

Hobbes: Reason Leads to Conflict

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Philosophy 4

According to Hobbes, reason leads us into and out of conflict. The primary reason for this is our relative *equality*, by which Hobbes means equal ability to obtain what another has. The line of reasoning runs roughly as follows:

- All human beings are equally able to obtain from others what they have.
- Since they are aware of the previous point, each human being has equal hope of obtaining whatever it is they desire.
- They are aware, in turn, that we each have equal hope of obtaining whatever they desire.
- This makes it rational to ‘strike first’, so to speak, and take what we want before losing what we have to others.

This line of reasoning accounts for two of the three causes of war that Hobbes isolates in Book I, XIII.1-6, competition and diffidence (we won’t worry about the third cause, ‘glory’). Let’s take a look at each source in more detail.

1 Competition

At XIII.3, Hobbes writes, ‘if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies, which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only, endeavour to destroy or subdue one another.’

In other words, where two people cannot share goods they both desire, either for sustenance or pleasure, they instead compete for the goods. And, in fact, as we live in a world of scarcity, fighting for survival becomes a necessity.

2 Diffidence

Hobbes defines ‘diffidence’ as ‘constant despair’, and ‘despair’ in turn as desire had without hope of attaining the object of desire¹. We are always at risk of losing what we have

¹These definitions are found at VI.20 and 15 respectively (page 30 of the book).

to others, since we are in competition with them for scarce resources. Awareness of this fact makes us fear that we will not be able to satisfy our own desires, and thus it becomes necessary for us to attack others who seem to be a threat to survival and satisfaction.

Note that the problem of diffidence is compounded by the fact that we know that others are in the same state that we are. Not *only* do we have to fear violence from competition, we also have to fear violence brought about from the diffidence of others. This makes the need to attack others pre-emptively all the more pressing.

3 The State of War

The end result of this state of affairs is 'a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man', in which life is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (XIII.9). Note that according to Hobbes's definition of war at XIII.8, this need not mean that violence is constant and sustained at all times. War is not only the act of fighting, but is 'a tract of time wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known.' The state of nature is a state of war because everyone is always on the verge of doing violence.