

# The political philosophy of software: insights from Hobbes, Derrida, and Lessig

Vic Castro

How does software *act* in the world -- and how can this action be political in itself? This lecture discusses the metaphysics and politics of software through three apparently very different thinkers: political theorist Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), and Internet law scholar Lawrence Lessig (1961-). Software is made of text in computer language; but contrary to human languages, this text constrains what is possible as forcefully as the laws of physics. Yet again, contrary to the laws of physics, software is not set in stone but is made by humans -- and furthermore keeps escaping human intent through bugs and unexpected uses. These two aspects of software, deterministic yet profoundly indeterminate, make it not only political: they point to *the* political-metaphysical problem which the sovereign state was invented in the 17th century to solve. While back then the issue was with the natural world, the omnipresence of software in the 21st century creates a resurgence of these old challenges for contemporary society.