



Nasty, Brutish, and Short

THOMAS HOBBS

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was one of England’s greatest political thinkers. What’s less well known is that he was also an early fitness fanatic. He would go out for a long walk every morning, striding quickly up hills so as to get out of breath. In case he had any good ideas while out he had a special stick made with an inkwell in the handle. This tall, red-faced, cheerful man with a moustache and a little wispy beard had been a sickly child. But as an adult he was extremely healthy and played real tennis into old age. He ate lots of fish, drank very little wine, and used to sing – behind closed doors, and out of earshot – to exercise his lungs. And, of course, like most philosophers, he had a highly active mind. The result was that he lived to 91, an exceptional age for the seventeenth century when average life expectancy was 35.

Despite his genial character, Hobbes, like Machiavelli, had a low view of human beings. We are all basically selfish, driven by

fear of death and the hope of personal gain, he believed. All of us seek power over others, whether we realize this or not. If you don't accept Hobbes' picture of humanity, why do you lock the door when you leave your house? Surely it's because you know that there are many people out there who would happily steal everything you own? But, you might argue, only *some* people are that selfish. Hobbes disagreed. He thought that at heart we all are, and that it is only the rule of law and the threat of punishment that keep us in check.

The consequence of this, he argued, was that if society broke down and you had to live in what he called 'a state of nature', without laws or anyone with the power to back them up, you, like everyone else, would steal and murder when necessary. At least, you'd have to do that if you wanted to carry on living. In a world of scarce resources, particularly if you were struggling to find food and water to survive, it could actually be rational to kill other people before they killed you. In Hobbes' memorable description, life outside society would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.

Take away the power of the state to prevent people from helping themselves to each other's land and killing whoever they want to, and the result is a never-ending war in which everyone is against everyone else. It is hard to imagine a worse situation. In this lawless world even the strongest wouldn't be safe for long. We all have to sleep; and when we are asleep we are vulnerable to attack. Even the weakest, if cunning enough, would be able to destroy the strongest.

You might imagine that the way to avoid being killed would be to team up with friends. The trouble is you couldn't be sure that anyone was trustworthy. If other people promised to help you, then it might sometimes be in their interest to break their promises. Any activity that required co-operation, like growing food

on a large scale, or building, would be impossible without a basic level of trust. You wouldn't know that you'd been tricked until it was too late, and perhaps by that time you'd literally have been stabbed in the back. There would be no one to punish your backstabber. Your enemies could be everywhere. You'd live your whole life on your own in fear of attack: not an attractive prospect.

The solution, Hobbes argued, was to put some powerful individual or parliament in charge. The individuals in the state of nature would have to enter into a 'social contract', an agreement to give up some of their dangerous freedoms for the sake of safety. Without what he called a 'sovereign', life would be a kind of hell. This sovereign would be given the right to inflict severe punishment on anyone who stepped out of line. He believed that there were certain natural laws that we would recognize as important, such as that we should treat others as we'd expect to be treated ourselves. Laws are no good if there isn't someone or something strong enough to make everyone follow them. Without laws, and without a powerful sovereign, people in the state of nature could expect a violent death. The only consolation was that such a life would be very brief.

Leviathan (1651), Hobbes' most important book, explains in detail the steps needed to move from the nightmarish situation of the state of nature to a secure society in which life is bearable. 'Leviathan' was a gigantic sea monster described in the Bible. For Hobbes it was a reference to the great power of the state. *Leviathan* opens with a picture of a giant towering over a hillside, holding a sword and a sceptre. This figure is made up of lots of smaller people, who are recognizably still individuals. The giant represents the powerful state with a sovereign as its head. Without a sovereign, Hobbes believed, everything would fall apart and society would decompose into separate people ready to tear each other to pieces in order to survive.

Individuals in the state of nature, then, had very good reasons for wanting to work together and seek peace. It was the only way they could be protected. Without that their lives would be terrible. Safety was far more important than freedom. Fear of death would drive people towards forming a society. He thought that they would agree to give up quite a lot of freedom in order to make a social contract with each other, a promise to let a sovereign impose laws on them. They'd be better off with a powerful authority in charge than all fighting each other.

Hobbes had lived through dangerous times, even in the womb. He was born early because his mother had gone into labour when she heard that the Spanish Armada was sailing to England and would probably invade the country. Fortunately it didn't. Later he escaped the dangers of the English Civil War by moving to Paris, but the real fear that England could easily descend into anarchy haunted his later writing. It was in Paris that he wrote *Leviathan*, returning to England soon after it was published in 1651.

Like many thinkers of his day, Hobbes wasn't just a philosopher – he was what we would now call a Renaissance man. He had serious interests in geometry and science, and in ancient history too. As a young man he loved literature and had written and translated it. In philosophy, which he only took up in middle age, he was a materialist, believing that humans were simply physical beings. There is no such thing as the soul: we are simply bodies, which are ultimately complex machines.

Clockwork mechanisms were the most advanced technology in the seventeenth century. Hobbes believed that muscles and organs in the body were the equivalent of these: he frequently wrote about the 'springs' of action and the 'wheels' that move us. He was convinced that all aspects of human existence, including thinking, were physical activities. There was no space for the

soul in his philosophy. This is a modern idea that many scientists hold now, but it was radical for his time. He even claimed that God must be a large physical object, though some people took this to be a disguised way of declaring that he was an atheist.

Critics of Hobbes think he went too far in allowing the sovereign, whether it was a king or queen or parliament, to have such power over the individual in society. The state he describes is what we would now call an authoritarian one: one in which the sovereign has almost unlimited power over citizens. Peace may be desirable, and fear of violent death a strong incentive to submit to peace-keeping powers. But to put so much in the hands of an individual or group of individuals can be dangerous. He didn't believe in democracy; he didn't believe in the ability of the people to make decisions for themselves. But if he'd known about the horrors committed by tyrants in the twentieth century, he might have changed his mind.

Hobbes was notorious for refusing to believe in the existence of the soul. René Descartes, his contemporary, in contrast, believed that mind and body were completely distinct from each other. This was probably why Hobbes thought Descartes was much better at geometry than philosophy and should have stuck to that.