

Appendix 3: Thomas Hobbes

Keith Sutherland

The other problem with Arnhart's thesis is the view that Kant inherited his dualism of nature and culture from Hobbes. But Hobbes was emphatic about the continuity between nature (human emotions and animal appetites) and culture (ethics and morality) — 'Every man, for his own part, calleth that which pleaseth, and is delightful to himself, GOOD; and EVIL which displeaseth him' (Hobbes, 1969, I.7.3).

Arnhart goes on to claim that the Hobbesian position was then taken up and fulfilled in the writings of Immanuel Kant. But this is a strange claim: Although Hobbes was an undoubted influence, Kant's philosophy is normally viewed as a synthesis of British sceptical empiricism (he was known as the 'Prussian Hume') and German rationalism. The split between nature and culture that Arnhart claims Kant developed from the writings of Hobbes is usually traced back to Descartes. There is a danger of interpreting Hobbes 'through Kantian lenses', and his influence was just as great on David Hume, who Arnhart places in the opposing 'naturalistic' tradition.¹

Hobbes' texts have to be understood in terms of the particular memories, fears and hopes of English people at the time of the English civil war. But the writings do also have to be seen in the context of a pessimistic view of human nature which can be traced back at least to St. Augustine, if not to St. Paul.² And the reason that this viewpoint was so widely accepted throughout medieval Europe is because it appeared to be a reasonably accurate description of human behaviour at the time.³

But while all this is of interest to students of the history of political thought it does little to undermine Arnhart's thesis. There has been little progress on reconciling the

[1] If we are looking for an alternative sponsor for the kind of Darwinism that Arnhart associates with Hobbes, we might fare better with Thrasymachus or Callicles.

[2] But did Hobbes really have a pessimistic view of human nature? Certainly, the last 150 years had been bloody ones, and Hobbes is famous for rejecting the Aristotelian idea that humans are 'naturally social' (and in this respect, Arnhart's argument is well taken). Without politics, life is 'nasty, brutish, and short.' At the same time, Hobbes didn't think that people were bad, on the whole. He does mention that some people have a desire to dominate others, but the real problem is not that people are evil, it's just that they are uncertain, and lack an authoritative framework of rules and sanctions to reassure them about the likely behaviour of others. In a world of scarcity, conflict is inevitable. As a result, people 'anticipate' — they make pre-emptive strikes, fearing what others might do.

But that's only half the story. Consider also the fact of ideological diversity — does the fact that people disagree about what's good make them bad? Their disagreement could be said to have three sources: (1) the variability of human constitution, which leads to differences in desires and perceptions (2) inherited philosophical mistakes (3) ideological power grabs of the past. None of this makes the average man in the street a particularly sinful fellow. Despite his debt to Augustine, and his interest in Luther, the idea of human sinfulness does not play a large role in Hobbes' thought. I am grateful to Andrew Lister for this gloss on so-called Hobbesian pessimism.

[3] Although Hobbes is criticized by some commentators for a cynical and bourgeois view of morality, he provides clues of a higher alternative. Although he normally speaks of pride in a derogatory sense as one of the pre-eminent sources of human strife, at other points in *Leviathan* he identified it with generosity, courage, nobility, magnanimity and an endeavour for glory. Drawing on the tradition of St. Augustine, pride can either take the malign form of the attempt of Satan to take the place of God, or else the benign form of the endeavour to imitate God. As Duns Scotus said, 'there is no vice but it is the shadow of a virtue; and in the second manner of being God-like, self-love appears as self-knowledge and self-respect'. The trouble is, as Hobbes was quick to realise, *very few men match up to this ideal* (exemplified, in his eyes, by Sidney Godolphin), so the politics of fear, with the *civitas* as the rational outcome is the practical solution.

‘problem of modernity’ since the time that Kant first outlined it: how can we reconcile our sense of freedom, rationality and personal agency in a deterministic Newtonian universe? The standard approach in the cognitive sciences is to dismiss this central dilemma of human experience as a ‘benign user illusion’. On to this we have to add the postmodern predicament: how to establish agreement on ethical principles in a society where the meta-narratives — the original transcendental sources of authority — no longer claim widespread support. Societies have to organise their affairs and the alternative to agreement on the ground rules is their imposition by the state. Arnhart’s book is an important contribution to the search for a new foundation for ethics in the postmodern world. It deserves to be widely read — by scholars in a wide range of disciplines, policymakers and all those concerned with the human predicament.

Additional Reference

Hobbes, T. (1969), *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies, 2nd edn. by M.M. Goldsmith (London: Cass)