

3) *“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. (...) In such condition (the state of nature) there is no place for industry... 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.”* – Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, XIII

The quote from Hobbes’ book of political philosophy expresses little faith in the nature of human beings. Perpetual warfare has indeed characterized much of human history. In recent times, the Montreal police went on strike for one day, resulting in mass theft and serious crime being committed all over the city. Do humans then – *all humans* – need a common power governing over them? And what about the common power itself, is she/he not also human? Logically she/he too would also need some form of restraint to avoid acting out human nature in all its ferocity and barbarianism.

Interestingly enough, the most frightful bloodsheds and wars in history have all been conducted by what Hobbes calls “a common power who keeps men in awe”. If it is in the interest of this common power to keep men at constant war, would it not lessen the total damage somewhat if men refused to be kept under this power? Hitler, Stalin and Mao all enjoyed great respect and admiration from their followers, and they all left massive destruction in their path. However, the asymmetrical warfare Hobbes describes is not the organized front-to-front wars led by these men, but a state of utter chaos where no alliances exist. As uncomfortable as it may be to wage war against a specific group or country, the uncertainty of Hobbes’ state of nature might be even worse in its isolation of individuals and their struggle for survival.

If a common power to keep all men in awe is needed to avoid massive upheaval in society, what about modern democracies? Although each state has a form of leadership, these do not need to have the full support of all citizens in the states they lead. But it does not follow that all opposition will violently rebel against leaders not of their liking. Is patiently awaiting your leader of choice’s rise to power a result of democratic tradition, or a simple wait-you-turn mentality common to groups of humans sharing resources?

What then, is the nature of human beings? All constructions we see around us, whether social or technological, have been made by humans. The modern world is a product of human thinking, just as the first knife and bonfire. Yet we often claim our modern environment is “unnatural”, and we spend remarkable sums traveling to untouched areas of the world where indigenous people live their fascinatingly primitive lives. In this context, the apparent state of nature uncivilized tribes live in, appears both peaceful and worthy of preservation. Despite there being no industry, letters, structured society or arts, we partly envy this form of existence – perhaps in faith that humankind could do without these things and not perish.

Most of humans then, seem to have a more optimistic view of themselves than Hobbes. Perhaps it is because we assume that his description of man as solitary is wrong – humans are social beings and demonstrate altruistic behavior even when it is not necessarily to their own benefit. At the same time, optimism is not always companionable with being realistic. No

philosopher analyzing Hobbes today has ever lived in a proper state of nature, and so we know very little about what we would be up against. As in Montreal, perhaps even we confident, law-abiding citizens would seize the chance to plunder and steal if we had it. After all, if there is no one to punish or condemn our actions, what *really* stops us from doing whatever we want, when we want it?

In order for there to be people competent of raging warfare, new people need to be born and mature into adulthood. If this is to be made possible, someone will – at some point – have to care for these newborn warriors-to-be. Whether it be their mothers, fathers, or some other guardian feeding them and holding them, they will have been touched by human warmth. The extent of human memory being utterly remarkable, ought not these acts of compassion to leave a mark, however small and seemingly insignificant? Cannot this memory of being fed, held and cared for, compel grown women and men to imitate their caretakers, should the opportunity arise? Perhaps it is this knowledge of what human kindness feels like that prevents us from greedily forsaking it for material gain or complete autonomy from authorities. As demonstrated in orphanages in Irak, children die when uncared for. This knowledge alone should be enough to keep Hobbes' state of nature in our imaginations only.

However, the fundamental question remains: if humans need to be governed, how much and by whom? Do we, every last one, need to be held in check to prevent us from slaying our neighbors? Indeed the world looks more orderly and prosperous when organized into states with governments and law enforcers, but I do not believe all form of structure and social relationships would fall into ruin should states disappear and their leaders perish. The world would obviously look very different, but there must be *something* in humans which prevents most of us from trying to wind our way through legislation in search of an opportunity to do harm without punishment. Whether good morals are derived from evolutionary successful practices, or if they are just *there* within us, I cannot answer. But if a great many people believe that they can do better than Hobbes' puppets of solitude, greed and nastiness, perhaps that will be enough.

By Kristin Thue