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Wreaking Hobbes on Mankind

————— ◆ —————
PHILIP COATES

For a long time I've wondered why so many intelligent, worthy people remain darkly skeptical of arguments for more freedom and less government. They shake their heads and smile that world-weary you're-so-naïve smile, not focusing on the details of the argument. Some are conservatives who have fought doggedly for much of their lives to hold the line against government. They do not appear anxious to escape from the room because they can't respond, but evidently giving an adequate answer would take far too long—they know something deeper than political philosophy. "Well," they say with resignation, "I believed that sort of utopian thing when I was younger, but I've seen a lot more of the world since then." Sometimes they project a wistfulness or sadness that significantly less government is unworkable. One leaves such discussions feeling that if one can't reach these people, convincing the wider world of the merits of a freer society will be difficult indeed.

"What Is Living and What Is Dead in Classical Liberalism?" by Charles K. Rowley (1996) helps fill in a piece of the puzzle. It reveals a key factor that may have contributed to the retreat from classical liberalism by two prominent and influential academics, John Gray and Robert Nozick. It is often difficult to trace the intellectual roots of a thinker's ideas—roots by

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nature lie under the surface. But Rowley suggests that, at least for Gray, one factor is a highly negative view of man, specifically, the view of human nature of British philosopher Thomas Hobbes. When debating about government, it may be necessary to go beneath political philosophy to delve into more fundamental areas of general philosophy and psychology. Rowley indicates that Gray shares the conclusion of Hobbesian psychology: free men are self-destructive creatures destined for a “war of all against all.” Gray then accepts Hobbes’s political conclusion that freedom must be sacrificed to maintain peace and order. He then argues that a broad spectrum of societies—from Asian authoritarianisms to some welfare states and liberal democracies—might be compatible with the maintenance of peace and order.

But if Gray does hold a consistently Hobbesian view of man, his conclusion is too ecumenical and flexible. He must not accept any nonauthoritarian societies. After all, Hobbes viewed men as incapable of composing a responsible society in which people respect the rights of others. For the most part, he maintained, either greed or laziness (“covetousness” and “sloth”) motivates men. Moreover, they naturally follow their feelings, their lust for riches and power, regardless of the means required to achieve their objectives; and this passionate irrationality leads to war. If this view of man as either universally or primarily an unreasoning brute is accepted, how can one logically advocate anything but authoritarianism? After all, freedom must lead ultimately to anarchy and chaos.

Hobbesian Psychology

What deeper view of human psychology supports such conclusions? For Hobbes, “the passions” motivate people. Why? Because objects produce in men “appetites and aversions” associated with pleasure and pain; and man is a volitionless machine. So the last desire before an action determines it. “In deliberation, the last appetite or aversion immediately adhering to the action or to the omission thereof, is that we call the Will” (Hobbes [1651] 1994, chap. 6, par. 53). Reason is the slave of the immediate desires. Reason is impotent (Strauss 1963, 3). It cannot independently cause action. In fact, reason, or “deliberation,” is actually defined in terms of the passions (Hinnant 1977, 57).

What attitudes follow? Men are fundamentally antisocial and the enemies of one another. When a man acts among others, he tends to assert himself and to seek power. Men desire that the whole world fear and obey them (Strauss 1963, 18). “But the tongue of man is a trumpet of war and sedition” (Hobbes [1642] 1983, chap. 5, par. 5). Pride, avarice, ambition, and fear of death primarily motivate men, who call good whatever pleases them for the moment. In *Elements of Law* Hobbes states that

Since men by natural passion are divers ways offensive one to another, every man thinking well of himself, and hating to see the same in others, they must needs provoke one another by words, and other signs of contempt and hatred which are incident to all comparison, till at last they must determine the pre-eminence by strength and force of body. (Hobbes [1640] 1969, pt. 1, chap. 14, par. 4)

What can prevent this outcome? According to Hobbes, only the fear of death. Nothing but a supreme and absolute authority to which men will submit can halt perpetual strife and suspicion. Don't bother preaching a sermon to a horse; it responds only to the whip.

The Life and Times of Hobbes

Although Hobbes himself was a materialist and a determinist—hence the metaphysical underpinning of his view of man as a volitionless machine—it is important to note the conditions in which he lived. During his lifetime England passed through a chaotic era marked by deep disputes over authority, which culminated in civil war, overthrow of the established system of government, and ongoing contention over who would hold legal power: the Great Rebellion of 1642 to 1652, the overthrow of the monarchy, the rule of Cromwell, and the restoration of the Stuarts. Battles raged continually between king and parliament, between common man and noble, between Catholic and Protestant. The age has been called a time precariously poised between anarchy and civil disorder. Moreover, external wars with various continental powers kept breaking out.

If, as commentators have argued, Hobbes's fragmented world provided the raw materials for his ideology, subsequent personal experiences must have reinforced his bleak outlook. His life and freedom chronically endangered, he endured a series of oppressions expressing the baser natures of small men. He was barred from court for his views. Later he had to flee France because some there viewed his writings as containing an attack on the papacy. He had to kowtow before being allowed to live quietly in England again. Finally, in a time of superstitious fear caused by the Plague and other calamities, he faced still more persecution as a possible atheist and heretic and was forbidden to write again on "ethical subjects."

To some the upheaval, insecurity, vying for power, and injustice of Hobbes's time may seem to confirm all too well his malignant view of humankind. In his own time one group that might have found him persuasive comprised those who saw the freedom of thought and conscience of the Renaissance and the Reformation as the cause of the prevailing anarchy. In today's world, Gray praises Hobbes for his modernist sensibility, "arresting

contemporaneity,” and “supreme relevance” (Rowley 1996, 24). Hobbes’s ideas have indeed been resurrected and viewed favorably in the twentieth century in the wake of the holocaust and the world wars. This decades-long epidemic of disaster has seemed to many intellectuals to support his basic assumptions. Balefully scowling down on us, the nasty and brutish ghost of Hobbes intones: “Look at the unleashing of total war, the wholesale debasement and brutalization, the lunatic destructiveness, the piles of bodies—you who believe men are suited to live rationally and peacefully together with a minimum of restraint, without stern and inflexible control!”

Other, Better Lives and Times

But those who embrace either the politics or the psychology of this view lose sight of the rest of history. The conditions of Hobbes’s time did not persist; the world improved. The English resolved their differences over the powers to vest in parliament and the monarchy. Eventually they could freely espouse their religious beliefs, speak their minds about politics, and publish their political or philosophical writings without fear of violent retribution. And these conditions have persisted for centuries.

No Hobbesian authority was needed to keep in line the Englishmen who enjoyed these liberties. Rather, the opposite direction was chosen. And religious freedom, political toleration, freedom of expression, the rule of law, and civil order have spread in tandem far beyond England. If men were the slaves of their boiling impulses and sudden rages and could not reason past them, how could this outcome have ever occurred?

The periods of power lust and religious blood feuds, of senseless conflict and chaos in Europe’s and the world’s history down through much of this century, demonstrate that men have the capacity to act in Hobbesian fashion. They can, on a societywide scale, put their unexamined, short-run, or baser emotions and motivations in the saddle. But other times show that humans also have the capacity to behave quite differently. These eras show that people can function on a higher level, and can do so without a chain, a leash, and a whip to induce their every action and decision. With the fall of the absolute monarchies, freedom gradually began to increase; and as it did so, the anarchic end of civilization, the “war of all against all” that Hobbes foresaw and Gray, living in better and more secure times, still fearfully echoes, never happened.

Although the direction of our era remains unsettled and our world is far from perfect (and of course the future is not guaranteed), in many ways we live in an era that rebuts Hobbes’s determinism about men’s motivations and actions. In fact, the times and places in which men have lived under the very sort of authoritarian government that Hobbes recommended—in

Germany, the Soviet Union, and China—have been the most insecure, warlike, and destructive of all. As those regimes have tended either to be defeated by the armies of freer (and therefore more prosperous) nations or to melt away through their own internal destructiveness and the people's perception of their injustice, the world has begun to clear a greater space for prosperity and freedom to coexist with order and peace. The doomsday weapons now point toward the oceans; many are being dismantled. World trade and the stability it requires, offering vast new segments of the world's people a chance for productive lives and wider prosperity, have made war and the forcible seizure of others' property less attractive. People from the former communist and apartheid countries show signs of moving toward integration into a single wider civilization.

Normal Human Development

Consider a typical middle-class American man today. As a schoolchild he may have sometimes given in to his impulses to bully someone smaller or to steal someone's lunch. But he learned about the balance between emotions and reason, between "passions" or impulses and self-control or reflection, between short-range pleasures or satisfactions and long-range self-interest. When he acted in a Hobbesian (or Nietzschean) way, he was ostracized or punished, and he didn't feel good about himself. Maybe he met someone bigger who inflicted injustices on him. He became more mature, often by trying different ways of behaving and reflecting on them; not necessarily because some authority figure said "no" every step of the way. The authority figure can't always be there. (As many have observed, if people in general thought it proper or felt it attractive to steal or commit other crimes, all the police on the planet couldn't keep order in one medium-sized city.) As he grew up, he learned in other ways that focusing on the gratification of immediate passions and desires got bad results. If he didn't study and graduate at least from high school, he wouldn't earn much income and wouldn't have much of a future. When he fell in love, when he formed close friendships, he learned to care deeply about other people. He wanted then to direct many of his efforts, thoughts, and emotions toward their happiness and well-being.

Every step of this process, which occurs millions of times daily around the world, refutes Hobbes. Most men in moderately stable and sustaining cultures do not develop into power-lusters, aggressors, or enemies of all men; nor do they experience such seething impulses and attitudes internally. (Hitler and Stalin were psychopaths.) Nor are human motivations directed only toward physical possessions or consumption. They include a wide range of ends appropriate to a thinking creature whose emotions rise far above the

level of the physical sensations of a snail or a bat. People value enjoyable work, creativity, amiable human relationships, aesthetic pleasures, and a sense of membership in a successful and beneficent community and society.

The example could be extended to discuss the man's wife and how her emotional and social maturation occurred; how one can properly have an interest in one's society, nation, and community and the lives of and justice toward people in general; and how all of this develops without any use of governmental authority to forcibly constrain human nature. But this extension is unnecessary once the point of the example is grasped.

Like history viewed broadly, a proper introspection or a glance around us at people we know shows that Hobbes was wrong about human nature. Man is not a robot driven inexorably by the emotion of the moment. He possesses both reason and emotion and must create his own balanced integration—or war and disunity—of them. Far from always responding to the most recent Pavlovian stimulus, people gradually develop a huge body of knowledge, values, and feelings, and they process each event in life in a vast context molded from these elements.

Summoning the Darkness

The debate transcends that between academics or about classical liberalism. The flawed, malevolent Hobbesian view of people, or a similar view springing from other philosophical roots, is far more widespread and subtle than the explicit or full form in which rigorous political thinkers may adopt it. People may accept the view only in part; it can seep in from religious sources; it can emerge nonphilosophically from making one's empirical observations too selectively.

One sometimes senses an apprehensive, despairing spirit that seems unjustified by the immediately surrounding facts of the age or by the evidence arrayed. Russell Kirk, the traditionalist conservative intellectual, has voiced the perched-on-the-edge-of-an-abys sensibility often fashionable across the cultural as well as the political spectrum today:

We live in a world that is giving at the seams. Sometimes, indeed...there comes an uneasy feeling that the garment of civilization has already parted; and that if one were to tug even the least bit, a sleeve or a trouser leg of our social fabric would come away in his hand. (Kirk 1965, 160)

Kirk wrote this passage not of collapsing Rome in the fourth century but of America in 1965, before the Vietnam War scattered intellectual shrapnel everywhere, before Watergate, before the counterculture, the New Left, or various nihilistic movements had come to the fore. One can better

understand the bleakness of this outlook by supposing that, more than mere existential facts, the writer's entire metaphysics and his view of human capabilities led him to the edge of a dark cliff.

Of course, the nonintellectual—the man on the street who responds to arguments for reduced regulation with skepticism and a conviction that pure voluntarism can't work in the real world—has never read Hobbes. He gets his sense of humankind from “street smarts” formed from his own experiences. Many people lose their benevolence or potential for optimism in stages because of bad or disheartening experiences. They subconsciously generalize about people and what to expect of them from unfortunate relations with parents and others.

The ideas of the intellectual and those of the man on the street, even if false, can reinforce each other and have an unintended effect. In the end, like all the skeptical, cynical, and nihilist philosophies that litter the world, Hobbesianism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Acting together, like opportunistic viruses in a patient with a weakened immune system, they sap energy and undercut self-confidence. They bring about results less likely to have occurred otherwise. If people act as though these doctrines are true, treating their fellows—and worse, themselves—as though they were limited, shrunken, and hopeless, they will indeed tear the fabric of civilization, opening the way for the very destruction they fear.

Conclusion

As we move toward quarantine and inoculation, Gray has unwittingly done us a service. He has underlined a view of human nature that may well explain his political mutation and the faintheartedness of others. Rowley deserves thanks for shining a light on the disease. But note that besides the purely Hobbesian misconceptions, there is a deeper error in the methods often used by intellectuals in drawing wide conclusions of the Hobbesian sort: their thinking is too shallow, and they are too quick to generalize.

If one were to offer two words of advice to Hobbes and Gray (and perhaps to Nozick if the shoe fits), they would be extrospection and introspection. Review both the external and the internal evidence more thoroughly. Look again at history, well beyond the most recent era, as a check on your political philosophy. And look inside yourself, asking whether your self-knowledge comports with your assumptions about human nature. Try to come to a fuller understanding of the psychology of mature human beings than did a beleaguered seventeenth-century deterministic British thinker who formed his views in exceptionally unsettled and violent circumstances.

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