

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) “Of the Naturall Condition of Mankind, As Concerning Their Felicity, and Misery” (Chapter xiii of *Leviathan*)

Contemporary of Galileo (1632 *Two World Systems*) and Descartes (1637 *Discourse*)

Background

Late 1630's Conflict between Royalists and Parliamentarians in England.
1640 Hobbes (royalist sympathizer) flees to Paris.
1642 Civil war in England.
1646 Royalists are defeated.
1649 King Charles is beheaded. Oliver Cromwell assumes power.
1660 Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II.

Leviathan is published in 1651. Major theme - The only solution to the problems of disorder that all societies are vulnerable to is an absolute monarch with absolute power.

Chapter xiii gives us Hobbes' views on human nature.

Famous quote: In the state of nature, human life is "... solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."

In brief: Nature is BAD. Society is GOOD.

I. Hobbes' materialism (laid out in other parts of *Leviathan*)

- The world consists entirely and solely of matter in motion (all substances are corporeal - no noncorporeal "mental" substances for Hobbes). Matter consists solely in extension.
- Thought consists of images - the residue of sensations produced by external objects acting on our bodies (pp. ii, 2).
- Space is the image of extension; time is the image of motion.
- Mental discourse (intellect) is explained by Hobbes in terms of the motion of images. These images obey universal laws of nature. So the equality of mental capacity arises from the universal laws of motion.
- Note: *Leviathan* was meant as a scientific work. Hobbes wanted to reason from first principles.

II. Human nature

Two fundamental characteristics:

- A. **Equality** Physical and mental. Any individual differences can always be compensated for.
- B. **Egoism** Humans act with their own self-interests at heart.

“Of the voluntary actions of every man, the object is some good to himself.” (xiv, 8)

Hobbes' justification for pessimism: Better to be safe than sorry; i.e., it's better to erroneously assume everyone is out to get you and take precautions, than to let even a minority few deceivers ply their trade.

Three Causes of Quarrel

Claim: Characteristics (A) and (B) lead to conflict initiated by **competition**, **diffidence** (mistrust), and/or **glory**.

Consider competition: It arises when two (or more) people want the same thing. (This will at least be possible, given egoism and finite resources.) But why should conflict arise? If you are the equal of your competitor, is it wise to initiate conflict? Why not cooperate?

Let's consider a game-theoretic analysis.

The Prisoner's Dilemma ← Why it's not unreasonable to think characteristics (A) and (B) can lead to conflict instead of cooperation

Suppose Jones and Smith are suspected of committing a crime together. The police lack the evidence to convict either of them. So they offer the following deal to each prisoner:

- (a) If he confesses and his partner doesn't, then he gets 1 year in prison and his partner gets 20 years.
- (b) If neither confesses, then both get 3 years.
- (c) If both confess, both get 10 years.

	Smith keeps quiet	Smith confesses
Jones keeps quiet	J - 3, S - 3	J - 20, S - 1
Jones confesses	J - 1, S - 20	J - 10, S - 10

Assume each prisoner desires to minimize jail time (egoism).
 Assume they both make the same choice (equality).

- Dilemma:
- (i) If both make the same choice, they would be better off keeping quiet.
 - (ii) But if they are motivated by self-interest, each should confess.

Option (ii) is a *dominant strategy*: Each gets a better result if he confesses, no matter what his partner does:

- (1) If Jones's partner keeps quiet, then Jones will prefer to confess. If Jones' partner confesses, then Jones will prefer to confess.
- (2) If Smith's partner keeps quiet, then Smith will prefer to confess. If Smith's partner confesses, then Smith will prefer to confess.

Hence it is not unreasonable to claim that characteristics (A) and (B) lead to conflict rather than cooperation. (Note: one assumption of this game-theoretic analysis is that humans are rational decision-makers.)

III. The state of nature.

Hobbes says: “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”

Let's be clear about what he's saying:

- (1) Is this a description of the actual historical condition of humans, or of primitive societies?
Answer: Not really. Hobbes' state of nature is one into which any society will fall when government breaks down. (Examples: Hobbes' England; Beirut of the early 1990's; Bosnia and Kosovo of the 1990's; the Congo, etc.)
- (2) “War” means “the known disposition to use force and no assurance it will not be used”. “War” is not just armed conflict.
- (3) “Every man against every man”. Hobbes allows that this doesn't mean everyone against everyone all of the time. The weak can gang up on the the strong, for instance.

Central Claim: Where people live without a government capable of regulating their conduct, there will be enough actual conflict, or well-founded fear of conflict, that no one will have enough security to make life tolerable. (Or, as Hobbes puts it, life will be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”.)

How do we escape the state of nature?

Hobbes' general argument:

- (1) Humans are motivated by self-preservation (we fear death; we desire peace).
- (2) Humans are rational.
- (3) To avoid death, it is necessary to agree on “Articles of Peace” (“Laws of Nature”; social rules).
- (4) Since the acceptance of these conditions is based on fear of death, only fear of death can ensure that they be followed.

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- (5) Therefore, only an absolute monarch with absolute power can ensure that we remain free of the state of nature.

(One implicit assumption: It is irrational to want something and yet refuse to take the only means necessary to obtain it.)