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Hobbes: Man as Mechanism, State as Artifact

The Hobbesian paradox:

His *premises* seem thoroughly *democratic*. All men, in his view, are naturally free and equal, and no state is legitimate without their consent.

But his *conclusions* seem entirely *undemocratic*. Men ought to consent to a state in which a single body wields all political power, in whatever way it likes.

Why? The democratic premises create an intolerable problem, and the undemocratic conclusion offers the only stable solution to it. Today, we look at the premises.

Hobbes's rejection of Aristotelian natural purposes:

Hobbes rejects Aristotle's theory of natures for a "mechanistic" or "corpuscular" alternative.

- There are only *bits of matter*,
- distinguished only by *quantifiable* properties, such as shape and size.
- Everything that happens is explained by the *spatial motions* of these bits of matter,
- where these motions are governed by *universal laws*, which govern everything, everywhere.

Since there are no natures, Hobbes believes, there are no natural purposes. Bits of matter move in certain ways, and certain things result. That's it.

Hobbes's rejection of Aristotelian political philosophy: the state as artifact

As Hobbes makes clear in the Introduction, the state is not natural, as Aristotle claimed. It is instead an artifact. The state is a tool that we have deliberately designed for our own self-preservation.

Hobbes's rejection of Aristotelian ethics: good

For Aristotle, we approach ethical questions by asking after the man's natural purpose, which determines his good. For Hobbes, man does not have a natural purpose. Instead, Hobbes starts simply by describing what happens. People are made up of matter. This matter behaves in certain ways: there are certain "motions of the body." These motions of the body cause people as a whole to be disposed to do certain things.

- *Desire*=a motion towards what causes it.
- What a man calls "*good*"=what he desires=what he tends to move towards.

There is no fact of the matter whether something really is *good*, whether we *ought* to desire it. There are only facts about what we *do*, in fact, desire. No *justification*, only *description*.

Is this coherent? Hobbes describes certain "laws of nature": a list of basic moral rules, such as "Keep your promises." Hobbes seems to be *advising* us to follow these laws of nature, these basic moral rules. But if Hobbes is *advising* us to follow these laws, isn't he saying that we *ought* to follow them, that it would be *good* to follow them?

Hobbes's rejection of Aristotelian ethics: happiness

So what is the effect that we want? *Not* happiness. The closest thing in Hobbes to Aristotle's *eudaimonia* is "felicity." Felicity is simply success in satisfying whatever desires we have.

- Felicity isn't something, like *eudaimonia*, that we desire for its own sake.
- And we can never achieve felicity, because as soon as we satisfy one desire, new desires appear. "A perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death."

Why do we desire power (=the means to satisfy our desires) after power? Does the problem lie within us—in our psychology—or without us—in our circumstances?

- If our desires *for ends* were insatiable, then the problem would lie within us.
- But perhaps the problem is that, although our desires for ends are satiable, we find ourselves in circumstances in which we need *ever greater means* to sate them.
- Which circumstances lead to this result? Not our natural circumstances, it seems.
- Instead, our social circumstances. But why? We will see next time. It has something to do with...

Hobbes's "Glory"

- (1) having the thought that we have power and
- (2) liking that thought.

Kinds of glory:

- (a) confidence: based on a *justified* belief in one's power.
- (b) vainglory: based on a *unjustified* belief in one's power.
 - (i) merely *entertains the thought* that one has power, as in a daydream.
 - (ii) actually *believes*, but *unjustifiably*, that one has power.

The kind of glory that most interests Hobbes:

- (1) actually *believing* that one has *greater power than others* and
- (2) liking that belief.

This is a kind of vainglory of type (b)(ii), since in the state of nature, the belief that one has greater power than others is not justified.

This kind of glory has three very nasty effects:

- (A) because one actually *believes* that one has greater power than others, one is inclined to "rash engaging": i.e., picking fights one that one may well lose
- (B) because one *likes* the belief that one has greater power than others, one is inclined to pick fights for the chance to experience, if one wins, one's greater power in action.
- (C) because one actually *believes* that one has greater power than others, one is particularly vulnerable to being *dishonored* by others. To dishonor someone, as Hobbes uses the term, is to value him less highly than he values himself. When one is dishonored, one is inclined to extort honor by force.

These effects are especially nasty, because in the state of nature all men have equal powers. So:

- one will pick fights with people who won't back down, leading to bloodshed on both sides, and
- one will be dishonored, since others won't value one's powers as highly as one does.