

Phil 114, February 1, 2007
Hobbes: The role of consent

Obligation=a duty to obey another.

One acquires *obligations only* by voluntary consent. There is “no obligation on any man which ariseth not from some act of his own; for all men equally are by nature free” (XXI, 10).

Why does obligation require consent? Why do duties to obey others depend on our choices? What does it have to do with the claim that “all men equally are by nature free”?

Recall:

- We are *naturally equal* in the sense that none can be assured of his self-preservation, and
- *naturally free* in the sense that we have no duty not to take anything that might serve our self-preservation.

Hobbes’s argument proceeds from the premises that

- (i) no one can be assured of his self-preservation and
- (ii) no one has a duty not to do what promotes his self-preservation

to the conclusion that:

- (iii) no one has an obligation to obey another unless he has agreed to obey him,

which just means:

- (iv) it is not necessary for anyone’s self-preservation to obey another, unless one has agreed to obey him.

Before a covenant to obey another, it does *not* jeopardize one’s self-preservation *not* to do what someone else commands.

Indeed, it may often jeopardize one’s self-preservation *to* do what someone else commands. Consider the command: “Put down your weapons, take off your armor, and close your eyes.” What point is there in obeying that command, given that the person making it is one’s natural equal?

But after a covenant to obey another, the picture changes. Now—if the reply to the fool succeeds—it does jeopardize one’s self-preservation *not* to do what that person commands. It jeopardizes our self-preservation in the same way that not performing any other covenant jeopardizes our self-preservation.

God *can* rightfully command men *without* their consent.

- Why?
- Because God wields “irresistible power” (XXXI, 5). We are not God’s natural equals. He’s sure to punish us if we don’t do what he says.
- Therefore, it undermines our self-preservation—at very least after this earthly life—not to do what God commands, even if we haven’t made a covenant.

Objection: Aren't there cases in which another human being can determine whether we live or die? Why should his or her right to command us depend on our consent?

- Example 1: "Sovereignty by acquisition." Even when a conqueror holds your life in his hands, you have an obligation to obey him only if you consent.
- Example 2: Hobbes insists that children are obligated to obey their mother not by generation, but instead by consent. "For it ought to obey him by whom it is preserved, because preservation of life being the end for which one man becomes subject to another, every man is supposed to promise obedience to him in whose power it is to save or destroy him" (XX, 5). The suggestion seems to be that power over life and death *implies* a promise of obedience, which in turn implies an obligation to obey.
- But what work is the promise really doing here? *Why not go straight from the power over life and death to the obligation to obey?*
- Perhaps the reason is that there is no guarantee that the conqueror's or mother's power, like God's, will continue to be irresistible...
- ...and so, unless you covenant, you would not continue to be obligated to obey after your mother or conqueror ceased to have power over your life and death, e.g., when you grow up, or when your conqueror's back is turned.

Question: Does Hobbes's claim that there is no obligation without consent follow directly from rejecting Aristotle's view that some obligations to obey are natural?

Not necessarily:

- There might be another alternative to nature, besides consent: *accident* or *luck*.
- Hobbes accepts that one person, by luck, might subdue his natural equals.
- Suppose we say that he acquires authority over them, whether or not they consent.
- We would *not* be endorsing Aristotle's view that he was *by nature* such as to rule over others.
- No: neither man was better than the other; neither was more likely to succeed. It's just that someone had to win, and as things played out, it happened to be this guy.