is subordinate to philosophy for Hobbes, but the claim that history is necessary to philosophy provokes questions about whether philosophy’s axiomatic approach to knowledge production requires the added weight of experiential knowledge, an issue of concern later in this chapter when considering the limits of Hobbes’ civil science.

The question of the status and value of history for politics persists in Hobbes’ thought, from his earliest writings onward. The preface and concluding remarks of Hobbes’ 1629 edition of Thucydides’ The History of the Peloponnesian War, his earliest work, contain particular praise for Thucydides and more general reflections on the merits and utility of a history well written. In the dedicatory letter to William Cavendish, Hobbes offers the translation as a gift that he hopes will be of some practical use to its recipient. In fact, he recommends Thucydides to Cavendish for “his writings, as having in them profitable instruction for noblemen, and such as may come to have the managing of great and weighty actions” (TPW xx). Shortly thereafter in the volume’s preface, he suggests that readers ought to value histories for as a critical tool to help them choose their actions wisely with respect to the consequences these choices might bear for the future. He notes that “the principle and proper work of history [is] to instruct and enable men, by the knowledge of actions

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6 Hobbes divides natural history from civil history; for him natural history is the history of facts that do not result from man’s will, and civil history is a record of the “deeds of men in commonwealths” (L IX.1).
past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future” (TPW xxi). Hobbes’ words to the young nobleman Cavendish, and to his readers in general, suggest plainly that men can depend on history as a guide for proper action. The careful study of history gives its reader knowledge akin to that granted by experience, albeit knowledge that comes second-hand and is perhaps more dramatic in scope. Histories thus also create opportunities to make conjectures about the future and choose wisely in the present, by providing studies of the outcomes of past conditions and events. In the case of Thucydides’ history, the lessons to be learned are those of serious interest to Hobbes—ones on the origins of conflict (Scott 2000, 112-136).

Since the purpose of histories is apparently the cultivation of prudence and skillful choice in readers, it should be no surprise that Hobbes expects historians themselves to be people of exceptional intellectual virtue. In particular, he finds the best histories are those written by scholars of good judgment who let the facts speak for themselves—to a point. The clearest statement of what he expects comes in Chapter VIII of Leviathan, in which he notes that “in good history the judgment must be eminent, because the goodness consisteth in the method, in the truth, and in the choice of the actions that are most profitable to be known” (L VIII.5). Hobbes thus seems to give historians a fairly wide berth with respect to how they represent the past. They can, he argues, survey the events of the past and choose which ones to feature and which to obscure, according to what they think will profit the reader. Historians shape their representations of the past, then, by how they perceive the needs and demands of the present, and perhaps those of the future as well.

The historian must make his narrative choices with care and present them subtly, however, so that the text itself appears to do the teaching. Hobbes argues that The History of the Peloponnesian War, not its author, teaches the reader some clearly political lessons about war and peace. The narration itself ought to lay bare its own lessons to the reader, and Hobbes notes that Thucydides is “yet accounted the most politic historiographer that ever writ,” even though he “never digress to
read a lecture, moral or political, upon his own text, nor enter into men’s hearts further than the acts
themselves evidently guide him” (TPW xxii). Writing history is a demanding enterprise even, or
especially, for the historian who avoids polemic. He must choose an argument that is both
manageable and significant for posterity and then he has the difficult task of carefully selecting
which events to recount and in what order before representing them in his best prose (TPW 579).
Finally, the absence of the historian’s voice is what makes his history great. But in every case, the
reader’s intellect and judgment must carry a burden, too. While many historians either overtly or
subtly inject their work with morals, manners, and policy to benefit the reader, the judicious reader
must learn to separate the “contexture of the narration” from these “discourses inserted” (TPW xii).

Hobbes’ brief preface to The Peloponnesian War suggests that history, if done well, can enrich
the decision-making capacities of its reader. For one, a skilled and truthful historian has much to
offer his reader in the way of informative facts about the past. For another, and perhaps more
importantly, reading history cultivates the kind of rigorous prudential thinking about the relationship
between past and future that promotes the performance of deeds appropriate for the situation at
hand and appropriate for a desired future. But, Hobbes’ praise for The History of the Peloponnesian War
as a superlative history suggests that the recording of history requires more than simple reporting of
the known facts of the past and even more than simple induction about what is to be garnered from
reading and interpreting the past.

Beyond what Hobbes writes to complement his translation of Thucydides’ work and the
faint praise for history we find in his philosophical works, we might also look to his own retelling of
the English Civil War—Behemoth—as some evidence for the significance of the historian’s
contribution.7 After ruminating on the causes of war in his philosophical writings, Hobbes selects

7 Furthermore, Leviathan is full of historical examples, especially those gleaned from Biblical
history; how these stand in relation to what Hobbes is trying to demonstrate scientifically varies
those “actions most profitable to be known” for his reader. Unsurprisingly, given his own interests, he focuses his attention on the problem of uncertainty and political judgment, and the conflicts stirred by competing claims to epistemological authority. He chooses to document the proliferation of imperfect knowledge about political rule and obligation, as well as the state of popular ignorance about how to order the commonwealth. Experiencing the spectacle of mid-seventeenth-century English politics ought not to enable Hobbes’ reader to draw universal and certain conclusions about the causes and consequences of war for politics, but it should mark the beginning of the reader’s search for answers regarding the relationship between knowledge and politics, probably by prompting questions about what we need to know to stabilize politics—questions that the civil scientist can answer definitively.

History done well is thus perhaps merely suggestive of, or serves only to support, what the philosopher-scientist can pin down conclusively with his work. While history might spur its reader to the pursuit of scientific explanations for what he has “witnessed” on the page, by itself it cannot provide certain knowledge. Just as the man who arms himself and locks his doors may know why he takes such precautions, the reader of history may intuitively grasp why the events about which he reads occurred and keep an eye open for similar patterns in the present. But, the historian and his readers cannot present a firm causal explanation for events that applies in all cases, Hobbes thinks, nor can the study of history alone studies help men make any definitive progress toward a future without the perils of uncertainty. While history bears a significant relationship to philosophy and science, it is no substitute, particularly when it comes to the project of confronting uncertainty and securing the future.

depending on the moment, it seems, but cataloguing the variation here is beyond the scope of this chapter.
The Geometric Method: Fashioning a Safe Political Future

In spite of Hobbes’ insistence that the future must by definition remain opaque, his political projects are still assertively future-oriented. His work suggests plainly that while efforts to know the future based on the past are inevitably constrained, humans do, in ways both purposive and unintended, continue to make a future for themselves. In fact, this is the crux of the problem. This insight is reflected in his analysis of both prudence and history, in which he suggests that how people interpret the relationship between past and future conditions their choices, choices that create a new future. Hobbes remains sensitive to the uncertainty that hounds these efforts, cataloguing the difficulties of sifting through conflicting information or competing accounts of the past and present. Part of Hobbes’ work, then, is to find the best means by which people can engage in the project of fashioning a secure political future, free from the perils of uncertainty. Hobbes attempts to solve this problem first at the level of knowledge by devising an error-proof civil science. He argues that embracing a civil science modeled on the methods of geometry will secure a kind of political knowledge that is atemporal and certain, and in the process, ensure a certain and safe political future.

In contrast to prudence and history, which are supported by inductive modes of thinking, science is a matter of proceeding from obvious first principles to deduce their consequences. As such, it is conditional but universal knowledge: as long as conclusions follow from the set premises, they should always be true. While Hobbes divides science into consequential knowledge of natural bodies, and consequential knowledge of bodies politic, he favors one particular brand of natural philosophy above all others and uses it to develop accounts of how do all varieties of philosophy, including political. The model for a scientific mode of philosophical inquiry is, as examples in
Leviathan make clear, geometry. To illustrate how people arrive at conditional and universal knowledge, Hobbes cites the following example from geometry: “we know that if the figure shown be a circle, then any straight line through the center shall divide it into two equal parts” (L IX.1). Of course, knowing that a straight line drawn through the center of a circle splits in half requires prior agreement about what a circle is, but this is part of Hobbes’ point as well—to write a valid proof, one must begin by defining one’s terms.

The first business of a proper political philosophy or civil science modeled on geometry ought then to be the settling of “first definitions” and “signification of names,” from whence the scientist proceeds to reason his way to a logical conclusion regarding the relationship of the parts in question (L IV.12). Hobbes distinguishes reason, in fact, from other intellectual abilities like prudence in terms of this connection to language. He defines it as nothing more than the “reckoning (that is, adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the marking and signifying of our thoughts” (L V.2). Scientists can be certain that their conditional statements are true always and everywhere only if they are definitive about starting points and rigorous in their logic. To render certain and secure knowledge of politics, a civil scientist must be clear about defining the terms that matter for politics, the intentions and elements of the people who make up a commonwealth—a task Hobbes very meticulously and energetically executes in the opening chapters of Leviathan and elsewhere. From there, presumably civil science is a matter of logic.

A major appeal of a scientific, geometric approach to political knowledge production over provisional, prudential approaches for those who seek political security is doubtless, then, its stabilizing effect on language. Language, in its fraught connection to sense perception and experience, generates uncertainty, in part because human practices of naming and defining perceptions are not uniform. A person’s first instinct, Hobbes thinks, is to ground these practices in

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8 For an account of the controversy surrounding the possibilities of certainty in mathematics, see especially chapter seven in Shapin 1994.
experience. Unfortunately, memory and experience, which are as diverse as the members of any community, are unhelpful starting points if agreement about first terms (and the certainty such agreement affords) is what is required. Early in *Leviathan*, he explains,

> The names of such things as affect us, that is, which please and displease us, because all men be not alike affected with the same thing, nor the same man at all times, are in the common discourses of men of *inconstant* signification. For seeing all names are imposed to signify our conceptions, and all our affections are but conceptions, when we conceive of the same things differently, we can hardly avoid different naming of them. For the nature of that we conceive be the same, yet the diversity of our reception of it, in respect of different constitutions of body and prejudices of opinion, gives everything a tincture of our passions (*L* III.2).

Hobbes thus diagnoses one of the root causes of social breakdown: when people try to communicate about their varying perceptions using words, they often end up operating at cross-purposes and come to blows rather than mutual understanding.

The destabilizing effects of language are especially acute and pressing in the case of the relationship between words and those ideas or claims that matter most for ethics and politics. The use of moral language is perhaps least constant of all because its subject matter is also closest to human passion. As Hobbes notes later, an experience that one person may describe as “just,” another might call “unjust.” People cannot, he thinks, use the terms they choose to signify virtues and vices as tools to communicate effectively with one another, much less as starting points for reasoning out demonstrable proofs about the consequences of these terms for social relationships. Hobbes thus speculates that the uncertainty generated by language is partly to blame for the breakdown of human relations into conflict. A situation in which people follow the dictates of prudence or worse still, passion, and struggle to communicate about and justify their moral, social, and political choices to
others is not one conducive to peace. In short, people fail to use reason to formulate conclusions about proper political ends, and they fail from the start because they do not rightly define the terms such a scientific approach to politics requires. Thus they are left in a condition of perpetual disagreement and very likely mutual distrust. Hobbes argues that a science of politics is essential to the polity’s survival for its management of the conflict over a proper understanding and naming of the key elements of the commonwealth—human motivations and characteristics, as well as the building blocks of political society, such as rights, duties, and laws. As Noel Malcolm notes, the “essential similarity” between Hobbes’ civil science and geometry “was striking” if also a bit troubled. He writes,

Both sciences yielded universal truths by pressing the connections between conceptual entities: lines, circles, and squares, or rights, duties, and laws. To express the relationship between the sovereign and the citizens was to expound an analytic truth, similar to that which states the relationship between a circle and its radii. Unfortunately, however, beyond this type of immediate similarity there lay a very shadowy terrain of uncertain resemblances and shifting implications (Malcolm 2002, 152).9

While Hobbes is committed to modeling a science of politics after geometry, admittedly thinking about politics is a more tendentious enterprise. As Hobbes documents so carefully in his body of work, even the most careful efforts to plan carefully for the political present and future, armed with experience and the wisdom of history, must rely always on less than perfect comparisons, shifting meanings, and a society in flux.

9 Malcolm notes that these difficulties had two sources—Hobbes’ shifting views on geometry and his practice of “playing down the peculiar status of the objects of geometry as conceptual entities.” It seems to me that the second source is the more troubling for Hobbes’ effort to subject civil scientific enquiry to the geometric framework (Malcolm 2002, 152).
While mapping the contours of political life via geometric civil science is Hobbes’ best hope for combating uncertainty and confusion, even beginning such an enterprise is no easy matter. Hobbes duly notes that formulating a science of politics is especially difficult precisely because its subject matter affects people more deeply than much else. In a thinly veiled attack on common law in *Leviathan* XI, he acknowledges something of a disjuncture between the basic materials of a civil science and those of geometry, admitting how easily any effort to render a proper science of politics might be thwarted. He argues that when it comes to politics and social life, men appeal from custom to reason and from reason to custom, as it serves their turn, receding from custom where their interest requires it and settling themselves against reason as oft as reason is against them; which is the cause that the doctrine of right and wrong is perpetually disputed, both by the pen and the sword; whereas the doctrine of lines and figures is not so, because men care not, in that subject, what be truth, as a thing that crosses no man’s ambition, profit, or lust (*L* IX.21).

Already here, we see a suggestion that fashioning a civil science will be political fraught, and may require management from political authorities.

Two critical questions thus remain, and Hobbes raises them himself, albeit to dismiss them a bit too handily. Can a science of politics be like geometry? Moreover, ought it to be? Hobbes answers both questions affirmatively, as he must. Even as he suggests that the controversy over lines and figures differs from that over sovereignty and right, he insists that the method for arriving at conclusions that are true always and everywhere can and must be the same, whether in geometry or civil science. His anxieties about the problems posed by both prudence and language suggest that part of the appeal of a civil science conceived as a geometric one is that it eliminates the uncertainty humans generate for each other when left only with experiential knowledge and an *ad hoc* and highly individualized moral vocabulary for communication. At the very least, he recognizes that a
proliferation of competing forms of knowledge and unstable language are key elements contributing to discordant politics, and science establishes universal and true propositions and stabilizes language. So, he thinks it is certainly worth attempting to apply the method of geometry to a study of politics.

As for whether the civil scientist can devise demonstrable and certain proofs about humans and politics in the same way a mathematician can about angles and triangles, Hobbes thinks so. The commonwealth is, as he tells readers in the introduction to *Leviathan*, not a natural association but rather a matter of artifice—human artifice. The commonwealth’s artificial, man-made character, renders it a legitimate object of demonstrable proof, a position Hobbes defends in his 1656 *Six Lessons to the Professors of the Mathematiques*, a politically inflected document expounding the virtues of the geometric method. Here we find Hobbes’ clearest statement of why geometry can and ought to be the model for civil science:

> Of arts some are demonstrable, others indemonstrable, and *demonstrable are those the construction of the subject whereof is in the power of the artist himself*, who, in his demonstration, does no more than deduce the consequences of his own operation. The reason whereof is this, that the science of every subject is derived from a precognition of the causes, generation, and construction of the same; and consequently, where the causes are known, there is place for demonstration, but not where the causes are to seek for. Geometry therefore is demonstrable, for the lines and figures from which we reason are drawn and described by ourselves: and *civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth ourselves* (Hobbes 1656, 1.).

Because Hobbes asserts that human beings make the commonwealth *ex nihilo*, he thinks it is entirely possible to know about its foundational parts and about the logical interaction of these parts, just as it is possible to know a geometric proof to be true. As long as there is agreement on how to name

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10 Jeffrey Collins situates this text in particular as part of a broad political and ecclesiological dispute between Hobbes and a set of university men (Collins 2002, 214-218).
and define the foundations of politics (namely, human beings, their characteristics, their rights and duties), it is possible to reason about political ends and outcomes with certainty. As Hobbes explains in his defense of the accessibility and universality of geometric proofs,

All Doctrine begins at the understanding of words, and proceeds by Reasoning till it conclude in Science. He that will learn Geometry must understand the Termes before he begin, which that he may do, the Master demonstrateth nothing, but useth his Naturall prudence onely, as all men do, when they endeavor to make their meaning clearly known. For words understood are but the feed, and no part of the harvest of Philosophy (Hobbes 1656, 14).

A parallel axiomatic proof about politics is Hobbes’ project in *Leviathan*, and to a lesser degree in *Elements of Law* and *De Cive*. In these texts he attempts to define and name those aspects of human beings that bear significance for social and political lives, to treat his philosophical “harvest” with proper “feed,” on the assumption that his readers will recognize and appreciate the effort. From there, logical reasoning from cause to effect takes hold:

For as in the adding together of many and great Numbers, he cannot fail, that knoweth the Rules of Addition, and is also all the way so carefull, as not to mistake one number, or one place for another; so in any other Science, he that is perfect in the Rules of Logick, and is so watchfull over his Pen, as not to put one word for another, can never fail of making a true, though not perhaps the shortest and easiest demonstration (Hobbes 1656, 9).

Interpreting Hobbes’ view on how names are imposed is notoriously tricky. On the one hand, he seems to say that individuals do it merely by convention. Using prudence as a guide, they must decide collectively on terms and definitions and impose them thereafter. On the other hand, it also appears that he thinks people can be more or less correct about words and their definitions, which suggests that he thinks that definitions can be true or false, and are prior to conventional formulations. Moreover, it is not clear that these two positions are entirely incompatible for him. For further discussion of this point see Jesseph 1995, 86-107. Cf. Strong 1993.
Through logical reasoning from agreed-upon first terms, Hobbes tries to demonstrate how one might craft a well-ordered commonwealth with certainty and thus put an end to conflict. A scientific approach to political philosophy thus gets Hobbes what prudential approaches to politics alone cannot—an indisputable blueprint for a secure political future, and by extension perhaps a certain future.

Hobbes’ argument for a geometric science rather than prudence as the key to acquiring dependable knowledge about politics rests on his assertion that the commonwealth is a matter of construction and artifice rather than evolution and nature.\textsuperscript{12} To return to the comparison between political philosophy and geometry he develops, offering a demonstrable proof in geometry is possible because the mathematician generates the proof himself based on a common understanding of lines and figures. If Hobbes is right about the artificial character of the commonwealth, it should also hold that the political philosopher can offer a theory of the commonwealth because he designs the commonwealth himself based on common understandings of the constituent parts of the commonwealth.

But, even if readers can accept Hobbes’ radical claim that politics is a matter not of nature but of artifice, it is unclear whether they can accept his related assertion that the study of politics and the projection of a political future can be handled in the scientific manner he proposes. It is not, perhaps, difficult to accept that the three angles that make up a triangle must always add up to 180 degrees. But what of the constituent parts of the commonwealth? Are they not more difficult to ascertain, and is their relationship, not something of a moving target? In naming and defining the qualities of human beings—as creatures of both passion and reason—Hobbes urges the reader to recognize in himself the representation of man to be found in the pages of \textit{Leviathan} and to profess its truth. And this is critical, because for Hobbes’ theory to hold, there must be initial agreement

\textsuperscript{12} For discussion of seventeenth-century concern with artifice and construction of commonwealth from the ground up, see especially the introduction in Kahn 2005.
about its most basic premises. There is evidence in his own work, however, that Hobbes’ rendering of the basic terms of the commonwealth is perhaps more constructive and normative than simply descriptive at points. That is, human beings as he finds them do not always quite square with his account of human nature and politics in *Leviathan* and elsewhere.

To illustrate the discrepancy between political subjects as Hobbes defines them and as they live in practice, we might look to the frequently mentioned “problem of Essex,” named so for a passage of *Behemoth*. In *Leviathan* XIV, Hobbes famously follows his depiction of the conflict generated in the state of nature with the claim that fear of a violent death is what drives human beings to seek peace and thus what serves as both a motivation to form a social contract and the foundation of political obligation. Or at least, if people adhere to reason and accept that the only solution to the problem of conflict is mutual agreement that fear of death trumps all other passions, fear of death ought to do quite a bit of political work.13

In *Behemoth*, Hobbes’ brief mention of the Earl of Essex, who served as a general of the parliamentary armies in the English Civil War, points to the instability of the fear of death as a reliable primary passion, or a corrective passion, for humans. Essex was famously twice-a-cuckold; the dissolution of his two marriages made him the object of scandalous gossip for much of the early seventeenth century and hence a rather unpopular member of the court. As Speaker “A” recounts in *Behemoth*, “I believe verily, that the unfortunateness of his marriages had so discountenanced his conversation with ladies, that the court could not be his proper element, unless had had some extraordinary favour there, to balance that calamity. But for particular discontent from the King, or

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13 For an account of fear of death as the key passion that promotes reason-based approaches to politics, see Strauss 1963. For rational choice arguments that Hobbes’ claim that we fear violent death is strictly a normative one, see Gauthier 1968 and Hampton 1986. Tuck’s claim is more nuanced; he thinks that self-preservation is a good candidate for a foundational principle of politics, because even if we do not always fear death, we can at least find it understandable when others do whatever it takes to avoid death (Tuck 1996). Kahn makes a critique of all these approaches; she argues that Hobbes’ political project depends on a contract with his readers based on acceptance of his account of passions (including fear and its objects) and imagination (Kahn 2001).
intention of revenge for any supposed disgrace, I think he had none” (B 112). This suggests that Essex marched onto the battlefield not to right any political wrong or even to defend himself or his cause against a perceived enemy. Rather, his motive was a purely vainglorious attempt to be recognized for valor and thus to soothe his own wounded pride. Fear of death is trumped, in the case of Essex, by fear of slander or disgrace in the eyes of other subjects, particularly women.

Here historical example suggests that Hobbes is not merely scientifically documenting the foundations of commonwealth when he argues that fear of death motivates individuals to make covenants and keep them; rather he thinks fear of death is potentially a strong motive for avoiding conflict. The problem seems to be that other passions generate political conflicts and push subjects to violent actions, and thus fear of death is the one that he tries to stabilize and persuasively endorse via scientific argument in Leviathan. If readers are reasonable, he thinks, they will recognize that their lives are not worth risking for reputation or other motivations, and they will opt to secure their bodies for the future by means of contract. The implication is that Hobbes’ account of human nature is not merely descriptive or explanatory, and therefore not a matter of pinning down what readers intuitively know about themselves, as they might know a circle or a line when they see one. Rather, Hobbes is arguing for a particular account of human nature, and one that requires assent (perhaps, as this chapter will assert, hard-earned assent) on the part of the reader before he can proceed to construct a commonwealth around it. That is, readers must accept how Hobbes defines them before they can accept a Hobbist commonwealth.

But why must readers agree with Hobbes on the finer points of human nature? Might they just move forward with his plan for an orderly commonwealth rooted in covenant and authorization and the related rights and duties these means of political order entail? If we recall Hobbes’ definition of reason in the early chapters of Leviathan alongside his reflections on the process of geometric argument, it seems essential that before anyone can demonstrate publicly the
consequential relationship among thoughts and perceptions, there must first be some agreement among the public on their names and definitions. This suggests that the production of scientific knowledge must at bottom be a social enterprise, which sets it apart from the highly particular and relative character of experiential knowledge.\textsuperscript{14} It is important to note that acknowledging the social component of scientific knowledge, in this case the knowledge produced by a civil science, is not to claim that Hobbes thinks that the naming of social and political concepts ought to be intersubjectively determined by the multitude. In fact, he suggests that popular efforts to formulate the right plan for the commonwealth have failed, and that an intervention of the sort he offers is required:

Though nothing can be immortal which mortals make, yet if men had the use of reason they pretend to, their commonwealths might be secured at least from perishing by internal diseases. For by the nature of their institution they are designed to live as long as mankind, or as the laws of nature, or as justice itself, which gives them life. Therefore, when they come to be dissolved, not by external violence but by intestine disorder, the fault is not in men as they are the \textit{matter}, but as they are the \textit{makers} and orderers of them...so for want, both of the art of making fit laws to square their actions by, and also of humility and patience to suffer the rude and cumbersome points of their present greatness to be taken off, they cannot without the help of a very able architect, be compiled into any other a crazy building, such as, hardly lasting out their own time, must assuredly fall upon the heads of their posterity (\textit{L} XXIX.1).

As Hobbes portrays men in this passage, their status as makers of the commonwealth also positions them to destroy it totally. Here again, the problem is one of proper knowledge, in this case, of the

\textsuperscript{14} For an argument about the social character of knowledge, as Hobbes conceives it, see especially the concluding chapter of \textit{Leviathan and the Air-Pump} (Shapin and Schaffer 1985).
laws of nature. Because humans do not use reason properly to lay bare the laws of nature, they also fail to formulate proper civil laws for the ordering of the commonwealth. The implication is that, left to their own devices, men rely on prudence, which they acquire with time and without rigorous intellectual labor. Prudence may help men formulate laws based on experience, but none of these will be universal or sufficiently stable to be fit “to square [their] actions by.” Moreover, men are creatures of passion, a quality that also orients them towards the crafting of laws for personal benefit, but perhaps not for the good of the commonwealth.

But, note that Hobbes does not suggest that men will come to this kind of reason on their own. Instead they must rely on an “able architect” who will not only build a stable commonwealth by himself but will also discipline the would-be makers of the commonwealth into overcoming their passions and accepting the tenets of reason, namely the laws of nature. Surely the architect in question is the author of *Leviathan*, and the hope is that the text itself will serve as an event meant to break the cycle of uncertainty and the discord and violence it yields.

The language of *Leviathan* XIX also recalls Hobbes’ earlier reference in Chapter IV to another famed “crazy building,” the Tower of Babel. In his account of the origins of speech, Hobbes argues that God was the “first author of speech,” who bestowed the practice of proper naming of the animals on Adam; the language humans received via Adam was lost when they erected the Tower of Babel and incurred God’s wrath. Since that moment, the development of language has been an *ad hoc* enterprise; people invent new terms according to need and by experience. The architect who guides the makers of the commonwealth has a task prior to the promulgation of the laws of nature. He must begin by settling the definitions from which logical argument must proceed. The need for science as a practice of naming and reasoning towards universal rules seems clear here, and the reference to Biblical history serves to remind readers why
by revivifying the moment in which they created this need for themselves through hubris and folly (L IV.1-2).

It seems clear that Hobbes determines that imposing geometry’s method on civil philosophy is a worthwhile enterprise for more than intellectual reasons, however uneasy the fit may be. For one, it is, he thinks, a means to overcome the epistemological and linguistic problems that plague political life, and thus the only method by which to construct a certain future. Although it seems clear that Hobbes wants geometry and civil science to be of a piece for these reasons, the benefits of arguing convincingly for this may flow in more than one direction. As the aforementioned examples of Essex and Babel make clear, it is not obvious that Hobbes defines the human elements of a body politic in ways that are immediately recognizable to his readers. Hence, the conclusions about proper political order that he draws may be of critical importance.

The form of rule Hobbes ultimately recommends in _Leviathan_ is one of absolute sovereignty, with one power that is the sole bearer of the ability to decide doctrine and to ensure that it will be taught. While agreement about first terms is essential to science, Hobbes is not optimistic that all will read and agree with his formulation, nor is he certain that it will defeat other accounts of politics on offer. His political commitment to absolutism expressed in _Leviathan_ may, however, win him the agreement of a sovereign who is positioned to disseminate Hobbes’ doctrine, and by extension, his method and approach. As it turns out, the polity made by Hobbes’ science may also need to be a polity made for Hobbes’ science.

**A Polity Fashioned for Science**

Hobbes’ initial worry about politics rests with both the ignorance of the people and the uncertainty and faction generated for them by competing claims to authoritative knowledge. After taking pains to establish a geometric civil science as the only route to universal knowledge, and hence
as the sole path to a secure political future, Hobbes must address one more problem. Because Hobbes has genuine doubt about the ability of members of a commonwealth to rely on their own reason successfully, the future of his preferred method for the production of knowledge is at risk. A carefully formulated scientific approach to politics may not recommend itself to many. As he notes in *Leviathan*’s chapter on power, “the sciences are small power, because not eminent, and therefore not acknowledged in any man; nor are in all but in a few, and in them, but of a few things. For science is of that nature, as none can understand it to be, but such as in a good measure have attained” (*L* X.14). Scientific approaches to politics may thus be doomed to obscurity; while essential to the survival of the commonwealth, they also seem relegated to its margins—a difficult task a few learned individuals set for themselves. Hobbes hopes that this will not be the case, and he anticipates that an absolute sovereign is the best means by which to ensure the survival of his method.

Hobbes makes his appeal to such authority in the introduction to *Leviathan* and suggests that he hopes that the sovereign will be the first to assent to his scientific account of human nature, and to the causal account of conflict and secure politics that he reasons from these first definitions. As he notes,

> He that is to govern a whole nation must read in himself, not this or that particular man, but mankind, which though it be hard to do, harder than to learn any language or science, yet when I shall have set down my own reading orderly and perspicuously, the pains left another will be only to consider if he find not the same

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15 This is not to assert that Hobbes desires a scientific community of experts who work behind closed doors. If anything, he favors geometry in particular because its practices are conducive to publicity and less politicized than other intellectual pursuits, like scholastic philosophy or theology. The only criteria for the man of civil science seem to be curiosity, leisure, and the right method (*L* XXX.19).
in himself. For this kind of doctrine admitteth no other demonstration (L.

Introduction.4).

Hobbes thinks that he demonstrates nothing in the text that the sovereign cannot “read in himself,” but he suggests that *Leviathan* should spare him such rigorous introspection. As such, his aim is to win the agreement of the sovereign—who is cast as the first teacher of doctrines for the multitude—for his theory (and by extension, for his geometric method). The sovereign is not only the arbiter of intellectual controversies but also the propagator of doctrine who may “by good laws…encourage men to the study of them.” Hobbes expects that if his doctrines were to be taught in universities, they would have far-reaching educational effects and eventually make their way into the doctrines of obedience and sovereignty taught to political subjects. As such, they might ultimately replace the prudential conclusions about politics drawn by the multitude (*L.* XXXI.41). While skeptical about the possibility that all people will perceive the merits of science and pursue the cultivation of reason, he remains confident that the polity can be constructed such that the sovereign can educate the people to profess the truth of *Leviathan*'s teachings and generate thereby a safe space for those committed to the practice of a geometric civil science.

Science and absolutist government thus exist in a tight and significant relationship in Hobbes’ work. Because science modeled on geometry is the only means by which to draw certain conclusions about the political consequences of human passions and behavior, it is also the only reliable tool people have for overcoming pernicious uncertainty in political life. At the same time, Hobbes recognizes the persistent threats to science present in his social world. In fact, the conflict generated by multiple claims to authoritative knowledge is, in his view, one of the roots of political conflict. With this in mind, the polity Hobbes constructs is most conducive to the longevity of his chosen scientific practices. With an absolute sovereign in place, who selects and disseminates doctrine, science's rivals for the claim to authoritative knowledge can be eliminated, as long as
Hobbes makes his case for a geometric science as the means to political stability and support for absolute sovereignty. If he can persuade the sovereign that his geometric method displaces all uncertainty and hence all chance of political resistance, he may also be able to preserve the method of procuring political knowledge that he is unwilling to risk—a geometric civil science.

**Traces of Prudence? The Limits of Geometry and the Fragility of Hobbes’ System**

While this chapter has largely focused on Hobbes’ arguments for the insufficiency of common methods of procuring political knowledge—prudence especially—in favor of scientific approaches, we are still left with the question of where this leaves Hobbist subjects. In the process of undermining reliance on ordinary approaches to fashioning a more certain political future, Hobbes has issued very little cognitive work or epistemological authority to political subjects. He has, however, placed heavy political demands on them, suggesting that their primary role in politics is to assent to unified epistemological and political authority, located in the seat of the sovereign. Indeed, the contracting subject of the early part of *Leviathan* seems less significant on this reading, which brings the authorizing, assenting subject of *Leviathan* XVII to the fore. While Hobbes has arguably worked to improve the political lot of all people in his efforts to reduce uncertainty in politics, his account also produces a powerful alliance between a particular subset of the scientific community and an indivisible sovereign, and one against which the modes of resistance are few.

Hobbes’ effort to fuse authoritarian politics with a unified system of knowledge production modeled on geometry turns out to be quite fragile, however, in ways already suggested by this chapter. As the discussion of how Hobbes settles the principles of his civil science implies, it is not clear who has the final word on the definitions that serve as the foundation of a certain civil science: The reading public, with its prudential intuitions about who the natural man is? An expert civil scientist like Hobbes? A sovereign who holds both epistemological authority and a monopoly on
legitimate force? While Hobbes postulates that the union of these potential sources might be the most secure route, perhaps beginning with an alliance between civil science and the state, it is just as likely that tension among them might fracture the unified edifice of Hobbes’ political-epistemological order.

Hobbes’ own personal and political struggles to secure his method against scientific alternatives have been well documented, but this chapter suggests that there is ample evidence for the unsteadiness of his system in Hobbes’ own *Leviathan*. Hobbes’ work raises a question that his account of a geometric civil science can never quite settle. Is a science of politics enough, or must experience come back into political decision-making? Connected to this question is another of critical importance: If science requires the help of experience, how are these competing ways of knowing the future ordered or prioritized? In *Leviathan*’s chapter on counsel, we find one clue.

In Chapter XXV of *Leviathan*, Hobbes notes that sovereigns will likely require some counsel, and so he sets about distinguishing binding commands from counsel and advice, and enumerating the qualities of good counselors. While he has taken great pains to insulate his political system from the uncertain claims of prudential approaches to politics, prudence recovers some political ground in this chapter. The sovereign certainly has final say over political decision-making, but the chapter on prudence suggests that he does not have a monopoly on political knowledge. At the very least, advisors who draw on prudence and experience influence his decisions.

The primary role of the counselor is to make clear the consequences of any political decisions or actions the sovereign might take. The standards for presentation and argumentation are high, and in some respects, map onto Hobbes’ account of what a geometric science of politics can do. Hobbes argues that the counselor must “propound his advice in such form of speech as may make the truth most evidently appear, that is to say, with as firm ratiocination, as significant and

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proper language, and as briefly as the evidence will permit” (*L. x xv.12*). The counselor must take care to eliminate from his speech any “rash and unevident inferences” that draw on eyewitness accounts, opinion, or examples from books; likewise, he must purge his speech of any “obscure, confused, and ambiguous expressions, also all metaphorical speeches” that might stir the passions and interfere with the formation of reasonable arguments (*L. x xv.12*). Thus far, the work of the counselor seems to be at one with the kind of argument a civil scientist such as Hobbes would make. Hobbes’ account of counsel does not do much yet to disrupt a picture of political world in which sovereign and civil science are unified, and counselors follow suit.

In the next paragraph, however, Hobbes suggests that true skill as a counselor comes from another source—experience and reflection, the hallmarks of prudential thought. He notes that the capacity for counsel is only developed by experience and careful study, and “no man is presumed to be a good counsellor, but in such business as he hath not only been much versed in, but hath also much meditated on, and considered.” As the purpose of the commonwealth is to preserve peace domestically and defend against outside invasion, the sovereign requires counsel from those who have “great knowledge of the disposition of mankind, of the rights of government, and of the nature of equity, law, justice, and honour (not to be attained without study).” Presumably, much of this knowledge can be procured directly from engaging a rigorous civil science like Hobbes’. But counselors must also know “of the strength, commodities, places, both of their own country, and their neighbours, as also of the inclinations and designs of all nations that may any way annoy them.” This kind of knowledge is “not attained to without much experience” in the field and the use of judgment to reflect on the meaning and significance of those experiences (*L. x xv.13*).17 Ideally, the sovereign will assemble a range of counselors who are experts in different areas of

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17 Hobbes also suggests that in addition to direct experience, counselors will have to sift through and interpret records of fact from the commonwealth’s archives—everything from treaties to correspondence. This is interpretive work, not unlike what the historian must do (*L. x xv.14*).
significance to a ruler, and will gather and mull over their expert advice before choosing a course of action that will best secure the longevity of the commonwealth for the future.

Significantly, Hobbes suggests that the knowledge of counselors—or good counselors—will draw on both science and experience in the end. In some cases, good advice will come from knowledge of universal, certain rules. As Hobbes writes, “When for the doing of anything there be infallible rules (as in engines and edifices, the rules of geometry, all the experience of the world cannot equal his counsel that has learnt or found out the rule.” In these cases, political expertise is a matter of knowing the rules developed by scientific investigation and reason. But this is not enough, it would seem. Hobbes concludes, “And when there is no such rule, he that hath most experience in that particular kind of business has therein the best judgment, and is the best counselor” (L xxv.13). In some cases, then, there is no rule for proceeding in politics, no certain guide for securing the future. Expertise, in this case, is a matter of judgment and experience, the prudence that Hobbes compares unfavorably with the certainty of science elsewhere. Moreover, this admission suggests that the question of who decides in politics is open—while the sovereign may have final say, it is not clear whether the civil scientist or an expert of some other kind will be the one to provide the necessary knowledge. Already here we can see a disaggregation of the tight regime of knowledge and political authority that Hobbes posits as the only way to a certain future for the commonwealth and its people. While this is but a brief example from one text, it suggests strongly that politics requires, even for Hobbes, multiple ways of proceeding into an unknown future, and it raises the question of how these different modes of knowledge production can be prioritized or ordered within in the commonwealth.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} Emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{19} Note to readers: A second example, and perhaps an even more troubling one for Hobbes, is the discussion in \textit{Leviathan} XXI concerning conscription and desertion. Here, Hobbes appears to say that subjects’ desertion in battle is cowardly but not unjust in some cases, and one of
Conclusion

This chapter argues that Thomas Hobbes’s work, especially *Leviathan*, provides fruitful material for thinking about uncertainty as a persistent condition for human beings and as the problem to be solved by theorists of politics. Hobbes’ engagement with the question of the utility of prudence and experiential knowledge establishes that the impossibility of conceptualizing the future is a source of anxiety, suffering and, more significantly for politics, of interpersonal conflict. Hobbes locates the highest stakes of politics at the level of the procurement of knowledge. He suggests that political problems are often grounded in basic knowledge problems, an insight that figures importantly in the work of the other authors central to this book, as well as in scholarship on risk and politics. Politics is an uncertain, risky, and dangerous enterprise because human beings are not sufficiently equipped with what they need to know. In particular, Hobbes thinks that individuals have no understanding of what being a good subject entails—a problem which stems from the inherent limitations of humans as thinking bodies and from a lack of reliable sources from which to learn.

Hobbes aims to rescue political life from both the inexact character of ordinary knowledge and feuding communities of experts—hologians, experimental scientists, and politicians—by fashioning an authoritative and decisive political theory after geometry, the most accessible and methodologically airtight of the sciences. While no admirer of popular wisdom or public reason, Hobbes expects that any person with reason should be able to grasp the validity of a political theory constructed as one might build an axiomatic proof. The ability of subjects to consent is a key element of Hobbes’ theory of politics, for indeed they must be able to consent to form a contract in

the stronger implications of the few paragraphs surrounding his discussion of desertion is that the obligations to serve the sovereign last only as long as the sovereign can guarantee its purpose, presumably the preservation of the lives and security of subjects. I’m considering adding this as an additional example of the return of judgment and prudence to political practice, but I haven’t yet figured out exactly how to introduce it. Suggestions and advice are most welcome here!
the first instance and to authorize a sovereign in the next. But the public of subjects must be
Hobbes’ readers even before this, it seems, and must assent to his formulation of human beings and
his method for determining how a polity ought to be constructed. A political science, delivered in
the form of Hobbes’ text *Leviathan*, teaches and disciplines by requiring such assent; the text itself is
the intervention necessary for creating a secure state that can establish science and the knowledge it
produces as authoritative.

Hobbes thus offers a geometric approach to thinking about politics as the best means of
managing the dangers and harms of political life, nearly all of which are rooted in uncertainty. The
shortcomings of experience and prudence are thrown into relief by his evaluation of science as a
means of solving the knowledge problems that bring conflict to politics. He argues that science is
the only means by which people can acquire certain and indisputable knowledge of who they are,
why their politics are disorderly, and how they can maintain order for the future. By generating
axioms and reasoning from these principles to certain conclusions, a geometric science is able, he
thinks, to offer a secure political future in the form of absolutist order. Hobbes develops his cases
for absolutism and a science of politics side-by-side, and he argues persistently for the unification of
natural and civil science and the protection of both by a sovereign. In the process of establishing
the primacy of science, he also reveals that knowledge ought not to be left to chance in the political
arena. As he writes at the conclusion of Part II of *Leviathan*, “I recover some hope that, one time or
other, this writing of mine may fall into the hands of a sovereign who will consider it himself...without the help of any interested or envious interpreter, and by the exercise of entire
sovereignty in protecting the public teaching of it, convert this truth of speculation into the utility of
practice” (*L* xxxi.41). The polity Hobbes generates depends on geometric science for its design and
justification. In turn he expects that polity to protect the primacy of geometry as the authoritative
path to knowledge by holding up *Leviathan* as an exemplary civil science.
But, even Hobbes’ own work suggests the vulnerability and fragility of his system, as when he considers the ways prudence and counsel make their way back into the search for political knowledge. It would seem that the assumptions, theorems, and proofs about politics so carefully mapped in *Leviathan* are not enough; there will, Hobbes admits, be contingencies in political life that will reveal the somewhat fixed and brittle nature of his civil science. These events will demand a confrontation with only partial, uncertain experiential knowledge in hand. Hence, at points *Leviathan* suggests that uncertainty—and the suffering and vulnerability that Hobbes thinks come with uncertainty—can never be displaced from politics altogether.

The apparent fragility of Hobbes’ project creates an opening for the thinkers who follow him. His rich consideration of prudence, a way of knowing the future jettisoned in favor of the certainty of geometric science, becomes central to the other thinkers so central to this book’s exploration of uncertainty and risk in politics. For Locke, uncertainty becomes the most permanent feature of politics and political economy, a condition that can only be managed by probabilistic reasoning and good judgment. Hume and Smith also take uncertainty as a given, and caution seriously against the kind of totalizing system that Hobbes builds to displace it. While Hobbes’ approach to securing the future falls out of fashion almost immediately, he must still be read as an agenda-setting thinker for early modern British engagement with the problem of uncertainty and risk. In his struggle to find reliable knowledge for an unknown future, and to secure knowledge production politically, he places uncertainty in the foreground of political thought and raises the question of the relationship between certain knowledge and political security, a question that will hold priority for thinkers of risk for centuries to come.
References


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