



Thomas Hobbes

Social Contract Ethics

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was born in Malmesbury, England, to poor and uneducated parents. Because he was precocious, however, his uncle provided the financial assistance needed to send him to Oxford University. There, finding the curriculum of scholastic logic boring and Aristotelian physics confusing and irksome, he devoted much of his time to independent reading of literary classics. Upon graduation in 1608, Hobbes was selected as a tutor for the young son of the Cavendish family, a family to which he was attached for almost the whole of his life. In this capacity, he had sufficient time to reflect, to travel, and to become acquainted with such outstanding contemporary philosophers and scientists as Galileo, Bacon, Kepler, and Descartes.

It is reported in John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* that at the age of forty, quite by chance, Hobbes became enamored of the deductive certainty of mathematics. "Being in a gentleman's library, Euclid's *Elements* lay open, and 'twas the forty-seventh [theorem of Book I]. He read the proposition. 'By God,' he said, 'this is impossible.' So he reads the demonstration of it which referred him back to such a proposition: which proposition he read. That referred him back to another, which he also read. [And so back to the self-evident axioms, when] at last he was demonstratively convinced of that truth. This made him in love with geometry." Presumably, at about the same time, he read Galileo's *Dialogues* and became firmly convinced that a systematic philosophy must be based on the physical principle that every change is a change in motion. The deductive form of geometry and the materialism of physics became essential features of his philosophy, which was then in its formative stage.

During the period of Hobbes' intellectual development, the English political scene was one of constant crisis and turbulence. While the tension between Parliament and King Charles I was at its peak, Hobbes wrote a political treatise defending the doctrine of absolute sovereignty. He believed that absolute sovereignty was the necessary condition of a secure and peaceful society, arguing that if supreme authority were to be divided

and limited, as, for example, between the King and Parliament, only chaos could result. Though he made no explicit reference to the current situation, Hobbes imagined that he was in danger of reprisal from Parliament and fled to France. During this self-imposed and unnecessary exile (1640–1651), he engaged in philosophical inquiry, tutored the future Charles II, and wrote the important political treatise, *De Cive (On the State)* in 1642 and his major philosophical work, *Leviathan*, in 1651.

Upon his return to England, Hobbes remained aloof from the political scene but continued to write. The most significant work of this period was *De Homine (On Man)*, published in 1658. Although Hobbes' writings exhibit fine scholarship, they are particularly distinguished by their penetration and originality.

Historically, Thomas Hobbes is the first philosopher to apply systematically the basic assumptions of seventeenth-century science to human behavior. Impressed with the advance in "natural philosophy" achieved by Copernicus in astronomy, Galileo in physics, and Harvey in physiology, Hobbes attempts to obtain comparable results in the other divisions of philosophy.¹ He envisions a unification of all the branches of philosophy, the study of physical bodies, the study of living bodies, and the study of political bodies. Convinced that the key to the success of physics resided in its underlying assumption of *mechanistic materialism*—the view that everything is ultimately reducible to material bodies in motion—Hobbes extends this doctrine to psychology and to political and moral philosophy. He insists that although the several sciences investigate different subject matter, the basic laws of each describe the motions of bodies.

Hobbes' moral philosophy is directly related to his psychological theory, in which he constructs his mechanistic conception of motivation. He opposes the prevailing notion of his time that the mind and body are different substances, maintaining that *mental phenomena are nothing but physiological motions*. The thoroughgoing nature of his psychology comes out most forcibly in his mechanistic analysis of voluntary actions. These he traces to a variety of "animal motions," which he calls *endeavors*—that is, predispositions to act in a certain direction. Endeavors are mechanically initiated by sensory stimuli, augmented by the action of imagination and memory, and guided by a calculated appraisal of the situation. The most important kinds of endeavors are *desires* and *aversions*. Desires move one to pursue objects, and aversions move one to avoid objects. Endeavors are not only the chief determinants of behavior but also the basis of evaluations.

Evaluating objects or actions as good or evil depends, Hobbes insists, on no other basis than desires and aversions. No objects or actions are intrinsically good—that is, good by their very nature. Rather, people call *good* the objects of their desires, whereas they call *evil* the objects of their aversions. Therefore, evaluations are *transient* and *relative to the individual*. Values are transient, because the desire for an object may change to indifference or even to aversion: What is good on one occasion may on another be ethically neutral or even evil. Values are relative to the individual, because one person may love an object to which a second is indifferent and that a third may hate: The same object is then simultaneously good, neutral, and evil.

Another feature of Hobbes' psychological theory is his conception of human nature as completely and exclusively egoistic. He depicts people as being by nature

¹ *Philosophy* was for some time used interchangeably with *knowledge* and *science*. For example, physics was referred to as one of the branches of natural philosophy and ethics were included under moral philosophy.

entirely selfish and devoid of any genuine feelings of sympathy, benevolence, or sociability. Each individual is preoccupied exclusively with the gratification of personal desires, and one's success in maintaining a continuous flow of gratifications is the measure of one's happiness. The means for attaining the objects of desire Hobbes calls *power*. He maintains that in a natural state, individuals are approximately equal in their mental and physical powers. Under these conditions, intense competition eliminates virtually all chances for individuals to achieve happiness and, what is more serious, threatens their very survival.

Hobbes believes that reason points to voluntary collective organization as the most effective way for individuals to utilize their powers. When our rights to do whatever will satisfy our desires are deputed to a central governing authority, the conditions requisite to our survival and happiness are provided. Each individual asserts in effect, "I authorize, and give up my right of governing myself, to this man or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right and authorize all his actions in a like manner." It is through a "social contract" that the state of nature is transformed into a civil society:

A commonwealth is said to be instituted when a multitude of men do agree, and covenant, every one, with everyone, that to whatsoever man, or assembly of men, shall be given by the major part, the right to present the person of them all, that is to say, to be their representative; everyone, as well he that voted for it, as he that voted against it, shall authorize all the actions and judgments, of that man, or assembly of men, in the same manner, as if they were his own, to the end, to live peaceably amongst themselves, and be protected against other men.^a

With the establishment of the commonwealth through the social contract, Hobbes tells us, the necessary and sufficient condition for morality is present. Whatever is in accordance with the law of the sovereign is *right*, whereas that which deviates from it is *wrong*. Hobbes thus establishes *civil authority and law as the foundation of morality*. He is arguing that morality requires social authority, which must be in the hands of the sovereign. The will of a sovereign power whose authority is absolute and indivisible constitutes the only law by which human behavior can be properly regulated. Morality, then, is based on law—the law of the absolute sovereign. Only with the institution of a government that can reward right action and punish wrongdoing is moral conduct possible. Without a civil authority, it would be foolish and dangerous to follow the precepts of morality, whereas with it, morality turns out to be the "dictate of reason." In the last analysis, we are moral only because it is conducive to individual security, and the prime condition of security is absolute civil power.

1. The elements of Hobbes' psychological theory are presented in a set of principles that govern the various "motions" of the human mind.

There be in animals, two sorts of *motions* peculiar to them: one called *vital*; begun in

generation, and continued without interruption through their whole life; such as are the *course of the blood*, the *pulse*, the *breathing*, the *concoction*, *nutrition*, *excretion*, etc., to which motions there needs no help of imagination; the other is *animal motion*, otherwise called *voluntary motion*; as to *go*, to *speak*, to *move* any

of our limbs, in such manner as is first fancied in our minds. That sense of motion in the organs and interior parts of man's body, caused by the action of the things we see, hear, etc.; and that fancy is but the relics of the same motion, remaining after sense, has been already said in the first and second chapters. And because *going*, *speaking*, and the like voluntary motions, depend always upon a precedent thought of *whither*, *which way*, and *what*; it is evident, that the imagination is the first internal beginning of all voluntary motion. And although unstudied men do not conceive any motion at all to be there, where the thing moved is invisible; or the space it is moved in is, for the shortness of it, insensible; yet that doth not hinder, but that such motions are. For let a space be never so little, that which is moved over a greater space, whereof that little one is part, must first be moved over that. These small beginnings of motion, within the body of man, before they appear in walking, speaking, striking, and other visible actions, are commonly called ENDEAVOR.

This endeavor, when it is toward something which causes it, is called APPETITE, or DESIRE; the latter, being the general name; and the other oftentimes restrained to signify the desire of food, namely *hunger* and *thirst*. And when the endeavor is fromward something, it is generally called AVERSION. These words, *appetite* and *aversion*, we have from the Latins; and they both of them signify the motions, one of approaching, the other of retiring. . . . For nature itself does often press upon men those truths, which afterwards, when they look for somewhat beyond nature, they stumble at. For the schools find in mere appetite to go, or move, no actual motion at all: but because some motion they must acknowledge, they call it metaphorical motion; which is but an absurd speech: for though words may be called metaphorical; bodies and motions cannot.

That which men desire, they are also said to LOVE: and to HATE those things for which they have aversion. So that desire and love are the same thing; save that by desire, we always

signify the absence of the object; by love, most commonly the presence of the same. So also by aversion, we signify the absence; and by hate, the presence of the object.

Of appetites and aversions, some are born with men; as appetite of food, appetite of excretion, and exoneration, which may also and more properly be called aversions, from somewhat they feel in their bodies; and some other appetites, not many. The rest, which are appetites of particular things, proceed from experience, and trial of their effects upon themselves or other men. For of things we know not at all, or believe not to be, we can have no further desire, than to taste and try. But aversion we have for things, not only which we know have hurt us, but also that we do not know whether they will hurt us, nor not.

Those things which we neither desire, nor hate, we are said to *contemn*; CONTEMPT being nothing else by an immobility, or contumacy of the heart, in resisting the action of certain things; and proceeding from that the heart is already moved otherwise, by other more potent objects; or from want of experience of them.

And because the constitution of a man's body is in continual mutation, it is impossible that all the same things should always cause in him the same appetites, and aversions: much less can call men consent, in the desire of almost any one and the same object.^b

2. Hobbes interprets the traditional ethical concepts, "good" and "evil," in terms of this mechanistic psychological theory.

But whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth *good*: and the object of his hate and aversion, *evil*; and of his contempt, *vile* and *inconsiderable*. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves.^c

3. For people in a presocial state, the desires and aversions that underlie their judgments of good and evil are directed toward their primary objective, self-preservation. Hobbes terms continual success in preserving oneself *felicity* or *happiness*. Various objects of desire—that is, goods such as friendship, riches, and intelligence—promote this felicity. Friends are good because they come to our defense when we are in difficulties; riches are good because they buy the allies we need for our security; intelligence is good because it alerts us to danger.

When the objects of desire are examined from the point of view of effectiveness in promoting felicity, they are termed powers. Hobbes ascribes to humans in their natural state a general tendency to “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death.” When several persons desire the same object, enmity arises; and because nature endows them equally with the various mental and physical powers, the personal confidence that each one feels intensifies the likelihood of conflict.

Nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of the body, and mind; as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himself.

And as to the faculties of the mind, setting aside the arts grounded upon words, and especially that skill of proceeding upon general, and infallible rules, called science; which very few have, and but in few things; as being not a native faculty, born with us; nor attained, as

prudence, while we look after somewhat else, I find yet a greater equality amongst men, than that of strength. For prudence, is but experience; which equal time, equally bestows on all men, in those things they equally apply themselves unto. That which may perhaps make such equality incredible, is but a vain conceit of one’s own wisdom, which almost all men think they have in a greater degree, than the vulgar; that is, than all men but themselves, and a few others, whom by fame, or for concurring with themselves, they approve. 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 many 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, than unequal. For there is not ordinarily a greater sign of the equal distribution of any thing, than that every man is contented with his share.

From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end, which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only, endeavor to destroy, or subdue one another. And from hence it comes to pass, that where an invader hath no more to fear, than another man’s single power; if one plant, sow, built, or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united, to dispossess, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labor, but also of his life, or liberty. And the invader again is in the like danger of another.

And from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable, as anticipation; that is, for force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see no other power great enough to endanger him: and this is no more than his own conservation requireth, and is generally allowed. Also because there be some,

that taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires; if others, that otherwise would be glad to be at ease within modest bounds, should not by invasion increase their power, they would not be able, long time, by standing only on their defense, to subsist. And by consequence, such augmentation of dominion over men being necessary to a man's conservation, it ought to be allowed him.

Again, men have no pleasure, but on the contrary a great deal of grief, in keeping company, where there is no power able to overawe them all. For every man looketh that his companion should value him, at the same rate he sets upon himself: and upon all signs of contempt, or undervaluing, naturally endeavors, as far as he dares, (which amongst them that have no common power to keep them in quiet, is far enough to make them destroy each other), to extort a greater value from his contemners, by damage; and from others, by the example.^d

4. From his examination of the contentiousness of people in the absence of political organization, Hobbes discovers three sources of controversy in human nature. The natural condition of human beings, he says, is universal war. He does not claim that the "state of nature" actually existed historically; rather, it exists in any time or place where civil society is not functioning.

So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory.

The first, maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety, and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other men's persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons, or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man. For WAR, consisteth not in battle only, or act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of *time*, is to be considered in the nature of war; as it is in the nature of weather. For as the nature of foul weather, lieth not in a shower or two of rain; but in an inclination thereto of many days together: so 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. All other time is PEACE.

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. . . .

It may peradventure be thought, there was never such a time, nor condition of war as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world: but there are many places, where they live so now. For the savage people in many places of America, except the government of small families, the concord whereof dependeth on natural lust, have no government at all; and live at this day in that brutish manner, as I said before. Howsoever, it may be perceived what manner of life there would be, where there were no common power to fear, by the manner of life, which men that have formerly lived under

a peaceful government, use to degenerate into, in a civil war.

But though there had never been any time, wherein particular men were in a condition of war one against another; yet in all times, kings, and persons of sovereign authority, because of the independency, 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. But because they uphold thereby, the industry of their subjects; there does not follow from it, that misery, which accompanies the liberty of particular men.^c

5. Hobbes argues that society originates out of self-interest and fear, not out of natural feeling for other people. He defends as natural and reasonable the interest one takes in one's own welfare and happiness. In a state of nature, the first and only rule of life is self-protection, and human beings have a natural right to do anything that serves this end.

All society therefore is either for gain, or for glory; that is, not so much for love of our fellows, as for the love of ourselves. But no society can be great or lasting, which begins from vain glory. Because that glory is like honor; if all men have it no man hath it, for they consist in comparison and precellence. Neither doth the society of others advance any whit the cause of my glorying in myself; for every man must account himself, such as he can make himself without the help of others. But though the benefits of this life may be much furthered by mutual help; since yet those may be better attained to by dominion than by the society of others, I hope no body will doubt, but that men would much more greedily be carried by nature, if all fear were removed, to obtain dominion, than to gain society. We must therefore resolve, that the original of all great and lasting societies

consisted not in the mutual goodwill men had towards each other, but in the mutual fear they had of each other.

The cause of mutual fear consists partly in the natural equality of men, partly in their mutual will of hurting: whence it comes to pass, that we can neither expect from others, nor promise to ourselves the least security. For if we look on men full grown, and consider how brittle the frame of our human body is, which perishing, all its strength, vigor, and wisdom itself perisheth with it; and how easy a matter it is, even for the weakest man to kill the strongest: there is no reason why any man, trusting to his own strength, should conceive himself made by nature above others. They are equals, who can do equal things one against the other; but they who can do the greatest things, namely, kill, can do equal things. All men therefore among themselves are by nature equal; the inequality we now discern, hath its spring from the civil law. . . .

Among so many dangers therefore, as the natural lusts of men do daily threaten each other withal, to have a care of one's self is so far from being a matter scornfully to be looked upon, that one has neither the power nor wish to have done otherwise. For every man is desirous of what is good for him, and shuns what is evil, but chiefly the chiefest of natural evils, which is death; and this he doth by a certain impulsion of nature, no less than that whereby a stone moves downward. It is therefore neither absurd nor reprehensible, neither against the dictates of true reason, for a man to use all his endeavors to preserve and defend his body and the members thereof from death and sorrows. But that which is not contrary to right reason, that all men account to be done justly, and with right. Neither by the word *right* is anything else signified, than that liberty which every man hath to make use of his natural faculties according to right reason. Therefore the first foundation of natural right is this, that *every man as much as in him lies endeavor to protect his life and members.*

But because it is in vain for a man to have a right to the end, if the right to the necessary

means be denied him, it follows, that since every man hath a right to preserve himself, he must also be allowed a right *to use all the means, and do all the actions, without which he cannot preserve himself.*

Now whether the means which he is about to use, and the action he is performing, be necessary to the preservation of his life and members or not, he himself, by the right of nature, must be judge. For if it be contrary to right reason that I should judge of mine own peril, say that another man is judge. Why now, because he judgeth of what concerns me, by the same reason, because we are equal by nature, will I judge also of things which do belong to him. Therefore it agrees with right reason, that is, it is the right of nature that I judge of his opinion, that is, whether it conduce to my preservation or not.

Nature hath given to *everyone a right to all*; that is, it was lawful for every man, in the bare state of nature, or before such time as men had engaged themselves by any covenants or bonds, to do what he would, and against whom he thought fit, and to possess, use, and enjoy all what he would, or could get. Now because whatsoever a man would, it therefore seems good to him because he wills it, and either it really doth, or at least seems to him to contribute towards his preservation, (but we have already allowed him to be judge, in the foregoing article, whether it doth or not, insomuch as we are to hold all for necessary whatsoever he shall esteem so), and . . . it appears that by the right of nature those things may be done, and must be had, which necessarily conduce to the protection of life and members, it follows, that in the state of nature, to have all, and do all, is lawful for all. And this is that which is meant by that common saying, *nature hath given all to all*. From whence we understand likewise, that in the state of nature profit is the measure of right.

But it was the least benefit for men thus to have a common right to all things. For the effects of this right are the same, almost, as if there had been no right at all. For although any man might say of every thing, *this is mine*, yet could he not enjoy it, by reason of his neighbor,

who having equal right and equal power, would pretend the same thing to be his.

If now to this natural proclivity of men, to hurt each other, which they derive from their passions, but chiefly from a vain esteem of themselves, you add, the right of all to all, wherewith one by right invades, the other by right resists, and whence arise perpetual jealousies and suspicions on all hands, and how hard a thing it is to provide against an enemy invading us with an intention to oppress and ruin, though he come with a small number, and no great provision; it cannot be denied but that the natural state of men, before they entered into society, was a mere war, and that not simply, but a war of all men against all men. For what is WAR, but that same time in which the will of contesting by force is fully declared, either by words or deeds?^f

6. Defending himself against the possible charge of cynicism, Hobbes shows that there are no grounds for objections against self-interested action in the natural state. Social relations are not derived from the original nature of humanity but rather are artificially created. In fact, society is only a means to the furthering of each individual's interests and happiness. Moreover, Hobbes maintains, the concept of moral obligation has neither meaning nor application in the state of nature. Rather, the basic moral concepts, right and wrong, just and unjust, arise concomitantly with the establishment of a civil society.

It may seem strange to some man, that has not well weighed these things; that nature should thus dissociate, and render man apt to invade, and destroy one another: and he may therefore, not trusting to this inference, made from the passions, desire perhaps to have the same confirmed by experience. Let him therefore consider with himself, when taking a journey, he 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 this when he knows there be laws, and public

officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall be done him; what opinion he has 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? But neither of us accuse man's nature in it. The desires, and other passions of man, are in themselves no sin. No more are the actions, that proceed from those passions, till they know a law that forbids them: which till laws be made they cannot know: nor can any law be made, till they have agreed upon the person that shall make it. . . .

To this war of every man, against every man, this also is consequent; that 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. Force, and fraud, are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice, and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body, nor mind. If they were, they might be in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses, and passions. They are qualities, that relate to men in society, not in solitude. It is consequent also to the same condition, that there be no propriety, no dominion, no *mine* and *thine* distinct; but only that to be every man's, that he can get; and for so long, as he can keep it. And thus much for the ill condition, which man by mere nature is actually placed in; though with a possibility to come out of it, consisting partly in the passions, partly in his 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 suggesteth convenient articles of peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement. These articles, are they, which otherwise are called the Laws of Nature.⁸

7. The termination of the perpetual warfare of the state of nature is brought about through the instrumentality of reason. First, an individual becomes aware, through rational deliberation, of the need for security. Second, reason discovers those precepts, or

"laws of nature," by which peace may be realized.

A LAW OF NATURE, *lex naturalis*, is a precept or general rule, found out by reason, 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. For though they that speak of this subject, use to confound *jus*, and *lex*, *right* and *law*: yet they ought to be distinguished; because RIGHT, consisteth in liberty to do, or to forbear; whereas LAW, determineth, and bindeth to one of them: so that law, and right, differ as much, as obligation, and liberty; which in one and the same matter are inconsistent.

And because the condition of man, as hath been declared in the precedent chapter, is a condition of war of everyone against everyone: in which case everyone is governed by his own reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemies; it followeth, that in such a condition, every man has a right to every thing; even to one another's body. And therefore, as long as this natural right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man, how strong or wise soever he be, of living out the time, which nature ordinarily alloweth men to live. And consequently it is a precept, or general rule of reason, *that every man, ought to endeavor peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of war*. The first branch of which rule, containeth the first, and fundamental law of nature; which is *to seek peace, and follow it*. The second, the sum of the right of nature; which is, *by all means we can, to defend ourselves*.

From this fundamental law of nature, by which men are commanded to endeavor peace, is derived this second law; that *a man be willing, when others are so too, as farforth, as for peace, and defense of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men*

against himself. For as long as every man holdeth this right, of doing any thing he liketh; so long are all men in the condition of war. But if other men will not lay down their right, as well as he; then there is no reason for anyone, 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.

Right is laid aside, either by simply renouncing it; or by transferring it to another. By *simply RENOUNCING*; when he cares not to whom the benefit thereof redoundeth. By *TRANSFERRING*; when he intendeth the benefit thereof to some certain person, or persons. And when a man hath in either manner abandoned, or granted away his right; then is he said to be *OBLIGED*, or *BOUND*, not to hinder those, to whom such right is granted, or abandoned, from the benefit of it: and that he *ought*, and it is his *DUTY*, not make void that voluntary act of his own: and that such hindrance is *INJUSTICE*, and *INJURY*, as being *sine jure*; the right being before renounced, or transferred. So that *injury*, or *injustice*, in the controversies of the world, is somewhat like to that, which in the disputations of scholars is called *absurdity*. For as it is there called an absurdity, to contradict what one maintained in the beginning: so in the world, it is called injustice, and injury, voluntarily to undo that, which from the beginning he had voluntarily done. . . .

Whensoever a man transferreth his right, or renounceth it; it is either in consideration of some right reciprocally transferred to himself; or for some other good he hopeth for thereby. For it is a voluntary act: and of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some *good to himself*. And therefore there be some rights, which no man can be understood by and words, or other signs, to have abandoned, or transferred. As first a man cannot lay down the right of resisting them, that assault him by force, to take away his life; because he cannot be understood to aim thereby, at any good to himself. The same may be said of wounds, and chains, and imprisonment; both because there is no benefit consequent to such patience; as there is to the patience of suffering another to be wounded, or impris-

oned: as also because a man cannot tell, when he seeth men proceed against him by violence, whether they intend his death or not. And lastly the motive, and end for which this renouncing, and transferring of right is introduced, is nothing else but the security of a man's person, in his life, and in the means of so preserving life, as not to be weary of it. And therefore if a man by words, or other signs, seem to despoil himself of the end, for which those signs were intended; he is not to be understood as if he meant it, or that it was his will; but that he was ignorant of how such words and actions were to be interpreted.^h

8. When the egoistic nature of humans is taken into account, it is manifest that the first two laws of nature, in and of themselves, are not binding on the individual. Consequently, another law is necessary to make the first two effective.

From that law of nature, by which we are obliged to transfer to another, such rights, as being retained, hinder the peace of mankind, there followeth a third; which is this, *that men perform their covenants made*: without which, covenants are in vain, and by empty words; and the right of all men to all things remaining, we are still in the condition of war.

And in this law of nature, consisteth the fountain and original of *JUSTICE*. For where no covenant hath preceded, there hath no right been transferred, and every man has right to everything; and consequently, no action can be unjust. But when a covenant is made, then to break it is *unjust*: and the definition of *INJUSTICE*, is no other than *the not performance of covenant*. And whatsoever is not unjust, is *just*.

But because covenants of mutual trust, where there is a fear of not performance on either part . . . are invalid; though the original of justice be the making of covenants; yet injustice actually there can be none, till the cause of such fear be taken away; which while men are in the natural condition of war, cannot be done. Therefore before the names of just, and unjust can have place, 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; and to make good that propriety, which by mutual contract men acquire, in recompense of the universal right they abandon: and such power there is none before the erection of a commonwealth. And this is also to be gathered out of the ordinary definition of justice in the schools: for they say, that *justice is the constant will of giving to every man his own*. And therefore where there is no *own*, that is no propriety, there is no injustice; and where there is no coercive power erected, that is, where there is no commonwealth, there is no propriety; all men having right to all things: therefore where there is not commonwealth, there nothing is unjust. So that the nature of justice, consisteth in keeping of valid covenants: but the validity of covenants begins not but with the constitution of a civil power, sufficient to compel men to keep them: and then it is also that propriety begins.¹

9. Hobbes concludes that the laws of nature may be summed up in a rule that everyone accepts, the Golden Rule.

These are the laws of nature, dictating peace, for a means of the conservation of men in multitudes; and which only concern the doctrine of civil society. There be other things tending to the destruction of particular men; as drunkenness, and all other parts of intemperance; which may therefore also be reckoned amongst those things which the law of nature hath forbidden; but are not necessary to be mentioned, nor are pertinent enough to this place.

And though this may seem too subtle a deduction of the laws of nature, to be taken notice of by all men; whereof the most part are too busy in getting food, and the rest too negligent to understand; yet to leave all men inexcusable, they have been contracted into one easy sum, intelligible even to the meanest capacity; and that is, *Do not that to another, which thou wouldst not have done to thyself;*

which showeth him, that he has no more to do in learning the laws of nature, but, when weighing the actions of other men with his own, they seem too heavy, to put them into the center part of the balance, and his own into their place, that his own passions, and self-love, may add nothing to the weight; and then there is none of these laws of nature that will appear unto him very reasonable.¹

10. Reason not only dictates peace and security in society but also prescribes the means by which they can be ensured: a commonwealth instituted by covenant. It was apparent to Hobbes that there must be some civil power to determine and interpret what is right and what wrong, what is good and what bad, in society. Such authority must be vested in a single sovereign power—either an individual or an assembly—to prevent the occurrence of jurisdictional disputes between one authority and another.

From this institution of a commonwealth are derived all the *rights*, and *faculties* of him, or them, on whom sovereign power is conferred by the consent of the people assembled. . . .

First, because they covenant, it is to be understood, they are not obliged by former covenant to anything repugnant hereunto. And consequently they that have already instituted a commonwealth, being thereby bound by covenant, to own the actions, and judgments of one, cannot lawfully make a new covenant, amongst themselves, to be obedient to any other, in any thing whatsoever, without his permission. And therefore, they that are subjects to a monarch, cannot without his leave cast off monarchy, and return to the confusion of a disunited multitude; nor transfer their person from him that beareth it, to another man, or other assembly of men: for they are bound, every man to every man, to own, and be reputed author of all, that he that already is their sovereign, shall do, and judge fit to be done: so that any one man dissenting, all the rest should break their covenant

made to that man, which is injustice: and they have also every man given the sovereignty to him that beareth their person; and therefore if they depose him, they take from him that which is his own, and so again it is injustice. . . .

Secondly, because the right of bearing the person of them all, is given to him they make sovereign, by covenant only of one to another, and not of him to any of them; there can happen no breach of covenant on the part of the sovereign; and consequently none of his subjects, by any pretense of forfeiture, can be freed from his subjection. . . .

Thirdly, because the major part hath by consenting voices declared a sovereign; he that dissented must now consent with the rest; that is, be contented to avow all the actions he shall do, or else justly be destroyed by the rest. For if he voluntarily entered into the congregation of them that were assembled, he sufficiently declared thereby his will, and therefore tacitly covenanted, to stand to what the major part should ordain. . . .

Fourthly, because every subject is by this institution author of all the actions, and judgments of the sovereign instituted; it follows, that whatsoever he doth, it can be no injury to any of his subjects; nor ought he to be by any of them accused of injustice. For he that doth anything by authority from another, doth therein no injury to him by whose authority he acteth: but by this institution of a commonwealth, every particular man is author of all the sovereign doth: and consequently he that complaineth of injury from his sovereign, complaineth of that whereof he himself is author; and therefore ought not to accuse any man but himself; no nor himself or injury; because to do injury to one's self, is impossible. It is true that they that have sovereign power may commit iniquity; but not injustice, or injury in the proper signification. . . .

Sixthly, it is annexed to the sovereignty, to be judge of what opinions and doctrines are averse, and what conducing to peace; and consequently, on what occasions, how far, and what men are to be trusted withal, in speaking

to multitudes of people; and who shall examine the doctrines of all books before they be published. For the actions of men proceed from their opinions; and in the well-governing of opinions, consisteth the well-governing of men's actions, in order to their peace, and concord. And though in matter of doctrine, nothing ought to be regarded but the truth; yet this is not repugnant to regulating the same by peace. For doctrine repugnant to peace, can no more be true, than peace and concord can be against the law of nature. . . .

Seventhly, is annexed to the sovereignty, the whole power of prescribing the rules, whereby every man may know, what goods he may enjoy, and what actions he may do, without being molested by any of his fellow-subjects; and this is it men call *propriety*. For before constitution of sovereign power, as hath already been shown, all men had right to all things; which necessarily causeth war: and therefore this propriety, being necessary to peace, and depending on sovereign power, is the act of that power, in order to the public peace. These rules of propriety, or *meum* and *tuum*, and of *good*, *evil*, *lawful*, and *unlawful* in the actions of subjects, are the civil laws; that is to say, the laws of each commonwealth in particular.^k

11. Hobbes believes that matters of conscience, for example, must be controlled entirely by the sovereign. Thus even church affairs should be dominated by the secular rules, "God's lieutenant on earth."

I observe the *diseases* of a commonwealth, that proceed from the poison of seditious doctrines, whereof one is, *That every private man is judge of good and evil actions*. This is true in the condition of mere nature, where there are no civil laws; and also under civil government, in such cases as are not determined by the law. But otherwise, it is manifest, that the measure of good and evil actions, is the civil law; and the judge the legislator, who is always representative of the commonwealth. From this false doctrine,

men are disposed to debate with themselves, and dispute the commands of the commonwealth; and afterwards to obey, or disobey them, as in their private judgments they shall think fit; whereby the commonwealth is distracted and *weakened*.

Another doctrine repugnant to civil society, is, that *whatsoever a man does against his conscience, is sin*; and it dependeth on the presumption of making himself judge of good and evil. For a man's conscience, and his judgment is the same thing, and as the judgment, so also the conscience may be erroneous. Therefore, though he that is subject to no civil law, sinneth in all he does against his conscience, because he has no other rule to follow but his own reason; yet it is not so with him that lives in a commonwealth; because the law is the public conscience, by which he hath already undertaken to be guided. Otherwise in such diversity, as there is of private consciences, which are but private opinions, the commonwealth must needs be distracted, and no man dare to obey the sovereign power, further than it shall seem good in his own eyes. . . . There is [another] doctrine, plainly, and directly against the essence of a commonwealth; and it is this, *that the sovereign power may be divided*. For what is it to divide the power of a commonwealth, but to dissolve it; for powers divided mutually destroy each other. And for these doctrines, men are chiefly beholding to some of those, that making profession of the laws, endeavor to make them depend upon their own learning, and not upon the legislative power.¹

12. In its ultimate consequences, then, Hobbes' ethical theory leads to the political doctrine of absolute sovereignty, designed to end the natural war of every person with every other person.

To the care of the sovereign, belongeth the making of good laws. But what is a good law? By a good law, I mean not a just law: for no law can be unjust. The law is made by the sovereign power, and all that is done by such power, is

warranted, and owned by every one of the people; and that which every man will have so, no man can say is unjust. It is in the laws of the commonwealth, as in the laws of gaming: whatsoever the gamesters all agree on, is injustice to none of them. A good law is that, which is *needful, for the good of the people, and withal perspicuous*.

For the use of laws, which are but rules authorized, is not to bind the people from all voluntary actions; but to direct and keep them in such a motion, as not to hurt themselves by their own impetuous desires, rashness or indiscretion; as hedges are set, not to stop travelers, but to keep them in their way. And therefore a law that is not needful, having not the true end of the law, is not good. A law may be conceived to be good, when it is for the benefit of the sovereign; though it be not necessary for the people; but it is not so. For the good of the sovereign and people, cannot be separated. It is a weak sovereign, that has weak subjects; and a weak people, whose sovereign wanteth power to rule them at his will. Unnecessary laws are not good laws; but traps for money; which where the right of sovereign power is acknowledged, are superfluous; and where it is not acknowledged, insufficient to defend the people. . . .

The office of the sovereign, be it a monarch or an assembly, consisteth in the end, for which he was trusted with the sovereign power, namely the procuration of *the safety of the people*; to which he is obliged by the law of nature, and to render an account thereof to God, the author of that law, and to none but him. But by safety here, is not meant a bare preservation, but also all other contentments of life, which every man by lawful industry, without danger, or hurt to the commonwealth, shall acquire to himself.

And this is intended should be done, not by care applied to individuals, further than their protection from injuries, when they shall complain; but by a general providence, contained in public instruction, both of doctrine, and example; and in the making and executing of good laws, to which individual persons may apply their own cases.

And because, if the essential rights of sovereignty . . . be taken away the commonwealth is thereby dissolved, and every man returneth into the condition, and calamity of a war with every other man, which is the greatest evil that can happen in this life; it is the office of the sovereign, to maintain those rights entire.^m

Questions

1. Outline Hobbes' psychological theory. What effect does it have on his definitions of *good* and *evil*? On his moral philosophy in general?
2. In Hobbes' view, what is the "natural state" of humanity? To what political theory does this lead him?
3. How does Hobbes define *happiness*? Why can it not be achieved in a state of nature?
4. Discuss Hobbes' theory of the formation of society. How would he deal with the thesis that "man is by nature a social animal"?
5. What arguments does Hobbes offer in defense of his egoistic theory of human relations? Can you find arguments or evidence against his view?
6. What does Hobbes mean by "laws of nature"? Where do they originate? Do you agree that they are really laws of nature?
7. What use does Hobbes make of the doctrines of materialism and mechanism? Are these doctrines essential to his ethical theory?
8. In Hobbes' ethical theory, what is the basis of morality? Do the same moral principles apply in a state of war and in a civil society?
9. Explain and discuss Hobbes' claim that the laws of nature imply, as we say, the Golden Rule.
10. Are there some situations in which you would not prefer peace and security? Relate your answer to Hobbes' ethical theory.

Key to Selections

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* and *Philosophical Rudiments*, from *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, vols. II and III, Sir William Molesworth, ed., London, John Bohn, 1839.

From *Leviathan*

^aCh. XVIII, p. 159.

^bCh. VI, pp. 38–41.

^cCh. VI, p. 41.

^dCh. XIII, pp. 110–112.

^eCh. XIII, pp. 112–113, pp. 114–115.

^gCh. XIII, pp. 113–114, pp. 114–116.

^hCh. XIV, pp. 116–118, pp. 118–119, pp. 119–120.

ⁱCh. XV, pp. 130–131.

^jCh. XV, pp. 144–145.

^kCh. XVIII, p. 159, p. 160, p. 161, p. 162, p. 163, p. 164, p. 165.

^lCh. XXIX, pp. 310–311, p. 313.

^mCh. XXX, pp. 335–336, pp. 332–333.

From *Philosophical Rudiments*

^fCh. I, pp. 5–7, pp. 8–11.

Guide to Additional Reading

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