

HOBBSIAN ETHICS: AN APPRAISAL

By

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Introduction

The history of philosophy reveals generally the attempts by philosophers to grapple with issues that are ethical in nature or have significant implications to ethical studies and development.

The aim of this paper is to assess critically the ethics of Thomas Hobbes (Hobbesian ethics) with a view to determining its tenability and consequently, determining the value that must be placed on Hobbesian ethics in contemporary ethical scheme. Since Hobbesian ethics revolves around his view of the state of nature, the laws of nature and the nature of man, it is appropriate to begin our discussion by re-examining these components of Hobbesian ethics.

The Nature of Man and the State of Nature

Hobbes sees life, which is a product of nature as essentially motion and man as the most excellent work of nature. All living beings can be defined only in terms of motion. Human actions are viewed by Hobbes as voluntary actions and human passion is the beginning of voluntary motion which can be traced to sense perception caused by the action of external objects on the sense organs. The imagination proceeds to the heart which is the seat of vital motion, and in its contact with vital motion either helps or hinders it.

When it helpeth, it is called delight, contentment or pleasure, which is nothing really but motion about the heart, as conception is nothing but motion in the head... but when such motion weakeneth or hindereth the vital motion, then it is called pain. (31)

When the motion of imagination helps vital motion, endeavour is directed towards the object which is the cause of imagination and is called "appetite or desire". When the opposite obtains such that endeavour is directed away from the object it is called "aversion". The numerous passions of man are just species of desire and aversion. That

which men desire, they also love, and hate those things which they have aversion.

It is, however, impossible that the same thing should always be the cause of a peculiar kind of appetites and aversions since the constitution of a man's body is in continual mutation. It is even more difficult for all men to consent either to the desire of anyone or to the same object. Thus what constitutes good or evil depends on one's desire and aversion, that is, on man's psychology. Hobbes explains this view thus:

Whatever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is it which 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 relations to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so...(90)

Hobbes denies the existence of the greatest good or the "*summum bonum*". "Felicity being simply a continual progress from one object to another; the attainment of the former being still but the way to the latter" according to him (122-123).

This, perhaps, explains the general inclination of mankind which Hobbes views (74) "as a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death" This accords with Hobbes (123) definition of power "as a man's present means; to obtain some future apparent good". Thus, in every case that man attains a desire, this desire provides the basis of, or creates, other unattainable desires which man strives to attain. Evil thus can be viewed as resulting from man's desire to have the future assured. As Hobbes puts it:

Competition of riches, honour, command and other power inclineth or impels men to contention, enmity, and war; because the way of one competitor to the attainment of his desire is to kill, subdue, supplant, or repel the other. (23)

This perhaps explains his characterization of the state of nature.

Hobbes acknowledges and recognises the equality of men in the state of nature. He insists that even if there be difference between one person and another, such difference is insignificant and inconsiderable. As to the faculties of the mind, Hobbes insists that he finds in them a greater equality amongst men than even the physical strength.

Hence, from this equality of ability arises equality of hope in the attainment of ends. Thus when two men desire the same thing which they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies and endeavor to subdue or destroy one another. Plundering is thus established, for whoever succeeds in destroying the other places himself in similar situation to be destroyed by another man desiring what he presently enjoys. There is a state of insecurity, consequently life and property are insecured.

This situation is worsened, according to Hobbes, by the existence of men who take pleasure in the act of conquest who will pursue this goal beyond what is required for their own security, so that those that would want to be modest would be left with no option to survive long.

Hobbes thus infers that the era in which men lived without a common power reigning over them was marked or characterised by a situation of war; and this war is a war of everyone against everyone. To worsen the situation men lived in continual fear of danger and violent death according to him (143) and "the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" The question of morality existing in this era is ruled out totally by Hobbes. He writes:

To this war of everyone against everyone, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place; justice and injustice being but qualities that relate to men in society. ... (145)

Hobbes maintains that though man by mere nature is placed in his condition; there is the possibility of coming out of it and this consists partly in the passions and partly in man's reason. The passions that incline men to peace according to him (145) are "fear of death: desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a hope by their industry to attain them". Finally, convenient articles called "laws of

nature” are suggested to men by reason upon which they may be drawn to agreement. What then are these “laws” of nature”?

Laws of Nature

Hobbes defines the law of nature thus:

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 the thinketh it may be best preserved. (146)

The laws of nature are rational precepts stating what reason requires. And because the condition of man in his natural state is a condition of war of one man against everyone else, in which everyone is governed by his own reason, it follows that there is nothing that he can make use of that will not be helpful to him in the preservation of his own life against his enemies. Hence, Hobbes (146) maintains “in such a condition everyone has right to everything, even to one another’s body”. Thus, so long as every man is allowed to exercise this natural right there can be no security to any man’s property and life; such that the question of living out one’s life span cannot be guaranteed. Hobbes maintains that it follows that:

It is a precept or general rule of reason that 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. (146)

The first fundamental law of nature, according to Hobbes (146), is thus “to seek peace and follow it”. From the fundamental and first law of nature is derived the second namely:

That 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. (147)

Hobbes maintains that so long as every man holds on to his natural right, the state of war condition will persist, and unless everyone is willing to give up this right, then it would be foolish for anyone to give it up while some others retain theirs, for such a person would only succeed in making himself an easy prey for others. The divesting of this right obliges a man, and in fact is his duty not to hinder those whom the right has been so wished. To do same amounts to injustice and injury, which is to voluntarily undo that which from the onset one had voluntarily undertaken or done. He believes that in this law of nature is the origin of justice or as he puts it "the fountain and origin of justice". The question of unjust and just action has existence only after the transfer of the right everyone had to everything through covenant. Once a covenant is made, to break it is unjust, for injustice is nothing in his view (156) "other than the not performance of a covenant... and whosoever is not unjust is just". He describes a just man as (160) "he that taketh all the care he can, that his actions may be all just and an unjust man, is he that neglecteth it." The laws of nature are seen by Hobbes as immutable and eternal, for what is unjust can never be made lawful.

Again, he maintains that good and evil are only names that signify our appetites and aversions, and that they differ according to customs, tempers and doctrines of men. Moreso, diverse men differ not only in their judgement of what is pleasant and unpleasant, but also of what is comfortable or disagreeable to reason in action that are performed in everyday life. For Hobbes, the science of virtue and vices is moral philosophy and the true doctrine of the laws of nature, the true moral philosophy. "... for moral philosophy is nothing else but the science of mankind", according to Hobbes (167). Thus, to be able to know what is right or just, good or evil, wrong or unjust, one must go back to nature as the reference point. One must study man's nature, the state of nature, and the laws of nature, for in them is to be found the science (i.e. the absolute and relative principles, the logic and the systematic discovery of what is just and unjust).

A Critical Evaluation of Hobbesian Ethics

The basic premise of Hobbes' argument is the state of nature. For in this state is to be discovered the true nature of man, and the laws of nature. Yet, despite the fact that the state of nature is the most original argument upon which Hobbes' ethical edifice rests, the diverse implications of this premise have not been sufficiently appreciated.

I wish to argue, however, that despite the appearance of consistency and coherency in Hobbes' basic premise of the state of nature, and consequently, the nature of man and the laws of nature upon which his ethics rests, there are logical inconsistencies of the worst kind, with the implication that Hobbes' premises fail to justify his conclusions.

The first difficulty that appears glaring in Hobbes' conception of the state of nature is the meaning of nature in the context in question. According to a time-honoured tradition, it is contrasted with 'art' or 'artefact'. This certainly appears to be the idea of nature employed by Hobbes and which he intends to be understood as implied in his conception of the state of nature. This is why the 'Leviathan' is an artificial man or construct and serves to illuminate the state of nature. In such a state, it would be logical that men be deprived of all manufactured goods, but no suggestion is made by Hobbes to this effect. Rather his view in *Leviathan* indicates that men certainly had weapons. Again, the state of nature according to Francis Tricaud, "might be equated to a situation where men even now spring out of the earth and suddenly like mushroom come to full maturity, without all kinds of engagement with each other" (111). What this points to is the fact that rather than being the natural condition of mankind, the Hobbesian state of nature appears to be a conceptual artefact arrived at by isolating certain fundamental and eternal characteristics of human behaviour, such as mutual fondness. Besides, his portrayal of the state of nature does not cohere with the other concepts of the same genus, namely, the "law of nature" and the "right of nature". The point is that if the condition of the state of nature disposes men to perpetual aggression, then there ought to be other complementary features of the state of nature. But, the right of nature does not suggest aggression. Arguing along the same line, Ikpe has noted that:

Though it could be argued that man in the state of nature, sees aggression as a means of fulfilling the imperative of the right of nature; i.e. self preservation, there is nothing wrong in also arguing that he can conceive of it as a means of self-destruction. Thus, the very reasons that one could advance for the initial aggression in the state of nature are also enough reason to restrain one from it. (61)

Following Hobbes, the right of nature and the laws of nature "dispose men to peace and obedience, and the laws did oblige in the state of nature".

Thus, as noted again by Ikpe:

What follows from this is that, either the right and law of nature as characterised by Hobbes' do not rightly belong to nature or Hobbes state of nature is not rightly of nature. (62)

Again, the cause of the war of all against all that characterizes the state of nature raises its own difficulties, for the reasons offered by Hobbes are inconsistent with one another. For example, in *De cive* Hobbes maintains that the cause of the war in the state of nature is because men disagree as to what is good and evil. This explanation, however, is far from satisfactory and inconsistent with Hobbes' basic assumption about the state of nature; for he denies the possibility of there being moral notions in the state of nature when he writes;

To this war of everyman against everyman, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust.

The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. (145)

Moreover, Hobbes locates the cause of war in the natural passions of men. Yet, he insists (50 – 51) that "reason which is the law of nature is given by God to everyman for the rule of his actions"; and reason would reduce the force of passions, and thus men would emerge gloriously into a civil society. The problem, however, is this: if reason has the ascribed quality of mitigating the influence of passion and men are in possession of it, then the war of all against all would not have

arisen in the first place. It would appear, therefore, that the passions are stronger than reason. If this is so and the state of nature is characterised with perpetual war, then it is impossible for civil society ever to emerge from it. Hobbes' view about the nature of man raises its own problems too.

Hobbes' analysis of human nature which is dominated by self-interest begins with the recognition of the equality of all men both in their physical and mental composition. The reason Hobbes offers in support of this claim is not convincing. He is of the view that wits must be equally distributed among men since each is contented with his share. Contentment, however, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient evidence of the equality of all men. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Joel Kidder observes and rightly too that (138) the issue of contentment "is compatible with their really being unequal...." Besides, if the thesis of equality were true, it should enjoin men to peace, rather than war, for as to the strength of men there would be no difference and venturing into war would be useless as one would not be certain of victory. Also, Hobbes' argument seems to involve a contradiction. There is, for instance, the problem of reconciling his view that human beings always act for the interest of their self preservation with another view of his that;

There are men who will consciously risk the possibility of death in order to gain revenge; a son would rather die himself than kill his mother or father. (19)

The strengthening and preservation of oneself can, thus not be both the necessary and sufficient condition of human action as maintained by Hobbes.

Hobbes believed that by the nature of men they prefer peace to war and, therefore, would be capable of coming out of the state of nature. The point, however, is that the pursuit of happiness or the means of self-preservation would vary from person to person, consequently, the possibility of realising a unique condition of peace by a common consensus becomes problematic and so questionable. Hobbes' view tends to rule out the possibility of such desire and consensus, for he maintains that:

On the contrary, needy men, and hardy men, not contented with their present condition; as also all men that are ambitious of military command, are inclined to continue the causes of war and stir up trouble and sedition. (50)

This view is strengthened by Hobbes' thesis that good and evil are reactions by man to emotions caused by external objects, and that it is impossible that the same thing should always be the cause of a peculiar kind of appetites and aversions because of the continual mutation of man's body. Hobbes goes further to stress the impossibility of all men consenting to the same object as being good. By this contention, Hobbes eliminates the possibility of men deciding on leaving the state of nature perceived to be evil, for it is impossible for all men to have consented to the same object (which in this case is the state of nature) as not being conducive for living. - Even if they had at a point in time say (t1) consented thus, at time (t2), the continual mutation of their bodies and consequently their desires and aversions should necessarily alter and the consensus or decision reverted. Hence, again, a contract could never be successfully and conclusively entered into.

Following Hobbes, a good moral philosophy, by implication, is one that can guarantee self-preservation since this explains all drives and inclinations. A system of ethics should, therefore, be accepted because it serves the goal of self-preservation. We should be moral because by so doing our life is preserved or at least protected from violent death. Morality thus serves to enable us attain those values that are conducive to our self-preservation which are simply our desires and appetites.

Leo Strauss is of the view that if Hobbes' claims that whatever is conducive to self-preservation is good and is the sole root of morality is true,

Then the fundamental moral fact is not a duty but a right, all duties are derivative from the fundamental and inalienable right of self-preservation. There are, then, no absolute or unconditional duties; duties are binding only to the extent to which their performance does not endanger our self-preservation. (13)

He maintains that this is not the case as otherwise, civil society can hardly demand that a man resigns that right (self-preservation) both by going to war and submitting to capital punishment. Hobbes' view on the laws of nature does not help matters either.

The Laws of Nature: A Re- Examination

Laws of nature, as defined by Hobbes, are not properly laws. For law properly conceived according to him (147) "is the word of him that by right hath command over other." Hence this definition excludes what is essential to the understanding of the laws of nature. Moreover, Hobbes presents an alternative account of the laws of nature saying that they are delivered in the word of God.

These dictates of reason, men used to call by the name of laws, but improperly: for they are but conclusions or theorems concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves;... 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. (147)

This account suggests an alternative equivalent thus: "law of nature – command delivered in the word of God" as noted by David Gauthier (37). The objection here is that if God commands by right then his commands are properly laws; but laws as we are told by Hobbes are tied securely to enforceability. It appears that all Hobbes succeeds to do here is give a scriptural basis for the laws without realising that this goes to show only that "they are binding on Christians as scriptural laws, not that they are natural" according to Gauthier (38).

Perhaps, it is for this reason that some political theorists have argued that the laws of nature do not create moral obligation, for if they do, they must be genuine laws. And as laws, they must be commands, as Hobbes (251) noted, "not a command of any man to any man; but only of him, whose command is addressed to one formerly obliged to obey him". It follows from this that the laws of nature are not in the real sense laws and to call them thus is a misnomer. Perhaps, without realising the effect on his theory, Hobbes (253) himself supports this point of view

thus; "for the laws of nature, ... are not properly laws, but qualities that dispose men to peace and obedience..." Moreover, Hobbes' insistence on the enthronement of a sovereign tends to give the impression that it is simply impossible for men to live without one. This assumption could be refuted in experience. Besides, it is not logically inconceivable that human beings lived without a common power over them.

In addition Hobbes tends to be implying that human beings not living under a common power would be unable to predict and rely on one another's behaviour, and this raises a fundamental problem. For if this view is correct it would imply that a social contract is impossible, and therefore an impossibility leaving the state of nature. This is because any contract entered into pre-supposes a level of dependability on the part of the contractors. Moreover, it is not a necessary truth that the threat of sanction must exist if individuals' actions are to be predictable.

Again, the recognition of equality of others to oneself by nature is required for accepting the first law of nature. Here, we find Hobbes saying that natural equality is to be acknowledged if it is real and admitted if it is not. But, if nature has really not made men equal, then the case for the first law of nature is destroyed, and consequently any peace agreement entered into on the basis of a spurious equality would certainly on the long run be of no value, at least to a party in the contract.

Also, if the individuals in the state of nature are strictly self-interested and ought always to act and advance their individual interests, and never to grant more benefits to another than to himself, yet when faced with situations where he could do better for himself by acting in one way rather than another, will consciously and willingly forego the chance to advance his own interest, then no one in the state of nature who acts so can be 'strictly self interested' person. This will be true of the "needy and hardy men" who will continue the cause of war as maintained by Hobbes.

This would imply that Hobbes' (162) claim that "of the voluntary acts of everyman, the object is some good to himself" is wrong. Otherwise, it becomes surprising, especially as it does to Hobbes' fool when Hobbes' claim that injustice, or the not keeping of covenant, is against reason when injustice can plausibly be capable of advancing ones interest and ensuring the good to oneself.

On the other hand, if the individual restrains himself in what sense is it true for him that his object in all his voluntary actions is 'some good to himself?' He appears to be foregoing 'a good' which in this case is his advantage. For Hobbes also, the only reason why men should obey rules is that it helps or assures in the satisfaction of their desires. The laws of nature thus appear to be rules of prudence – that is, rules which an individual must follow if he is to achieve the conditions of peace and security necessary for the assured continuance of his life and for making that life comfortable.

Hobbes seems to believe that in acting with this special kind of prudent concern for one's fundamental interests one is inevitably at the same time helping to promote the fundamental interest of one's actual or potential fellow citizens. But it is not a necessary truth that a man cannot secure his own good without acting in a way that will also secure the good of all his actual or potential fellow citizens. In most actual situations the securing of one's good has been shown to be detrimental to others, and there is no suggestion in Hobbes that if doing anything won't help you, but will help others, then you ought to do it.

Would it be wrong on Hobbes' principle if an agent both self-interested and other regarding were to consistently perform actions that turn out beneficial to him and not to others, granted that peace and security is maintained? Certainly, on Hobbesian principles such actions cannot be condemned, for peace and security in Hobbes are not required for their sake but as a means to an end.

In the same vein, Stanley Moore has argued that Hobbes' egoistic argument is inadequate to justify his system of ethics. In his view:

this argument from prudence fails to establish the principle of rule egoism over the entire range of cases to which Hobbes applied it. Prudence may dictate to a man that he always talk like a rule-egoist. And it may dictate that he usually act like a rule-egoist. But what about those crucial cases where violating the principle is to his interest because he is reasonably certain of escaping detection. (50)

The implication of our considerations so far on Hobbes can be seen in the act of covenanting and it is as follows. If one enters into a covenant, then it would be unjust to break it. But supposing it is to one's advantage, then it cannot be contrary to reason. Moreover, if the breaking of the covenant is dictated by reason, showing it to be to one's benefit, then one must have the right to do what is contrary to the covenant.

But in making the covenant that right was renounced. Therefore, one has the right to do what one had renounced the right to do. Clearly, it appears false to insist that a man can never expect breach of covenant to be conducive to his preservation.

It could be argued from this that for Hobbes the object of voluntary renunciation is prudential not moral. What determines whether an action is wrong is simply because men have voluntarily given up the right to perform them. John Kemp has noted that whatever advantages Hobbesian ethics might appear to enjoy, the transition from egoistic or prudential considerations to moral ones may still be regarded as unsatisfactory. According to him,

To say to a man 'you ought to do that because if you don't you jeopardize the security without which none of your desires can be fulfilled', is clearly not to make a moral judgement in any sense in which moral judgements are being distinguished from as opposed to being assimilated to, prudential ones. (20)

One other feature of Hobbesian ethics is noteworthy and this is the fact that Hobbesian ethics is a form of ethical naturalism.

If Hobbesian ethics is granted as a form of ethical naturalism, then it follows that Hobbesian ethics is plagued by some of the problems that besiege ethical naturalism as a theory, which I have discussed extensively elsewhere.

It is equally to be seen in Hobbesian ethics a strong display of the empiricist attitude which views only facts as real. This position accords with the scientific spirit. But scientific facts as have been argued

often are not the sole constituents of reality, and hence science is no more revelatory of nature's possibilities than any other aspect of experience.

CONCLUSION

Hobbesian ethics has been presented in some detail in this paper. It has been shown that irrespective of what arguments one may put forward in support of Hobbesian ethics, it is plagued with serious defects. Thus while the attempt in Hobbesian ethics to place morality on a scientific base is worthy of note, it should be borne in mind that values cannot be subsumed in facts and any effort to replace the one for the other, or make one the basis of the other is bound to be met with difficulties as evident in Hobbesian ethics.

I wish to emphasize that if things were deemed desirable or good on the mere ground of our desiring them, to use the words of Romanell,

Ethics would be completely pointless as a discipline, except perhaps as a sheer exercise either in sentimentalism on the one hand or cynicism on the other. (74)

In fact it is a non-sequitur to argue that nothing is desirable or good in itself, except insofar as it is desired by us, to the ethical conclusion that something is desirable or good, simply on the ground that it is desired by us individually or collectively.

As a final remark I must emphasize that this essay makes no claim to the effect that it has said the very last there is to say about Hobbesian ethics. But rather it holds the minimal position of having critically studied Hobbesian ethics and having indicated some of the flaws, inconsistencies and difficulties inherent in it.

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