

# The relationship between self-interest and common good in Hobbes's philosophy

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## Abstract

As we have seen, Hobbes argues that violating a contract cannot in any way serve self-interest. While there may occasionally be exceptional situations in which desertion produces positive results, these are always the result of chance. Therefore, only adherence to the terms of the contract can legitimately support the pursuit of self-interest. Moreover, it is not only in the interest of the individual, but also in the interest of the political community as a whole, that as few people as possible should desert, for this is the greatest form of peace and security. In this sense, if we accept the self-interest-oriented anthropological characteristics and Hobbes's perspective on circumstances, the theory of justice in *Leviathan* seems well-founded. According to this theory, a just act is one that is carried out in the light of adherence to the contract, while any other manifestation constitutes an injustice to oneself and others. Moreover, the injustice committed against oneself can certainly not serve anyone's self-interest.

The relevance of the charge of psychological egoism to Hobbesian concepts remains an open question, as does the practicality of implementing Hobbes's theory. However, we can argue that in Hobbes's conception, self-interest and the common good are intertwined and do not contradict the morality that arises from the creation of laws. Rather, they all point towards a single goal: the maintenance of peace and security in which the life of the individual is protected.

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## Hobbes as an advocate of psychological egoism?

Some 18th-century philosophers, such as Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Joseph Butler, David Hume, and Adam Smith, accused Thomas Hobbes of advocating psychological egoism. These philosophers argued that Hobbes used psychological egoism as a cornerstone of his argument to promote absolutism (Smith, 2017).

Psychological egoism is the view that all human action is driven by self-interest; in other words, all human action is directed towards one single aim: the

satisfaction of one's own desires. Every action is preceded by an intention to fulfil a desire. For instance, the active process of going to the tap, pouring myself a glass of water and raising it to my lips to take a sip is preceded by the desire to quench my thirst and the intention to fulfil that desire, that is, the determination to go to the tap, pour a glass of water and drink it.

This perspective represents a rather extreme view of human nature, as it claims that the pursuit of one's own desires is the driving force behind all activity, thereby rejecting the possibility of attributing any degree of selflessness to human nature. According to psychological egoism, despite the appearance of altruistic human actions, they are ultimately driven by self-interest. For example, a soldier who sacrifices his life to protect his comrades may appear to be motivated by selflessness. However, proponents of the theory argue that the soldier is simply fulfilling his own desires: to protect his comrades, to obey orders, to avoid living with the belief that his comrades died because of his cowardice, to gain the respect of others, and so on. The two examples above illustrate that, according to the psychological egoist, the pursuit of self-interest is present in everyday situations as well as in acts of helping others. It is not only efforts to quench thirst that are driven by self-interest, but ultimately even the soldier who sacrifices his life as a martyr does so to promote his own well-being (to avoid living with negative feelings, to avoid being perceived as a coward, to be appreciated, etc.).

Consequently, the psychological egoist can easily be accused of painting a rather bleak picture of human nature: the inevitable pursuit of one's own desires implies that, if self-interest cannot be achieved otherwise, it may even come at the expense of the well-being of others. In what follows, we will explore the negative aspects of selfishness, drawing on Hobbes's view of human nature. We will examine later whether there is indeed a connection between psychological egoism and Hobbes's political absolutism, as some have suggested. Before doing so, however, let us first examine the foundation of Hobbes's thought experiment, which has led some philosophers to make the above accusation<sup>1</sup> against him.

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<sup>1</sup> The reason why some view psychological egoism as more of a criticism than a praise lies in the weaknesses of the theory. One of its shortcomings is that it strips selflessness of its legitimacy: everyone acts according to their own desires and interests. Even an apparently altruistic behaviour is motivated by some form of self-interest. However, the question arises whether satisfying personal desires truly eliminates selflessness. For example, if I satisfy my desire to take the last slice of cake, disregarding the interests of others, my behaviour can be described as selfish. In contrast, selfless behaviour would be if I gave the last slice of cake to someone else, even though I wanted it for myself. Naturally, the psychological egoist might respond by saying that even in this case, I am merely fulfilling my own desire—to see a loved one happy, as their happiness brings me joy too; or I wish to be viewed favourably by others. From this perspective, one could argue that, in a sense, I am still

If we oversimplify Hobbes's anthropology, it may at first glance appear to present an extreme and rather bleak view of human nature. At its core is the desire to pursue self-interest, which Hobbes sees as the driving force behind all human action. This perspective directly contradicts the Aristotelian notion that human beings are *zoón politicon*, or social beings by nature.<sup>2</sup> In his work *De Cive*, Hobbes elaborates on the idea that humans do not inherently desire social interaction for its own sake, as it is not intrinsically desirable for the individual. It is the personal benefits that can be gained from such interactions that make social contact appealing, that is we seek the company of others in the hope of gaining some advantage from the interaction, rather than because the interaction itself is enjoyable. Put differently, we engage with others more out of self-love rather than out of genuine sympathy for our fellow human beings (Smith, 2017).

Egoism alone, however, does not necessarily lead to the 'fight of all against all' briefly introduced in the previous chapter. The pursuit of self-interest as a fundamental human inclination does not in itself imply that evil is a fundamental human trait. In Hobbes's state of nature, people are neither good nor evil because they have no inherent desire to do good or harm to others unless it is in their own interests to do so.

In Hobbes's view, selfishness does not inherently lead to evil. Evil, along with concepts of good and bad, presupposes a moral framework, a normative background that would hold up a mirror to human behaviour. In Hobbes's state

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satisfying my own desires, even though I appear to be acting selflessly. However, critics of psychological egoism might counter by pointing out that just because my desire to give the cake coincides with another person's desire to eat it—meaning that I am fulfilling my desire to promote someone else's well-being—this does not justify denying that I am acting selflessly. Moreover, we could even say that I have two desires: one is to eat the last slice of cake, and the other is to give it to someone else. If my desire to contribute to the well-being of another person outweighs my desire to eat the cake myself, then we can say that I have acted selflessly. Even if I experience greater joy from giving it to someone else than from eating it myself and feeling guilty afterwards, the action is still selfless. In fact, the selflessness might come from the fact that I get more pleasure from giving the last slice to another person than from eating it myself. This is the nuance that the psychological egoist tends to overlook.

<sup>2</sup> According to Aristotle, two essential characteristics define human beings: the first is that they possess logos, and the second is that they are inherently social creatures. Logos can refer to reason, intellect, and language, so in Aristotle's view, humans are rational beings capable of conceptual thought. This is the primary distinction between humans and animals; while the former are rational beings, the latter are driven by instincts. From logos and the natural inclinations of humans follows a natural tendency to seek association. Aristotle identifies three natural relationships: the marital relationship, the master-servant relationship, and the father-son relationship. The basis of these three levels of association is the division of labour, the pursuit of association, individual differences in ability and love.

of nature, however, morality is absent, and consequently, so is ethical egoism<sup>3</sup>. Discussions of right and wrong arise only after the establishment of a social contract, since right is defined by adherence to the law, and wrong by actions that violate it. The purely psychological egoist is not simply made happy by the misfortune of others. The sole aim of the individual is to assert his self-interest, without intending to cause either good or harm. Moreover, since conflict with others is always burdensome and its outcome uncertain, if he can achieve his ends by peaceful means, he will prefer that option. In short, Hobbes's view of human nature is not as bleak as it might at first appear, for people in the state of nature are characterised by psychological—not ethical—egoism. As a result, they do not wish harm to others, but seek the good for themselves.

According to the above idea, if human nature is defined by egoism, then this state of nature applies to everyone: no one wishes anyone else any good or harm, and it is clear to all that avoiding conflict is far more valuable, both biologically and psychologically, since avoiding conflict involves less injury and risk, and the likelihood of gain is much greater. Despite this, why does Hobbes's state of nature end up being characterised as a state of war?

*“(...) if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies (...)”.* (Hobbes, 1999, pp. 91-92.)

According to the quotation, when circumstances lead to limited access to certain goods, one participant can only assert their own interests at the expense of the other. Circumstances will always lead to scarcity of goods, which reflects not only the scarcity of resources but, more importantly, another trait of human nature: constant insatiability. In short, natural resources are indeed finite, so when I take something from nature for myself, I am in a sense taking it away from others. From another perspective, however, even though natural resources are finite, they could be more than enough for everyone if human beings were not insatiable. According to Hobbes, every satisfied desire inevitably leads to other unsatisfied desires, which highlights another feature of human nature:

*“So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death. And the cause of this is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight than he has already attained to, or that he cannot be content with a moderate power, but because*

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<sup>3</sup> Whereas ethical egoism prescribes how one should behave, psychological egoism merely outlines facts about human nature. The former is normative, aiming to establish rules for morally correct behaviour, while the latter is descriptive, simply providing an account of how people tend to behave.

*he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more.”* (Hobbes, 1999, p. 80).

The quoted text points to the Hobbesian idea that human beings are roughly equal in terms of their physical and intellectual abilities, so that individuals—no matter how strong or clever they may be—always have reason to fear others; consequently, they must constantly strive to acquire greater power, which can only be achieved by dominating others. Due to the similar balance of power, there is constant uncertainty, as no one can ever be sure that they can keep the goods they have already acquired. This is why they feel the need to constantly increase their power, regardless of how much they have already achieved.

In the first half of the chapter, we have seen that selfishness, as a fundamental human characteristic, does not in itself make individuals malevolent, and consequently, does not necessarily lead to a state of war. The question of whether Hobbes can be considered an advocate of psychological egoism remains open to debate. His concept includes certain signs of egoism, as well as the combined constellation of circumstances, such as the scarcity of resources, constant insatiability, the equality of abilities among individuals, and the expectation of recognition from others. The main reason why many criticise Hobbes’s presumed psychological egoism, or the acceptance of any egoistic theory, is that it excludes the possibility of any behaviour being altruistic, which may raise further questions. However, the discussion of where such concepts as morality or justice and injustice fit into an apparently egoistic absolutist theory will be addressed later.

### **A Hobbesian definition of the concept of good**

Hobbes begins his moral discussions by defining the concepts of good and evil. While many consider his anthropological ideas to be divisive, his thought experiment on the concept of good was regarded as downright scandalous, especially in the 17th century. At that time, value judgments regarding politics, religion or morality were expected to be on the same page; in contrast, Hobbes’s concept of good is egoistic, naturalistic, realistic and relational (Martinich, 2005).

In the state of nature, Hobbes refers to as good—in an amoral sense—anything that is the object of human desire, and as evil, anything that is the object of hatred. He thus rejects the possibility that values such as good and evil have any immutable, eternal, or supernatural source. In his view, both good and evil are determined by human preferences, which can vary according to individual value systems. Things are therefore not good or evil in themselves but always in relation

to the individual. After the establishment of the state, the root of good and evil becomes the person of the ruler. Consequently, the acceptance of laws as general rules gives values a more general and moral form, but they are still dependent on human correlation, that is, on the ruler, and since the ruler's choice is based on a collective decision, it is dependent on everyone:

*“But whatsoever is the object of any man’s appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth good; and the object of his hate and aversion, evil; and of his contempt, vile and inconsiderable. For these words of good, evil, and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the person of the man, where there is no Commonwealth; or, in a Commonwealth, from the person that representeth it; or from an arbitrator or judge, whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up and make his sentence the rule thereof.”* (Hobbes, 1999, p.60-61).

This definition supports the camp of those who criticise Hobbes for psychological egoism. The fact that the scope of the good coincides with the content of human desires makes the concept of the good itself egoistic. According to Hobbes's biographer, John Aubrey, Hobbes once gave money to a beggar during a walk. Hobbes's companion, Jasper Mayne, asked him: 'Would you have done this if Christ had not commanded it?' Hobbes replied as follows: 'Yes, because I felt pain when I thought of the old man's miserable condition, and now my alms, by giving him some relief, also relieve my own discomfort.' In other words, Hobbes's response reveals that he gave alms in order to alleviate his own discomfort (Martinich, 2005). This clearly shows that the psychological egoism indicated by human nature leads fundamentally to moral egoism, thereby underpinning norms as well.

The desire to help and promote the welfare of others cannot, in itself, be the sole motivation for an act of charity, because it would not include the actor themselves as the object of their action. In short, y does not rush to save x from drowning in order for (1) x to survive, but rather because (2) y would experience a negative feeling if x were to die. At first glance, there seems to be little difference between (1) and (2), and ultimately, the outcome will be the same in a consequentialist sense. According to the Hobbesian definition, however, (1) is incorrect, as it lacks the consideration of y, or the desire that drives y's action. This is due to the view of human nature, which regards moral action primarily as an action itself and thus requires it to have a motivation. This motivation fits into the causal order of the action, but does not necessarily need to fit into its moral order. According to

Hobbes, however, the two are essentially the same, which means that by following my own desires, I create the actions that establish norms as actions that conform to those norms. Even in apparently altruistic actions, my own self-interest must always be the guiding force. Thus, even though the intention and its subsequent manifestation may have a positive effect on others, we act primarily because the action and its consequences give us a sense of satisfaction or would otherwise give us a sense of discomfort if not carried out.

Consequently, since according to the Hobbesian definition, the good is the object of human desires, and desires are the motivators of actions—that is, every action is driven by a subjective desire—the whole process, including the action itself, the desire that prompts it, and the object of the desire, that is, what we consider to be good, will be egoistic.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the Hobbesian concept of good is that, for Hobbes, good is not a moral concept. According to the traditional views, goodness and evilness are moral properties of things. In contrast, Hobbes argues that judgments of good and evil are closer to, or even identical with, the pleasant and unpleasant things found in the physical world, rather than to abstract concepts such as justice, injustice, virtue, etc. Hobbes's concept suggests that good, that is, a thing to which a desire is directed, generally refers to material things in the material world, excluding any supernatural forces or influences (Martinich, 2005).

This naturalistic aspect of the concept of goodness leads to its relational nature. It breaks with the Platonic tradition of an eternal idea of goodness that is universally valid for everyone. According to the traditional concept, whether something is good or not is an inherent part of the thing itself, and does not depend on anything else to which it is related. For example, virtues such as honesty are inherently good in themselves.

Hobbes, however, leans more towards the Aristotelian concept that goodness is a relative term, meaning something different to each individual. What is good for one person may not be good for another, and indeed what is good for someone at one moment may not be desirable for them a few years later. The fact that something is good or desirable for one person does not mean that it is inherently, universally and independently good. In short, the concept of goodness becomes contingent, always defined by the values, tastes and circumstances of the individual, which is perhaps not entirely inconsistent with the charge of psychological egoism (Martinich, 2005).

### **The state of nature as a state of war**

As is characteristic of social contract theories, the two key concepts—the state of nature and the formation of a contract—remain purely theoretical. Just as no such contract, as mentioned in the theories, has ever been historically enacted, there is also no state of nature in which people live in a constant state of war, without any higher authority, coexisting or, more accurately, existing in opposition to one another. There are, however, some exceptions which suggest that while the elements of the social contract theories may not actually take practical form, there are historical events which bear similarities to the ideas outlined in these theories. Hobbes identifies three such events.

The first is the state of savages. According to Hobbes, in many parts of America, there is no government at all, and people live in brutal conditions, similar to the state of nature. The second is the relationship between different governments:

*“(...) yet in all times kings and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independence, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their forts, garrisons, and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms, and continual spies upon their neighbors, which is a posture of war.”* (Hobbes, 1999, p. 94).

According to Hobbes, the third form of the state of nature is the English Civil War (Martinich, 2005), in which the unity of the political community was disrupted, consequently setting those who had previously lived in peace against each other, and in which there was no central authority capable of bringing peace between the divided parties (Martinich, 2005).

Hobbes's state of nature is often identified with a state of anarchy. This comparison — if we simplify the concept of anarchy and associate it with the naive interpretations used in everyday language — may seem accurate, but from other perspectives, the conflation of the two theories is particularly incorrect.

Anarchy—if by anarchy we mean the absence of rule, that is, the absence of a higher, centralised authority—can be identified with Hobbes's state of nature. However, if we understand anarchism as the concept articulated by the Russian anarchist philosophers of the 19th century, then the conflation of the two is entirely false.

*“(...) we neither intend nor desire to thrust upon our own or any other people any scheme of social organization taken from books or concocted by ourselves. We are convinced that the masses of the people carry in themselves, in their instincts (more or less developed by history), in their daily necessities, and in their conscious or*

*unconscious aspirations, all the elements of the future social organization. (...) We declare ourselves the enemies of every government and every state power, and of governmental organization in general. We think that people can be free and happy only when organized from the bottom up in completely free and independent associations, without governmental paternalism (...)”* (Bakunin, 1983, pp. 76-77).

According to Bakunin, anarchists reject all forms of state intervention and see human happiness and well-being in the voluntary cooperation of individuals. In their view, human nature is naturally inclined towards individuals working and living together in peace, helping each other and collaborating in harmony.

Hobbes's state of nature thus corresponds to the anarchist concept in the sense that no centralised authority interferes in people's lives. However, the two ideas differ in terms of the quality of a state free of rulers or politically legitimate laws. While the Russian anarchist philosophers' thought experiment suggests that only such an association can bring peace and happiness, Hobbes believed that life without centralised control is nothing but a state of war. Hobbes does not contradict anthropological optimism, which holds that human nature is inherently good, since, as previously mentioned, in his argument humans are neither good nor bad. In the state of nature, there were no moral standards by which human nature and behaviour could be categorised from a moral perspective. However, if we were to judge Hobbes's man in the state of nature through the lens of a modern, 21st century reader, he would probably fall somewhere in the middle of the moral spectrum. He has no intention of causing harm to others; he seeks only to pursue his own interests. However, he is not deterred if the fulfilment of his desires can only be achieved at the expense of others. His self-interest is above all else, and therefore outweighs everything else. Because of the scarcity of resources, the constant desire for more, and the equality of physical and intellectual abilities, this naturally leads to perpetual conflict between individuals. Therefore, according to Hobbes, life without centralised control becomes a state of war. If there are no written laws and there is no punishment for breaking the laws, then nothing limits the pursuit of one's desires. However, the issue of punishment as a means of keeping the peace will be discussed later. For now, it is worth examining what Hobbes specifically means by a state of war.

From Hobbes's definition of war, it follows only that the *war of all against all* is a state in which each party is in conflict with all the others, and likewise all the others are in conflict with them. However, Hobbes argues that the parties in

question do not need to be actively fighting each other for a state of war to exist at any given time. In his view, the willingness to fight—that is, the readiness of each to engage in actual physical conflict or potential coup against another if it serves his self-interest—is sufficient. Between the late 1940s and the early 1980s, both the United States and the Soviet Union were described as being in a state of Cold War. This meant that both sides feared that the other might attack, and were equally prepared to attack, if necessary, despite the fact that there was virtually no direct violence between the Americans and the Soviets—with the exception of Third World countries (Martinich, 2005).

It is questionable how far mere will can take one. Since people generally think inductively, if the willingness to act is never or only very rarely followed by physical action, the state of war would become an empty concept, since the willingness would not be accompanied by any consequences (Kavka, 1986). Hobbes does not assume that the mere willingness to fight is enough to constitute a state of war, but neither does he require constant killing and pillaging for it to exist. Rather, a balance between the two creates a state of constant uncertainty, distrust, and a complete lack of security—this, for Hobbes, is what defines a state of war.

### **The law of nature**

The absence of a centralised authority implies that in the state of nature there are neither positive rights nor legitimate laws that would provide a regulatory framework or a uniform system of punishment for violations or non-compliance. There are natural rights or laws of nature, which are more like principles recognised by reason than actual laws, and therefore their observance is not supervised by anyone, nor are there penalties for non-compliance. Hobbes's definition of natural rights and the law of nature is as follows:

*"The Right of Nature, which writers commonly call Ius Naturale [Natural Right] is the Liberty each man has, to use his own power as he will himself, for the preservation of his own Nature, that is to say, of his own life, and consequently of doing anything which in his own judgment and Reason he shall conceive to be the best means to this end of preserving his own life. A Law of Nature [Lex Naturalis] is a precept or general rule found out by Reason by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destruction of his life or takes away the means of preserving his life."*  
(Hobbes, 1999, p. 94).

In short, whereas natural right grants freedom to the individual, the law of nature imposes obligations, specifically duties to oneself. The key difference between the

two is that the former empowers us to do something, while the latter defines and makes it our duty to determine what we must and must not do. The main similarity between the two concepts is that neither is based on moral principles and, like natural right, the law of nature is concerned solely with our own self-preservation. The law of nature prohibits actions that would endanger our own lives, while natural rights provide the freedom to take actions that protect ourselves. If we strip Berlin's concepts of positive and negative liberty of their political implications<sup>4</sup>, we might associate the law of nature with the category of negative liberty and natural right with positive liberty. The former, negative liberty, refers to *freedom from something*, while the latter implies *freedom to do something*. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* also refers to Berlin's concepts of positive and negative liberty when it lists fundamental human rights, such as the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman treatment and punishment—falling under negative freedom—as well as the right to express and declare one's opinion, which belongs to positive liberty. Apart from the fact that, strictly speaking, natural right gives freedom to individuals, we can also interpret it as *freedom from something*, whereas the law of nature can be seen as *freedom to do something*. For example, I have the freedom to take actions that protect my life, and I have the freedom to refrain from actions that would endanger my life.

Let's examine the key points of Hobbes's definition of the law of nature:

(1) Unlike many philosophers, Hobbes believes that all our knowledge comes from perception, and therefore he does not consider the laws of nature to be innate. However, it follows from human nature that through reason, everyone (or most people) can learn these laws through reason—that is, they can understand which actions are beneficial to them and which are not. Point (2) of the definition emphasises that the law of nature shapes human behaviour, while point (3) explicitly states that it does so as a command, meaning that everyone has a duty to adhere to it. However, point (3) raises a question: from whom does this command come? In the state of nature there is no higher authority, so who can give commands to individuals? There are two possible answers (there may be more, but let's examine these two for now): either (i) reason gives the command, or (ii) God provides the law (Martinich, 2005).

If we accept (i), namely that reason commands or is the command itself, then reason sets the goals that individuals strive to achieve. However, this statement

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<sup>4</sup> In Berlin's example, the Soviet Union is highlighted, where the country's leadership, in pursuit of its defined goals (positive liberty), considered the deprivation of people's rights and the use of violence (i.e. the violation of negative liberty) acceptable. (Berlin, 1990)

is flawed because it is the desires that determine the goals; reason merely helps to recognise and identify the means of fulfilling those desires. If we accept (ii), we are claiming that in the state of nature, God commands the laws of nature for human beings. If anyone, then God must surely have the right to give commands, even in a state of without authority. Additionally, Hobbes mentions that God commands certain things, such as the law of nature:

*“But yet if we consider the same theorems as delivered in the word of God that by right commandeth all things, then are they properly called laws.”* (Hobbes, 1999, p. 106).

As Martinich points out (Martinich, 2005), Hobbes also mentions this in Chapter 31, where he states that:

*“There wants only, for the entire knowledge of civil duty, to know what are those laws of God. For without that, a man knows not, when he is commanded anything by the civil power, whether it be contrary to the law of God or not (...).”* (Hobbes, 1999, p. 195).

With regard to the divine origin of the law of nature, Martinich writes the following in his book:

*“John Selden, a friend of Hobbes and one who is sometimes thought to be an atheist, said in private, ‘I cannot fancy to myself what the law of nature means, but the law of God’* (quoted from Martinich 1992: 381, n. 10). Hobbes himself said, 84 Hobbes ‘there is no doubt but they [the laws of nature] are the law of God’ (L 33.22) and ‘There is no doubt but they [the laws of nature] were made laws by God himself’ (L 42.37).” (Martinich, 2005, pp. 84-85).

The fourth part of the definition of the law of nature states that life is the highest value, and furthermore, reflecting mankind’s fundamentally selfish nature, each person’s life is their utmost value. Therefore, if we interpret the law of nature as a command—viewing it as an actual law—then a person commits a sin if he endangers his own life or if he does not do everything possible to protect it.

### **The desire for peace**

At the end of Chapter 13 of Leviathan, Hobbes raises the question of how the state of nature can be brought to an end and how peace can be established in a legitimate state. He argues that the law of nature dictates that the protection of one’s life takes precedence over all else, and that reason is the way out of a state of war. According to Hobbes, it is first the passions, such as the fear of death and

the desire for a good life, that motivate people to leave the state of nature. After that, reason shows individuals what they need to do to live in peace and security.

According to Hobbes, there is only one solution to eliminate the state of war: fear. Only fear can compel individuals to restrain their actions in pursuit of their self-interest. Most importantly, the fear of death can overcome the possibility of individuals satisfying their selfish interests through the violent exploitation or murder of others, since the value of life is always greater than the gains derived from violence (Smith, 2017).

In the state of nature, contracts would be meaningless without a higher authority, since the absence of punishment for breaking a contract would mean that self-interested individuals would not be constrained by fear. Hobbes does not consider the possibility that the parties to a contract might fulfil their agreements out of honour or a sense of justice, since breaking a contract would yield a far greater profit for an individual; it would therefore be more in their self-interest to do so than to honour the agreement. On the other hand, a sense of justice and honour are moral virtues, but, as mentioned above, such concepts do not exist in the state of nature, where morality has not yet emerged prior to the formation of contracts. Moreover, agreements made in the state of nature would not even be rational, since the naive parties would expose themselves to the risk of being exploited by others who might break the pact, which would not be in their best interests (Smith, 2017).

According to Hobbes, only a government with absolute power can maintain the constant fear necessary to establish social order, including the fear of death. He argues that only fear, as a counter-motive to self-interest, can force individuals to change the course of their usual self-interested actions. Hobbes's interpretation of self-interest undermines social order unless it is constrained by the fear of absolute government and the punishment for breaking the law. Thus, totalitarian power becomes a necessary condition for social order and internal peace because it encourages citizens to obey by imposing penalties for breaking laws that are contrary to self-interest, keeping them in a state of constant fear, and restraining self-interested actions (Smith, 2017).

### **The beast that rules over all**

Social contract theories generally assert that governments are formed by agreements between certain parties. As previously mentioned, humans, as rational beings, are capable of recognising the commands of the law of nature, the first and second of which state the following:

*“Every man ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek and use all helps and advantages of war.”*  
(Hobbes, 1970, p. 112).

*“A man be willing, when others are so too, as far forth as for peace and defence of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men as he would allow other men against himself.”* (Hobbes, 1970, p. 112).

According to the general definition of the law of nature, the first law states that individuals living in the state of nature must strive for peace as long as there is a chance of achieving it. From this first law—the pursuit of peace—follows the second law. Each individual must renounce his existing rights if he believes that everyone will adhere to what is outlined in the second law. The emphasis is on everyone, as if only a small proportion of individuals living in the state of nature were to renounce their freedoms, they would be at a disadvantage compared to others who might take advantage of the opportunity to dominate.

According to Hobbes, the pact involving the renunciation of rights can only be established by reason. The primary self-interest of each individual is to secure his own good and well-being. Through reason, everyone recognises that this requires them to give up their complete freedom in the state of nature and submit to the authority of a government or ruler. It is important to note that, in Hobbes's view, this only works if everyone simultaneously gives up their own freedom and transfers it to a government or ruler. In this case, while everyone is constrained—meaning that after the establishment of legitimate laws, I cannot do whatever I want to anyone—neither can I be robbed or murdered with impunity. Thus, it is in everyone's best interest to renounce complete freedom and submit to laws, as this is what ends the state of war and allows for peaceful coexistence. In Hobbes's view, self-interest does not contradict the common good; in fact, we might say that individual self-interest constructs the common good. If self-interest is about maintaining one's own welfare and well-being, which involves both renouncing freedom and transferring authority to a ruler, then the common good is essentially the establishment of state power. It represents a common goal: the achievement of general order and discipline, thereby creating the conditions for peaceful and secure coexistence.

It is important to note that the contract itself is not enough—as discussed at the end of the previous chapter—as only the fear of punishment can restrain people's natural desires. This leads to the need for a central authority to oversee and regulate people's natural inclinations. Such a power can only come into existence

if individuals transfer to it all the rights they have hitherto possessed. This is how Hobbes's contract is formed between people, where everyone agrees with everyone else to limit their freedoms, renounce their rights, and then transfer these rights to the same person or assembly. Hobbes argues that if everyone, or at least the vast majority, transfers their rights to the same governing body, then that ruler embodies the will of everyone, effectively merging the individuals into a single entity. The will of the ruler is thus aligned with the common will, meaning that each individual in the state of nature is manifested in this sovereign figure or institution. The emphasis is on the collective decision, since these decisions together create the politically legitimate state. In this sense, the ruler is metaphorically the body of the Commonwealth itself.

*"This done, the multitude so united in one person is called a COMMONWEALTH; in Latin, CIVITAS. This is the generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather, to speak more reverently, of that mortal god to which we owe, under the immortal God, our peace and defence. For by this authority, given him by every particular man in the Commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him that, by terror thereof, he is enabled to form the wills of them all, to peace at home, and mutual aid against their enemies abroad."* (Hobbes, 1999, p. 113).

Hobbes's theory holds that the sovereign's power derives not only from the rights that everyone has transferred to him, but also from the fact that the sovereign is not a party to the contract. Although the sovereign comes into being through this contract, he exists outside of it, as individuals in the state of nature only enter into a pact with each other, renouncing their rights and transferring all power to a single body or individual. Therefore, since the sovereign possesses all the rights of the subjects and embodies their will, and since no contract limits him, not only is he incapable of breaching the pact, but his power is absolutely unlimited. In order for the citizens to live in peace and security, the sovereign may employ any means. No higher moral or conscientious barrier regulates them; moreover, Hobbes links morality to the law. He states that justice is nothing more than the observance of the contract, while injustice is the breach of the agreement. The commands of the sovereign, that is, the legitimate laws, take precedence over the unwritten moral rules, since anyone who acts contrary to the laws commits a breach of contract, that is, injustice (Hobbes, 1970). This undermines the possibility for citizens who may disagree with the sovereign to express their dissenting opinions; furthermore, by transferring their will and rights to the sovereign, dissent itself becomes impossible. Moreover, since the sovereign is not

a party to the contract, and a breach of the agreement constitutes an injustice, the sovereign cannot act unjustly.

Therefore, it would seem that Hobbes has blocked every loophole to ensure that the sovereign enjoys absolute power, cannot become a violator of the contract, that his will always coincides with the will of the people, and that adherence to the laws takes precedence above all else. At first glance, despite the apparent fulfilment of the desire for peace and security, it raises the following questions. For example, if by some strange coincidence we were to find ourselves in Hobbes's work, living as a character in Leviathan, how liveable would we find a state in which, although the state of war between citizens has ceased and individuals have voluntarily surrendered their freedoms to the sovereign, the sovereign's will always coincides with the collective will, yet the very existence of the individual seems questionable?

### **Leviathan and the individual: From theory to practice**

Hobbes's definition of the law of nature may seem incomplete to many. According to the definition:

*"A law of nature, lex naturalis, is a precept, or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved." (Hobbes, 1999, p. 94).*

Hobbes's interpretation of the law of nature can also be understood in today's bioethical terms, particularly from a *pro-life* perspective. For *pro-life* advocates, one of humanity's most important duties is to protect life above all else; thus, their concept posits that the greatest value is life itself. The Hobbesian social contract emerges from this ideal, as individuals seem more willing to renounce their complete freedom and submit to the will of a ruler than to jeopardise their lives. While it is indeed true that the *pro-life* perspective places life metaphysically—almost objectively—above all else, it argues that life is always and under all circumstances the most valuable thing. Hobbes, on the other hand, is not talking about life in general, but specifically about one's own life. That is, each individual's own life is the most important. There may be a sense of lack, because just as *pro-life* advocates emphasise the sanctity of life, Hobbes only refers to the protection of one's own life, without making any claims about the good life. There is a significant difference between the right to life and the right to a good life. Whereas the former regards life itself as a value, the latter may regard life as a burden under certain circumstances.

Consequently, from a modern perspective, it may seem that Hobbes's individual in the state of nature finds himself in a situation of jumping out of the frying pan into the fire after entering into a contract, as he ends up in a totalitarian state—specifically an absolute monarchy according to Hobbes's conception. While Hobbes leaves open the possibility for citizens to make free choices in fundamental matters such as the choice of their living environment, the raising of their children, or the choice of their diet, in all other respects they are completely subordinated to the commands of the ruler. Furthermore, since the ruler is not a party to the contract, he is not bound by laws, which means that he has absolute power and his rule is unassailable. It is true that, according to Hobbes's conception, the will of the ruler is also the will of the public, and therefore he would never act in a way that would benefit only himself and not the common good. Thus, there is no need for his rule to be overthrown. At the same time—viewed through a contemporary lens and imagined in practical terms—Hobbes's *Leviathan* resembles several dystopian works, such as Huxley's *Animal Farm*. In these fictional negative visions of the future, a similar pattern often emerges. The ruler maintains obedience through demagoguery or violent means; he does not refrain from deception; he creates a cult of personality for himself and an invented common goal (in Hobbes's case, the goal is peace and security, which justifies any means to achieve it); and he employs punishments such as death penalties, deprivation of freedom, and rights. Moreover, as in most fictional dystopian societies, the citizens of the *Leviathan* believe that the existing situation serves their well-being and happiness, and see the ruler as caring and benevolent. It is important to emphasise that in these dystopias, the interests of those in power are always self-serving, whereas Hobbes does not hold such notions; in fact, he does not even consider this a possibility—because the will of the absolute ruler coincides with the will of the people. One must not overlook that Hobbes's social contract theory is purely theoretical. The extent to which Hobbes's envisioned state would be realised in practice, and how liveable it would be for the individual—that is, how closely the individual's will would align with the common will—remains questionable.

### **The theory of justice in Leviathan**

In Hobbes's social contract theory, he presents a completely new approach to the theory of justice compared to classical concepts. First and foremost, Hobbes redefines the concept of justice, stripping it of its former higher moral character and embedding it in a political, contractual framework. He then examines it as a condition for market activity, and finally justifies his arguments about justice and

injustice through the example of foolish individuals. The following sections will explore these three elements of Hobbesian justice.

Hobbes discusses the interpretation of injustice in his work *The Elements of Law*, where he does not explicitly mention justice, but we can infer it as the counterpart of injustice:

*“(...) the breach or violation of covenant, is that which men call injury, consisting in some action or omission, which is therefore called unjust.”* (Hobbes & Tönnies, 1969, p. 82).

According to Hobbes, the breach of a contract is an unjust act because it violates the rights transferred when the contract was made. Therefore, we can justifiably conclude, as Hobbes later states in the Leviathan, that if we understand injustice to be the failure to uphold a contract, then justice is nothing more than adherence to the agreement:

*“Men must perform their covenants made – this is the foremost, one might say the only moral commandment. Contracts must be fulfilled – this is the foremost, one might say the only moral commandment. And in this law of nature consisteth the fountain and original of justice. For where no covenant hath preceded, there hath no right been transferred, and every man has right to everything and consequently, no action can be unjust. But when a covenant is made, then to break it is unjust and the definition of injustice is no other than the not performance of covenant. And whatsoever is not unjust is just.”* (Hobbes, 1999, p. 100).

According to Hobbes's conception, neither justice nor injustice can exist outside the state, since these two concepts can only be mentioned in an environment where private property exists. In the state of nature, everyone has a right to everything, which means that there is no private property, and consequently, there is no possibility for anyone to act unjustly. Based on this, private property is nothing more than a kind of legal entity. According to Hobbes, injustice can only be discussed in the presence of private property, which can only be established under a strong state power „*to compel men equally to the performance of their covenants, by the terror of some punishment greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their covenant...*” (Hobbes, 1999, p. 100). Injustice, therefore, is the breach of a contract, meaning the violation of private property and the law, while justice is the adherence to the contract, that is, the respect of property and the law.

### **Justice in relation to the free market**

In the classical interpretation, in barter trade and, more generally, in the distribution of goods, an interaction is considered just if the goods are distributed equally. Commutative justice refers to the situation where the value of the goods exchanged in a commercial transaction is numerically proportional. In this case, the emphasis is on respecting the mutual interests of the parties, and the transactions serve the mutual and equal benefit of both parties. In contrast, distributive justice is defined geometrically, meaning that goods are distributed according to the specific situation of each individual (Foisneau, 2004). While in the former case, on a hot summer day, the same amount of water is distributed between the citizens of a European and an African country, in the latter case, a portion of the Europeans' share is transferred to the Africans because their situation requires it more urgently.

For Hobbes, the equality of the parties involved in the exchange is far more important than the equivalence in the value of the goods exchanged. According to his conception, the market value of goods is always determined by the agreement between the parties to the contract. Consequently, the basis of a just exchange is an equal commitment to the contract, which means that the primary concern is the mutual adherence to the agreement by both parties (Foisneau, 2004). Quoting from *Leviathan*:

*"The value of all things contracted for is measured by the appetite of the contractors, and therefore the just value is that which they be contented to give. (...) commutative justice is the justice of a contractor; that is, a performance of covenant in buying and selling, hiring and letting to hire, lending and borrowing, exchanging, bartering, and other acts of contract."* (Hobbes, 1999, pp. 179-180).

In determining the value of goods, it is always the parties who reach an agreement to ensure that everyone benefits, which is secured by a contract. Market trade is thus based both on private interest and on the conclusion of a contract that declares the price. Justice, therefore, lies in upholding every contract freely entered into. With regard to the free market, a barter interaction is not just when goods are distributed equally among all parties, nor when everyone receives as much as is naturally due to them or as external circumstances might dictate. The justice of commercial transactions lies in the fact that the parties involved have agreed beforehand on the relative value of the goods to be exchanged, and that all parties equally abide by the terms of the agreement.

### **The Fool's concept of justice**

According to Foisneau, the essence of the question raised by the Fool lies in whether we can truly regard justice as the central concept of state and market economy theory, which leaves little or no room for justice as a higher divine virtue (Foisneau, 2004). The Fool also questions the priority of upholding contracts as the rational basis for peace and security. Hobbes's aim is twofold: first, to use the Fool's argument to defend his theory of justice, and second, to highlight the contradiction in using self-interest as a reason for breaching a contract. As we saw in Chapter 3, a person living in the state of nature comes to understand through reason that his self-interest, namely the preservation of his own life, can only be served by renouncing total freedom, entering into a contract, and serving a legitimate state. This leads Hobbes to claim that using self-interest as a reason for breaching a contract would be a misunderstanding of the rationality of self-interest, something only a foolish person would do. Hobbes discusses this in the following passage:

*"The fool hath said in his heart, there is no such thing as justice, and sometimes also with his tongue, seriously alleging that every man's conservation and contentment being committed to his own care, there could be no reason why every man might not do what he thought conduced thereunto: and therefore, also to make, or not make; keep, or not keep, covenants was not against reason when it conduced to one's benefit."* (Hobbes, 1999, p. 101).

According to the Fool's argument, we can rightly conclude that if justice lies in the adherence to agreements, and since the aim of every agreement is to serve the welfare of those who enter into it, it may sometimes be reasonable not to fulfil the terms of the contract if breaking the law is beneficial (Foisneau, 2004). One might also ask whether self-interest and justice are sometimes mutually exclusive, or how *individualism* (Foisneau, 2004) and self-interest can coexist. In response to the Fool's thought experiment, Hobbes offers two arguments:

- (1) *"When a man doth a thing, which notwithstanding anything can be foreseen and reckoned on tendeth to his own destruction, howsoever some accident, which he could not expect, arriving may turn it to his benefit; yet such events do not make it reasonably or wisely done."* (Hobbes, 1999, p. 102).
- (2) *"In a condition of war, wherein every man to every man, for want of a common power to keep them all in awe, is an enemy, there is no man can hope by his own strength, or wit, to himself from destruction without the help of confederates; where every one expects the same defence by the confederation that any one else does: and*

*therefore he which declares he thinks it reason to deceive those that help him can in reason expect no other means of safety than what can be had from his own single power.*" (Hobbes, 1999, p. 102).

In his first argument (1), Hobbes describes the random and unpredictable development of circumstances. If someone breaks a contract and engages in an action that endangers his life, but it ultimately turns out well, we cannot call this a rational or wise manifestation from which we could make general statements in the future that violating a contract—out of self-interest and egoism—is beneficial. In his work *Leviathan's Theory of Justice*, Foisneau argues that Hobbes's reasoning can also be viewed as an anti-Machiavellian perspective. The accidental constellation of circumstances is similar to what Machiavelli refers to as fortune in *The Prince*. Hobbes believes that even if an action that would otherwise jeopardise our security turns out to be successful, it is not reasonable to use this outcome to justify the breach of a contract; thus, it is irrational to do so. While Hobbes acknowledges that fortune can influence the course of events, he denies the relevance of using this retrospectively to justify an irrational act (Foisneau, 2004).

In his argument (2), Hobbes examines how reasonable it is to violate a pact made to end a state of war. According to Hobbes's conception, the contract was created because, in its absence, everyone was in conflict with everyone else, meaning that individuals could only rely on their own strength to defend themselves against others. Therefore, if someone believes that violating the contract serves his self-interest, he reaches a contradiction, as he may find himself once again in a state of war with everyone else. Moreover, he will be alone, while the others will be united in a group. Such a development of circumstances can certainly not serve anyone's self-interest. Foisneau contrasts Hobbes's and Machiavelli's concepts here, highlighting the similarity between Hobbes's Fool and Machiavelli's Prince. Machiavelli's Prince, much like the Fool, believes not only that he can break the alliances he has with others, but that it is, in fact, reasonable to do so if it serves his own interests (Foisneau, 2004).

Machiavelli, like Hobbes's Fool, believes that circumstances can arise in which it is in one's own interest to violate an agreement. According to Hobbes, however, there are several reasons that prevent a ruler from breaching a contract (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3): even if the ruler wanted to, he could not break the pact because he exists outside the contract, and it would not be his intention to do so; his will is, in fact, the will of the people. For the people, breaching the contract would mean a complete eradication of rationality, because, as previously

mentioned, the violation of the contract and self-interest are in contradiction with each other. According to Hobbes, only a foolish person might believe that self-interest is aimed at satisfying individual natural desires. A rational person understands that self-interest always pertains to one's own well-being, which requires peace and security, and that the means to achieve this are contracts, laws, and a sovereign who maintains and oversees order.

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