

Three Sample Papers

Below are three sample papers in response to the following assignment:

Hobbes claims that all men are by nature equal. What role does this claim play in Hobbes's argument that the state of nature is a state of war?

What advice would you give authors? Which paper do you expect would get the highest grade? (Ties for first are possible.)

Notes:

1. This is from an exercise that I have done in Philosophy 2. Students in that class have a bit more context, since they have heard lectures on Hobbes and read the relevant passages:

Leviathan, Ch. 13–15, 17, available at:

<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-contents.html>

Nevertheless, you may be surprised at how far you can go in evaluating papers even without that context.

2. All three papers were written by me. So don't worry that you're harshing on real-life students!

Paper A

When Hobbes writes that all men are by nature equal, he means simply that any person can be killed by others. He does not deny that some people may have better abilities, such as being stronger or smarter. However, he claims that these differences are too small to matter: to change the fact that every person is at risk of being killed. For Hobbes, the “state of nature” is any situation where there’s no government. He argues that three causes, which he calls “competition,” “diffidence,” and “glory,” make the state of nature a “state of war”: that is, a situation in which it makes sense for everyone to attack other people. I will try to show how, according to Hobbes, the natural equality of people contributes to these causes.

Hobbes points out that different people often want the same things. Therefore, they want to take those things for themselves by force, if they can. To see how natural equality is relevant to this, imagine that someone tries to take something from me in the state of nature. Should I let her have it, or should I fight back? Since I know that I am her natural equal, I know that I have roughly the same chance of beating her as she has of beating me. Therefore, it makes sense for me to fight back. By contrast, if I knew that she were by nature superior to me, then I would know for sure that she would beat me if I fought back. In such a case, it would make sense for me to back off and let her have it. In sum, natural equality leads people to fight over things—which is what Hobbes means by “competition”—because everyone thinks that he has a decent chance of winning.

People who have “glory,” according to Hobbes, have two features. First, they think that they are naturally better than other people. In other words, they think that they are more likely to beat others than to be beaten by them. Second, they actually enjoy thinking this. People with glory are likely to start fights with others for three reasons. First, they are convinced that they will win. Second, there’s more in it for them if they do win. If they win, then this will

strengthen even more their belief they are better, and they like having this belief. Although these two reasons don't seem to have much to do with natural equality, the third reason does. Hobbes thinks that we want everyone else to think that we are as powerful as we think we are. If someone does not agree with us about how powerful we are, we feel "dishonored." When people feel dishonored, Hobbes claims, they often start fights, to convince others that they are as powerful as they think. If someone realizes that he is equal to others, then others will agree, since all people are naturally equal. But people with glory believe that they are better than others. Since all people are equal, others will not agree. Therefore, people with glory will be dishonored, and so will go on the attack.

Because people in the state of nature know about competition and glory, they will expect that others will attack them. This expectation—which is what Hobbes means by "diffidence"—gives people a third reason to go on the attack. If others are going to attack you eventually, then the best you can do is beat them to it: that is, attack them now, before they have a chance to get any stronger. As far as I can tell, natural equality contributes to diffidence indirectly. Natural equality contributes to competition and glory, and they then produce diffidence.

Usually, when people talk about "equality" in politics, they mean how things *should* be: for example, that the government *should* treat people equally. By contrast, when Hobbes talks about "equality," he means how things *are*: namely, everyone can kill everyone else. Therefore, Hobbes wants to argue, our lives are at risk unless we accept the kind of authoritarian government he wants. Maybe this is a strength of his argument. Hobbes doesn't rest his case on a vague and difficult-to-prove moral assumption, like "All people have equal rights." Instead, he points out, matter-of-factly, that without his "sovereign" our lives are in danger, and then appeals to the desire that we all have to stay alive.

Paper B

Thomas Hobbes believes “all men are created equal.” He really means all human beings. He says that the state of nature is a state of war. I will show how he combines these radical and scintillating ideas into a thought provoking package.

Men are by nature equal means no one “can be reasonably assured that he will *not be killed* by the rest of us.” (Handout 9/28/07.) The state of nature means “the state in which a certain *artifact*, namely a *political* state, is missing.” (Handout 9/28/07.) The state of war means total combat.

How is the state of nature turned into the state of war? Competition is people are competitive and they start to fight. Diffidence is “mutual mistrust.” This is a two-way street: I don’t trust you, and also the opposite way. Not shy the way we nowadays say. If we don’t trust each other then how are we going to get along? Diffidence is the second cause. Finally there is also a third cause.

Glory happens when people are better than others and like being better than others. It is OK when our “home” team wins we all feel good about it. In the state of war these glory feelings get more deadly and lethal. “Those given to (vain)glory will attack because they overestimate their abilities.” They also “enjoy the experience of subduing others,” because they are “easily dishonored.” Dishonored means people aren’t being respected. Feelings get pent up and then people “lash out” and express how they really feel.

After these causes Hobbes talks about the state of war. He says poetically it is a state that is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Felicity isn’t the same as pleasure or eudaimonia and there isn’t one kind of happiness. The idea of a prisoner’s dilemma helps make this clear.

Since the dawn of time, human beings have struggled for the equal rights and human dignity. Hobbes is realistic and knows that there are bad people out there. Sometimes we must fight to preserve our natural equality. It would be better if we didn't have to of course everyone will say this. Hobbes shows us that we can hope for a better day with his idea government is a giant Leviathan monster.

Paper C

When Hobbes writes that men are by nature equal, he should not be taken to be referring to Aristotelian natures. Indeed, Hobbes's philosophy represents a decisive break from the received Aristotelian *Weltanschauung* that still dominated the intellectual landscape of seventeenth-century Europe. For Aristotle, not only each different kind of matter (that is, each of the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water), but also each species of plant and animal has a "nature": a qualitatively distinct and irreducible principle of change, which inheres in it and governs how it behaves. By contrast, for Hobbes, everything that happens is explained simply by bits of matter with quantitative, rather than qualitative, properties, such as size, shape, motion, interacting with one another. One might think of this a primitive version of our own scientific worldview, which ultimately explains everything, from biology to astronomy, in terms of the same fundamental particles, waves, and fields of force. After Hobbes, we for the first time look out on a universe that has been, so to speak, disenchanted: stripped of any inherent natures.

Nor, when Hobbes writes that men are by nature equal, should he be taken to be denying the manifest differences in people's native endowments. He acknowledges, without reservation, that some are quicker of wit, stouter of limb, and fleet of foot. The gifts that men are bestowed at birth are, alas, not always fairly distributed.

In what sense, then, is every man by nature the equal of every other? In the following sense: that no one can be free from the justified fear that he may be killed by his fellows. Even his meekest, frailest, simplest neighbor is to every man a mortal danger. For even if that neighbor cannot kill him by his own hand, still he can do so by "secret machination"—cunning deception—or "confederacy"—joining his forces together with those of others until their gathered powers become irresistible.

How then does the state of nature—a state in which no one of us is clad with the protections that only political order can bring—become a state of war—a raging conflagration that threatens to engulf every man, woman, and child? How becomes this Eden a charred and ravaged country, whence no one escapes the scars of violent conflict?

In no fewer than three ways, Hobbes answers: competition, diffidence, and glory. “From this equality of ability,” Hobbes writes, “ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends” (XIII, 3). All people seek the same things in their struggle for survival. All people need food to eat, water to drink, shelter to protect them from the elements. Thus, they are led to conflict violently over those things. This is Hobbes’s first cause of war: competition.

Next comes Hobbes’s second cause: diffidence. This is our shared distrust of one another. No man can rest assured that others will keep the peace. If no man can count on any other to be faithful to the bargains that he has struck, then all treaties will be brittle. When no equal can trust his fellow equal, war is inevitable.

Finally, we come to the cause of “glory.” Men who are afflicted with the disease of glory are given to think that they have greater powers than others. Moreover, they take the greatest pleasure in entertaining thoughts of their own superiority. Nothing is sweeter, nothing more delightful, to a man driven mad by glory, by inflated thoughts of his own powers, than conquering others and imposing on them his iron will. Of course, for Hobbes, glory really is a kind of insanity. Its grandiose conceits are mere illusion. For all men are by nature equal.

Thus, we have seen the pivotal role that Hobbes’s thesis of natural equality plays in his argument that the state of nature is a state of war. It may seem surprising that our natural equality should be the root cause of our downfall. No doubt, this is why Hobbes’s philosophy continues to this day both to disturb and to fascinate us.