

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Session 10

October 7th, 2015

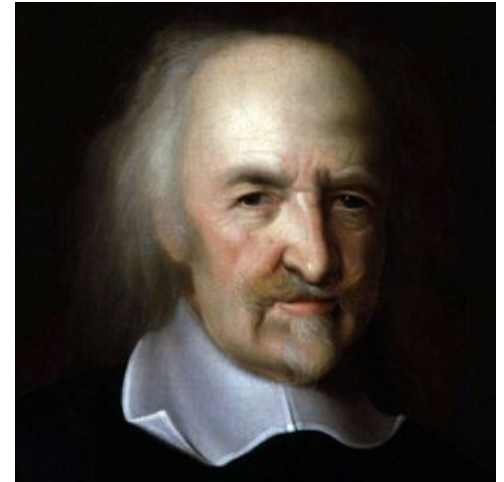


Human Nature: Hobbes

- Today we start discussing the connection between **human nature** and **political systems**.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679): English, considered the founding father of modern *political* philosophy,

- which investigates how governments (& other human institutions) work, and theorizes about how they *should* work.
- In other words, political philosophers make both *descriptive* and *normative* claims.



Descriptive claims intend to accurately characterize what something *really is* like *in our world*.

- e.g., *Monarchical governments (that is, those led by a king/queen, emperor/empress, etc.) are effective at producing social harmony.*

Normative claims express beliefs about what something *should be* like, or would be like *under ideal circumstances* or *in a perfect world*.

- e.g., *We should get rid of our democracy and elect a monarch in order to resolve our current social problems and create an ideal society.*



Hobbes lived through:

- two civil wars (1642-46, 1648-51),
- the execution of King Charles I (1649),
- the Interregnum period (where England was ruled as a commonwealth),
- and restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

All of these events likely inspired Hobbes to theorize about **what sort of government could bring about (and maintain) peace and justice.**



- He make the *normative* claim that **the ideal government is a monarchy**,
 - because human nature is such that individuals *cannot* be trusted to keep agreements with one another,
 - *unless* they are afraid of the consequences of disobeying the monarch's commands.

Hobbes believes that:

- in order to determine what sort of government we *should* have,
 - we need to identify *what human nature is like*.
- That means we need to think about what human beings are like in their natural condition – **the *state of nature***, before we became ‘civilized’.



...but what evidence can we use to figure out what humans were like before we became civilized?

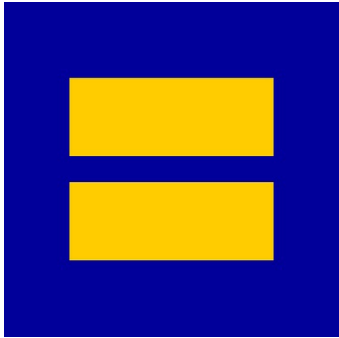
- Hobbes’ claims on this matter are pretty *speculative*:
 - i.e., based on educated guesses instead of facts.

It was common in Hobbes’ era (in which *colonialism* was rampant) to treat native cultures outside of Europe as examples of ‘uncivilized’ peoples.

- By today’s standards, regarding cultures different from one’s own as primitive and/or undeveloped is *Eurocentric* and, frankly, *racist*.

In *Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning their Felicity, and Misery* (1651), Hobbes insists that:

- all men (presumably, ***all humans***) ***are equal in the state of nature***.
- “Nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of body & mind... [such that] the difference between man and man is not so considerable as [to make it] that one man can...claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend as well as he.” (1)
 - » ...meaning, no one is naturally so much stronger and/or smarter than anyone else that he can reasonably claim to be superior to other people.



As a reply to those who may *object* that people are *not* born equal in strength and/or intelligence, **Hobbes argues that it only *appears* as if we are unequal,**

- **because we each think more highly of ourselves than we do of other people.**
 - “For such is the nature of men, that howsoever they may acknowledge many others to be more witty, or more eloquent, or more learned;
 - yet they will hardly believe there be any so wise as themselves.
 - For they see their own wit at hand, and other men’s at a distance.
 - » But this proveth rather that men are in that point *equal*”,
 - » since all humans are similarly prone to self-aggrandizement.₅

“From this equality of ability,
ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of ends” [i.e., goals] (1)

- ...and this is where the *trouble* starts.
 - We each perceive ourselves to be equally worthy of acquiring resources, rewards, and happiness,
 - but we cannot all get everything we think we deserve, since resources are limited.



Hobbes explains that

- “...if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, **they become *enemies***;
 - and in the way to their end [i.e., in order to get what they desire],
 - (which is principally their own *conservation*,
 - sometimes their *delectation* only),
 - endeavor to destroy, or subdue one another” (1):
 - ...just like animals fight to the death over food, mates, territory, and power.



» **video:** bit.ly/1Q3ifNI (*Mean Girls: the animal world*)

According to Hobbes,

- Anyone who seems to gain even the slightest advantage over any one else makes themselves *vulnerable*, to losing “not only the fruits of his labor, but also of his life or liberty,” (1)
 - ...because any individual’s success makes them a *target* of envy, theft, and competition.
- **So, each person will seek to protect themselves by intimidating others:**



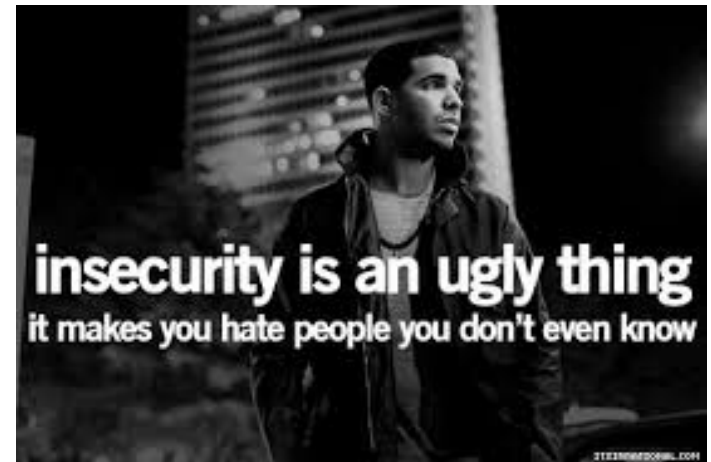
- “by force or wiles to master the persons of all men he can... [until] he see no other power great enough to endanger him:
 - and this is *no more than his own conservation requireth*, and is generally allowed.” (1)

» In the state of nature, **everyone does *whatever it takes to ensure their own survival*** (a.k.a. conservation, self-preservation)

- Moreover, **some people**, “taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest,” **will pursue power *beyond what is necessary for their survival***. (2)
 - This endangers the others, by using up resources they need to survive.

He identifies three reasons why human beings would behave this way in the state of nature.

- “in the nature of man, we find **three principle causes of quarrel** [i.e., fighting:]
 - First, ***competition***;
 - i.e., we strive to be better than our peers
 - “secondly, ***diffidence***;
 - that is, insecurity:
 - fear that others will notice our weaknesses prompts us to overcompensate with aggression
 - “thirdly; ***glory***.”
 - we want recognition and rewards for our accomplishments.



Hobbes says that in the state of nature, constant competition, mistrust, and fear of others means that:

- “men have *no pleasure*, but on the contrary a great deal of *grief* in keeping company,
- where there is no power able to over-awe them all.” (2)
- In other words,
 - If there is no figure who has authority over all human beings, then **living in society is painful and destructive**.



- He reasons that the *state of nature* must have been **miserable**,
 - and did *not* involve any of the positive features of life in society that we enjoy today,
 - » because the aspects of human nature that make us aggressive, greedy, and mean-spirited find their maximal expression when everyone is free to exercise them unchecked by any system of authority.
- **video:** bit.ly/1j6QKIF (*Lord of the Flies* trailer)

He goes on to characterize life in the state of nature as a ***war of “every man against every man”***.

- “...during the time men live *without a common power* to keep them all *in awe* [that is, *obedient out of fear*],
 - they are in that condition which is called war” (2)

– He explains that people are effectively at war any time where “the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known”:

- » “...the nature of war consisteth not in actual fighting,
- » but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary.” (ibid.)

- In other words, men are at war anytime they are:
 - prepared to fight with each other to protect themselves and/or to get ahead,
 - and have no reason to believe they aren’t at war.



Hobbes claims that

- as long as people are at war with one another,
- society is just way too chaotic to develop anything productive, such as:

- industry
- agriculture
- navigation
- overseas trade
- cities
- education
- art
- language
- civilization

Without a common ruler,

- people have “No arts, no letters, no society”,
- and live in “continual fear and danger of violent death.”

In this state,

- **“the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, & short.”** (2)



“Something’s just not right—our air is clean, our water is pure, we all get plenty of exercise, everything we eat is organic and free-range, and yet nobody lives past thirty.”

Hobbes thinks he can convince us that our nature is to be fearful and aggressive towards one another,

➤ by reminding us of *how we treat strangers*.

- “...when taking a journey, [a typical person] 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 [he does all] this when he knows there be laws and public officers armed to revenge all injuries shall be done him.

- What opinion [does he have] of his fellow subjects when he rides armed;
- of his fellow citizens when he locks his doors;
- and of his children and servants, when he locks his chests[?]

» Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions, as I do by my words?” (3)



For more evidence of the *nastiness* of the state of nature, Hobbes points to:

- **“savage people”** in the Americas, who “have no government at all, and live at this day in that brutish manner” (3)
- **civil wars** (which erupt in the absence of a common power), and
- **wars between sovereign nations** (who have no common ruler)



- “...in all times kings and persons of sovereignty, because of their independence, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators;
- having their weapons pointing and their eyes fixed on one another, that is, their forts, garrisons, and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms, and continual spies upon their neighbors, which is a posture of war.” (ibid.)

Hobbes also states that in war of every man against every other man,

- ***“nothing can be unjust.”***

- The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place.

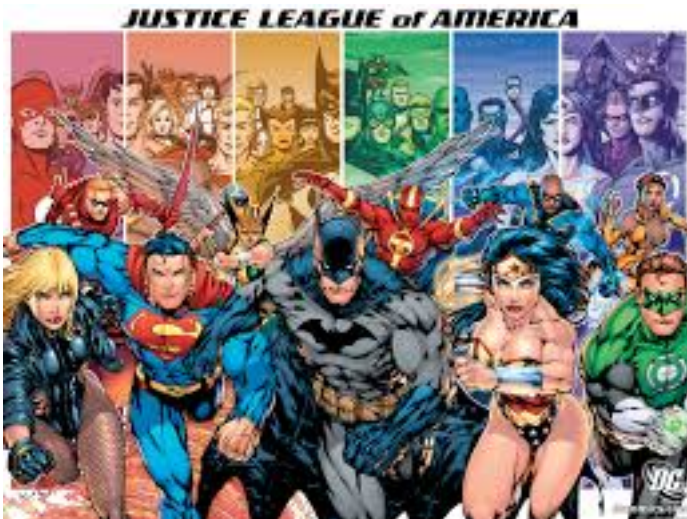
- Where there is no common power, there is no law;

- where no law, no injustice.” (3)

- Hobbes believes that **justice and injustice**

- “are qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude.” (3)***

- » That’s because it doesn’t make sense to speak of injustice except when a legal system has established what is just in some particular society.



- *Do you think that justice only exists when human laws have dictated what is right and wrong?*

- *...or instead, can justice be independent of any particular system of human laws?*

- e.g., is there such a thing as “divine justice”, established by God?

- Is there *universal* justice, that transcends national/cultural differences in law?

Fortunately, **people are drawn to seek peace by two elements of their nature:**

- their *passions*, and their *reason*.

- “The ***passions*** that incline men to peace are

- » *fear* of death,

- » *desire* of such things as are necessary to commodious living,

- » and a *hope* by their industry to obtain them.

- And ***reason*** suggest[s] convenient articles of peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement.

- » These articles are...the **Laws of Nature.**” (4)

➤ He explains that we derive Laws of Nature to deal with something called the **right of nature**:

- **the *liberty* each man hath to use his own power as he will himself for the preservation of his own nature**, that is to say, of his own life;

- and consequently, of doing *anything* which in his own judgment and reason he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.”

- » So, according to Hobbes, **we are all *entitled* by nature to do whatever it takes to ensure our own survival.**



The problem is that:

- “...as long as this natural right of every man to every thing endure[s],
- **there can be no security to any man**, [however wise or strong] he be, of living out the time which nature ordinarily alloweth men to live.” (4)
 - Each person’s right to do whatever is necessary for *their own* survival allows them to encroach on every *other* person’s right to do what they need in order to survive.
 - It’s therefore *impossible* for everyone to exercise their right to nature to the fullest extent without interfering with one another’s security.

Hobbes thinks we *ought to recognize* that **the right of nature endangers us all by pitting us against each other:**

- it is *self-destructive* for everyone in society to exercise their right to nature.

But by using our reason, we discover **laws of nature**, each of which “is a precept, or general rule,

- by which **a man is *forbidden* to do that which is destructive of his life,**
 - or taketh away the means of preserving the same,
 - and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved.” (4)

- Since laws of nature *forbid* us to “do that which is destructive of his life, “
- allowing everyone to exercise their right to nature *violates the laws of nature.*

Moreover, reason dictates that we follow this ***fundamental law of nature***:

- “**every man *ought to endeavor peace***, as far as he has hope of attaining it,
- and when he cannot obtain it, [then] he may seek and use all helps and advantages of war.” (4)

From the fundamental law follows of a ***second law of nature***:

- that “a man be willing, when others are so too,...to lay down this [natural] right to all things,
 - and be contented with [only] so much liberty against other men as he would allow other men against himself.” (4)

➤ In other words, **each man should be willing to give up some of his own rights for the sake of peace with all other men.**

➤ ***But, only if everyone agrees to give up their right of nature will everyone truly be protected from each other.***

- “...if other men will not lay down their right as well as he, then there is no reason for any one to divest himself of his:
- for that were to expose himself to prey (which no man is bound to) rather than to dispose himself to peace.”

– He notes that this is just like the **Golden Rule**: “*whatsoever you require that other should do for you, that do ye unto them.*” (4-5) ¹⁷

Lastly, Hobbes' **third law of nature** is

- “that [men] perform their covenants made,”
 - i.e., that **everyone keeps their agreement to give up their natural right.**



- » Otherwise (i.e., if people break the agreement),
 - “covenants are in vain, and but empty words,
 - and the right of all men to all things remaining, we are still in the condition of war.” (5)

According to Hobbes,

- » **To break a covenant “is unjust,**
- » and the definition of **injustice** is no other than the *not-performance of covenant.*” (ibid.)
 - i.e., breaking your promises to others.
- » So on Hobbes' view, **justice** turns out to be nothing more than *keeping your promises to others.*
 - It doesn't necessary involve doing what is morally correct,
 - but rather doing whatever your society has agreed upon.

SOLEMNE LEAGUE
AND
COVENANT,
FOR
REFORMATION.
AND

Defence of Religion, The Honour
and its quiet of the King, and the Peace
and Safety of the three Kingdomes
OF
SCOTLAND, ENGLAND, AND IRELAND.

1643. The Covenant is sworn to by the Lord in a solemn
and Covenant, that had not forgotten.
From 1643. Take what the will of the King, and
his Throned be of the Lord, in rightness for
2. CHURCHES. And all shall be kept in the Church for they
had, with much of their heart, and for the Lord with their
white hearts, and he was found of them, and the Lord gave
them up to stand about.

EDINBURGH,
Printed by Evan Tyler, Printer to the Kings
most Excellent Majesty. 1643.



Hobbes says that **a covenant made without mutual trust**,
“where there is fear of not-performance on either part,”
is not valid,

– and without valid covenants, there’s no justice. (5)

» So, **to secure justice**,

» ***we must make sure no one will be tempted to break their promises to each other.***

To institute justice, Hobbes declares:

– “there ***must*** be some **coercive power to compel men**
equally to the performance of their covenants,

– **by the terror of some punishment**,
greater than the benefit they expect
by the breach of their covenant” (ibid.)

➤ Such coercive power comes from
a **powerful and terrifying ruler**:

- someone like a *Leviathan*,
- a *terrifying mythological sea-monster*.



Hobbes thinks only a fool could believe that justice could exist *without* a powerful leader to ensure that we keep our covenants.

➤ He has arrived at the conclusion:

- If **we want to have justice**, then **we must have a common power**.
 - **video:** bit.ly/1Pg1gcv

He also believes that rational people are guaranteed to keep their covenants under the Leviathan's power:

- If **A** has already held up their end of the agreement,
- and there is a power who can force **B** to fulfill their end of the bargain (by threat of punishment),
- then the rational thing for **B** to do is always to keep the covenant, because:
 - It is irrational to do anything that may hurt oneself (like getting punished by the Leviathan),
 - Breaking a covenant will result in his getting cast out of society, and
 - No one man can expect to get by alone (apart from society), without the support of their fellow citizens.

Hobbes has argued:

- Human beings are naturally selfish, competitive, & belligerent,
 - and are all equally invested in ensuring their own survival by any means necessary.
- So, we are better off (happier, safer, etc.) and can only develop productive civilizations if we can all agree:
 - *not* to use our natural abilities *to fight* against each other,
 - but *instead cooperate* with each other, on the basis of mutual trust.
 - We do this by forming agreements with another.
- But in order to trust each other and keep our agreements with one another,
 - we need one common power to keep us all in check.
 - *Only* then can peace and justice arise.
- ***...but think about what Milgram's experiment revealed our propensity to obey authority.***
 - *What risks do we run by relying upon authority to protect ourselves against each other?*
 - *What other modes of government might ensure peace & justice?*

