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According to Hobbes, the Laws of Nature “Dictate Peace” and are Simple Enough for Anyone to Understand. Yet “Peace without Subjection” is Supposed to be an Impossibility. Why?

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TAN WEI KEE, OCT 15 2009

To understand and explain Hobbes’s assertion that “peace without subjection” is impossible even though men understand the laws of nature, I begin with the definitions of three key terms as he understood them, lest I find myself “as a bird in lime twigs, the more [I] struggle the more belimed” (L4.12, p. 19).

First, the laws of nature are rules which forbid a man to do anything that threatens his survival (L14.3, p. 79). They may be synthesized into one simple maxim: Do not to others what you would not have done to yourself (L15.35, p. 99). Second, peace refers to that period of time in which the disposition to fight is absent and there is certainty in the security of the individual self (L13.8, p.76). Third, subjection is that act of surrendering one’s right of self-governance to a man, or a group of men, and when done collectively, aims at the establishment of a common power which is free to act on behalf of the multitude to secure “the common peace and safety” (L17.13, p. 109). The absence of subjection, where every man retains the right to govern himself as he will, is termed the state of nature, or an anarchy “which signifies want of government” (L19.2, p. 119)

Why are men in the state of nature disposed to fight rather than observe the rules that ensure their preservation? There are two possible explanations: the one, that men are naturally belligerent and conscientiously opposed to the notion of, and means to, peace; the other, that the peculiar passions of men, when subjected to conditions consequent to an absence of sovereign power, leave them with no viable choice besides contention by battle.

The first hypothesis is false, by virtue of man’s love for commodious living. The “desire of ease and sensual delight” (L11.4, p. 58) runs contrary to suggestions that he delights in a state of war. In such a state there is no property, merely possessions which he must expect anyone to deprive him of at any time (L13.13, p. 78). From this constant expectation of invasion and deprivation, there can be no security, and thus no leisure for intellectual pursuits nor industry to improve lives (L13.9, p.76). Commodious living being impossible where there is no property, security, and industry, it is unfathomable that men, with their powers of reason, would be naturally opposed to the notion of peace. Neither do they in their hearts reject the laws of nature, for these rules “oblige *in foro interno*, that is to say, they bind to a desire they should take place” (L15.36, p. 99). Therefore, this breach of the laws of nature in the absence of a common power stems not from innate proclivity, but, as the second hypothesis suggests, necessity.

That the peace-loving man should deem war-waging necessary is not so illogical when one takes into account the two conditions inherent in anarchy with which he must make do. One is the equality of every man, in body and in mind. No man is so strong that he cannot be killed by the cunning of one man or the strength of many in alliance (L13.1, p. 74). Neither is there any man who believes “there be many so wise as themselves”, excepting the very few who are admittedly more gifted than the rest. Therein lies proof of equality, for what can be a more equal scenario than one in which “every man is contented with his share” (L13.2, p. 75)?

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While equality in the modern context is generally a term of approbation, it assumes a different, somewhat opprobrious connotation when applied to men in the state of nature. For equality of ability begets equality of hope (L13.3, p. 75). When every man is contented with the gifts of body and of mind that he possesses, he will believe himself to be no less capable of attaining the object of his desire than others. So that when two men desire the same object, neither has cause for fear of failure or abandoning his quest, and thus is willing to contend with the other, in the belief that he will eventually triumph. Hence from this equality amongst men in the natural state, conflicts are all too likely to break out.

Besides equality amongst men, there is also absolute liberty, which is the other intrinsic condition of anarchy. Before the establishment of sovereign power, man possesses the right of nature, by which term is meant “the liberty each man hath to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature” (L14.1, p. 79). Such liberty disposes everyone to make use of anything that may help in the preservation of his life. So long as the right of all to all endures, no man can be assured of any guarantee to his survival. Who can accuse a man of taking another’s life as he deems fit, when there is neither a law to forbid such an act, nor a sovereign power to enforce it? Thus, where there is no impediment to restrict what men can do, they are said to hold the “right to all things, which necessarily causeth war” (L18.10, p.114).

As much as the natural conditions provide a compelling rationale behind the impossibility of peace without subjection, they do not quite produce the full picture without reckoning with the passions of men. Unlike those of all other living creatures, these passions extend beyond the sensual. For man is not content simply with seeking the causes of an effect, as when he endeavours to quench his thirst, satisfy his lust, or soothe his anger; he is interested also in finding out the effects of a cause (L3.5, p.13). This inclination to anticipate and conjecture consequences from antecedents and vice versa engenders in man certain traits which, under conditions of absolute liberty and equality, steer him towards war in spite of his love for peace.

First, man’s desire of power is relentless, and as long as life continues, so does this desire. The cause of this is that “the object of man’s desire is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time, but to assure forever the way of his future desire” (L11.1, p. 57). For this reason, man cannot rest on his laurels and cease the seeking of more power and security, despite his having attained sufficient levels of each for a decent life. For who can assure him that he will have no need for more to maintain his current level of comfort in future? It follows that man seeks not simply absolute gains, but relative gains. What another man has, he must have more in order to secure his position, for man “can relish nothing but what is eminent” (L17.8, p. 108). The absence of a common power that gives other men every right to invade and violate him makes this desire of power all the more urgent. It is well-known too that competition of power, arising from equality of hope in attaining it, inevitably leads to enmity and war.

Second, men are prone to anxiety as a result of want of knowledge. As all men are differently constituted, they harbour varying interests and pursue different paths in life, accruing diverse experiences. Consequently, no one man can learn or know either all causes of every event, or all the effects of every cause. Despite this, man knows enough from his observations to understand the theory of causality; everything, including his fortune, has a cause and an effect. Knowing this, yet not knowing enough “to secure himself against the evil he fears, and procure the good he desireth” (L12.5, p. 64), man is constantly anxious about the future and what it might entail.

In an environment characterised by absolute liberty and equality, anxiety tends to deteriorate into fear and distrust. Even under a sovereign power, men are wont to anxiety, as I explained in the preceding paragraph. Where every man has right to everything, and every man is willing to battle to get what he wants, the situation changes from a matter of uncertainty about future comfort to a matter of life and death. Through the art of words and other forms of deceit exercised by those crafty individuals, man is constantly at risk of miscalculating intentions and possible consequences. The only reasonable course of action left to him is to trust no one but himself.

Under this perpetual climate of uncertainty and distrust, there is “no way for any man to secure himself so reasonable as anticipation” (L13.4, p. 75). Since men will do anything to advance his own good, no one can be sure about another man’s intentions. The safest course of action is to subdue others before one is subdued. This extends to observance of the laws of nature as well. Given that man cannot be sure that others will follow these rules, “he that

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should be modest and tractable, and perform all he promises, ... should but make himself a prey to others” (L15.36, p. 99). It is obvious then, how fear and distrust under the absence of a common power force men onto the course of war rather than peace.

There are some who disagree with Hobbes’s view, to be sure. Locke, for example, places greater stock in man’s ability to adhere to the laws of nature because as the creation and property of God, he can be assured that others like him are reasonable enough to uphold the common good, and should the odd exception wantonly break the laws, he is empowered with others to punish the offender. Yet this interpretation rests heavily on faith and assumptions of divine authority. In contrast, Hobbes’s view that divine retribution, being too unreliable and unverifiable, cannot be sufficient guard against the breach of laws proves more plausible and pragmatic (L15.8, p. 92). And because no incorporeal authority incapable of dispensing swift and provable punishment will suffice as a source of deterrence and protection, the absence of which must lead to a state of war, wherein there is nothing men will not do to safeguard their well-being.

In conclusion, the impossibility of peace without subjection, even though men understand the laws of nature which dictate peace, is due to both the conditions in the absence of a common power and the passions of men. Without subjection, not only are men willing to risk battle by virtue of their equal strength of body and mind, they suffer no restriction or penalty in doing so through any means necessary, for they possess the right to everything. Underlying these actions are those passions that incline them to act contentiously – anxiety, fear, diffidence, and a restless desire of power. There can be no doubt, therefore, that “the terror of some power” (L17.2, p. 106) – a Commonwealth – is vital to provide restraint and security, in order for men to willingly lay down their natural right in favour of the natural laws.

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