

Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes a.k.a. 'The Beast of Malmesbury' was born in the village of Malmesbury in Wiltshire in the south of England. He was born in 1588 on the same day the Spanish tried (unsuccessfully) to invade England. Apparently the bells warning that the Spanish Armada was on its way caused Hobbes's mother to go into premature labour. Hobbes would later say that "fear and I were born twins together".

Hobbes's dad was a clergyman. He got into a dispute with another clergyman and it ended in a fight. Literally. Hobbes's dad punched the other clergyman in the churchyard (not a euphemism). The subsequent scandal meant Hobbes's dad had to resign and leave the village in disgrace.

Hobbes went off to university in Oxford, the fees paid for by a rich uncle. After university Hobbes became a private tutor to the incredibly wealthy and powerful Cavendish family. He continued in their employ, on and off, throughout his life.

Hobbes lived in tumultuous times. He saw England descend into civil war, culminating in the decapitation of King Charles I. Hobbes went to live in France during this period. While in France he became the tutor and friend of the Prince of Wales. The Prince of Wales later became Charles II of England at the Restoration in 1660, and awarded his old friend Hobbes a pension for life of £100 a year. That's about \$150,000 a year in today's money.

Hobbes's ideas were constantly getting him into trouble. He had a peculiar ability to annoy nearly everyone. For instance, in his most famous work – Leviathan – he annoyed the Parliamentarians by arguing in favour of an absolute monarch; yet also managed to annoy the Royalists by arguing against there being any 'divine' authority behind the king.

However, the main source of his trouble was his supposed atheism. At the time, atheism was considered a scandalous position and it could easily cost you your life. For instance when Hobbes moved to London in 1666 there was an outbreak of the plague. Then, to top it off, the whole place burned down. Many people thought Hobbes was somehow responsible: that God was expressing displeasure at Hobbes's arrival by subjecting London to these two great misfortunes! There was a debate in parliament over whether to arrest and punish Hobbes, and in the meantime mobs formed and went looking for him.

It was at this time Hobbes started to be referred to as 'the Beast of Malmesbury' (this is also a reference to the title of his most famous work - Leviathan. A Leviathan is a sea beast or monster).

It was eventually decided that Hobbes should be banned from writing anything that related to religion or human conduct (his fate could have been a lot worse, but he was friends with the King remember, so strings were probably pulled). Nevertheless, for at least a century after his death, Hobbes was seen as a philosopher whose ideas should be mentioned only for the sake of refutation.

Hobbes himself seems to have been anything but a beast. He wasn't nasty, brutish, and short. He was nice, gentle, and tall. He was also a bit of a health-fanatic: he took regular long walks and played tennis into his seventies.

Ironically, although he was constantly plagued by fears for his safety he never came to any harm. He had a very comfortable life, never suffered any serious illness, and lived to the incredible age of 91, remaining alert to the end. He died at Hardwick Hall, one of the Cavendish stately homes in Derbyshire. His last words were "I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark".

Man the machine

Hobbes was an early, and very forthright materialist. Ultimately everything boils down to matter moving in accordance with deterministic laws. Humans are just complicated flesh machines:

What is a Heart, but a Spring; and the Nerves, but so many Strings; and the Joints, but so many wheels, giving motion to the whole Body...

Hobbes allowed no exceptions – even our mental processes are mechanical according to Hobbes. They consist of matter moving inside our skulls.

When it comes to our emotions, these are forces – pushes. Some are pushes towards something, some away (appetites and aversions to use his terms). For as long as we're alive, we are subjected to these pushes. Living involves constantly being assailed by desires that can never be ultimately satisfied (for the minute they are satisfied, another will take over). And he thought that we all have, as our most potent aversion, an aversion to death.

At the time this sort of extreme materialism was very new and very controversial. Hobbes's materialism was one reason he was thought to be an atheist. After all, if everything is just matter in motion, where's God? God, surely, isn't composed of matter! God, surely, is not a giant machine! And thus God has no home in Hobbes' view – or so it seemed.

Similarly, if we are nothing more than flesh machines we have no independent soul to ascend to an after life upon death. When pressed on these matters Hobbes's reply was simply to say that 'God was beyond human understanding'. As answers go it was not found satisfying and Hobbes' own breezy indifference to the implications of his theory were taken as very good evidence of Hobbes's atheism (Hobbes never positively affirmed atheism himself).

Free Will

Many think (then, as now) that if we are just complicated flesh machines whose operations follow deterministic laws then we can't really possess free will. For after all, if all of our thoughts, deliberations, decisions and other mental goings-on are determined by prior events – events over which we had no control.

Hobbes thought this line of thought is confused. Hobbes thought free will was perfectly compatible with us being complicated machines. For freedom, says Hobbes, just involves being self-determining. And you are self-determining when nothing prevents you from doing what you desire to do. Obstacles to freedom are physical restraint, coercion, and compulsion, but not determinism. The mistake, says Hobbes, is to think that your desires themselves need to be determined by yourself. This, he holds, is incoherent and cannot be any part of what it means to be self-determining.

You cannot determine your own desires, for on what basis would you do so? Free will involves being able to act on the desires that you find yourself possessing. It does not involve determining those desires themselves. Anyone who thinks otherwise has rendered free will incoherent, an impossible thing.

Thus, the fact that we are just flesh machines who do not determine our own desires does not, in itself, mean that we lack free will. If we're doing what we want, we're exercising as much freedom as anyone could want.

The State of Nature

Hobbes is best known as a political philosopher. In his most famous work - Leviathan (1651) - Hobbes argues for an absolutist 'sovereign' body to which we should all give almost unconditional obedience. Hobbes uses the term 'sovereign' to refer to the ruling body of the state.

As far as Hobbes was concerned it was preferable that the power rest in the hands of one individual, but it need not and could involve an assembly. The important thing for Hobbes was that the sovereign or sovereign body should decide everything in whatever manner they see fit, and we should all submit to its authority.

If there was no state, no police, no state institutions of any kind, we would be in what Hobbes calls a 'state of nature'. Hobbes held that in such a state life for us all would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short". Why? We all want to be happy and to avoid death. But in a natural state our desire for happiness brings us into conflict with others. We find ourselves in competition for the same patch of land, the same food, and so on.

We will be unable to co-operate with one another, despite recognising the benefits of doing so. In most co-operative enterprises someone has to expose themselves to exploitation: to the possibility that the person with whom they're co-operating will simply not hold up their end of the bargain. But in a state of nature no sensible person will do that unless they have some guarantee that the other person will hold up their end of the deal.

In a state nature there is no guarantee. These are some of the reasons why Hobbes held that life in the state of nature is bound to be 'nasty, brutish and short'. We will all live in constant fear, and poverty; wanting to co-operate but being unable to because we recognise that the others have a vested interest in exploiting us, just as we have in exploiting them. And so long as we remain in this state, we are trapped by the combination of our self-interestedness and our reason into being unable to co-operate or live peacefully with others.

If only we could co-operate with others, we could stop fighting, and achieve peace and prosperity. But how do we achieve this?

The social contract

Hobbes was the first of what have become known as 'social contract' theorists (a tradition in political philosophy that continues from Hobbes, through Locke and Rousseau, all the way to the most significant political philosopher of the present day: John Rawls). Social contract theorists attempt to show that a particular kind of political arrangement is just on the grounds that we, or ideal rational versions of ourselves, would agree to it.

In the state of nature the absence of any authority, of any law or sanction, means that the one thing we do have is the right to do whatever we please in the pursuance of our interests. Hobbes calls this a law of nature meaning that its authority comes from our reason (the assumption here is that it is rational to pursue your own interests).

The only way to escape the state of nature is for us to collectively agree to give up that right – the law of nature - and vest it in an all-powerful sovereign. What this means in practice is agreeing to submit to the absolute authority of the sovereign - agreeing, in other words, to do whatever the sovereign wants.

Totalitarian

Hobbes is often criticised for licensing, indeed positively encouraging, a totalitarian state. The sovereign body can do whatever it wants, and we, the citizens, should just submit to it.

Actually, that's not quite true. Even Hobbes thinks there are limits to what you should submit to. Remember that the ultimate source of authority for the sovereign – the ultimate reason why it makes sense for the citizens to submit (almost) completely and unquestioningly to the will of the sovereign is that the citizens – we - would agree to do so to escape a state of nature. Yet, there does come a point where the horrors of the state of nature would be preferable to submitting to the sovereign.

For instance, if the sovereign body demands that you die, or put your life in severe danger (by, say, conscripting you in order to send you to war) then it is rational to resist. Submitting to the sovereign in these cases would be to condemn oneself to a fate worse than life in a state of nature.

Hobbes extends this to criminals. If you've committed an offence for which the sovereign deems death the appropriate punishment, then you – the criminal – are justified in doing all that you can to avoid getting caught. Note: the rest of us should do all we can to ensure that you are caught. So, there are limits to your submission to the sovereign, albeit not many.