

Replying to the Fool: Hobbes and Gauthier

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Philosophy 100A

Hobbes claims it is rational that we keep our covenants, as this facilitates a transition from nature to society, hence from war to peace, where we can be assured it is easier to survive, fulfill our desires, and avoid what we are averse to. But, one might wonder, along with the character Hobbes calls the Fool, whether it might be even better to simply *let others* keep their covenants, and only do the same when our own benefit is in no way compromised. Then one may reap all the benefits that peace affords, without any of the sacrifice, thereby doing even better than those who keep their covenants.

1 Hobbes's Reply to the Fool

Hobbes replies to the Fool in Ch. 15, section 5. He writes that the Fool would not benefit from cheating in the long term:

[The Fool] cannot be received into any society that unite themselves for peace and defence but by the error of them that receive him; nor when he is received, be retained in it without seeing the danger of their error; which errors a man cannot reasonably reckon upon as the means of his security....

Here Hobbes says that it isn't reasonable to expect that one can survive and do well for very long in society before being figured out as a cheat. So, the Fool ought to expect to be cast out of society, and not to live much long after — hence the fool is acting contrary to self-preservation.

2 Gauthier's Reply to the Fool

Gauthier interprets the Fool as believing that it is only rational to follow through on a covenant (he puts the matter in terms of *promises*) when so acting is, in itself, the most beneficial option one has. But when we make the assumption that all members of a community are rational and aware of each other's rationality, it follows that covenants will never even be made unless those involved can be absolutely certain that all parties will keep their end of the bargain. After all, why would you make a covenant with someone you know will only follow through if they are sure they stand to benefit?

If a community adopts the practice of only making covenants under these conditions, then they lose out on a whole range of agreements that would maximize everyone's ability to get what they want. The outcome would be worse than if each person could be counted on to keep covenants *even when breaking them would maximize one's short-term gains*.

Gauthier takes his response to the Fool to illustrate a more general phenomenon sometimes called the *Paradox of Hedonism*: when we make our goal simply to maximize desire-satisfaction or the like, we will fail to satisfy desires as thoroughly as if we simply pursue things that we desire.

3 Study Questions

1. Take the quoted sentence from Hobbes and state it in your own words.
2. On the last full paragraph of page 708, Gauthier gives an illustration of how a community of individuals who think like the Fool lose out on mutually beneficial covenants. Read through the example very carefully and state how it illustrates Gauthier's point.
3. In discussing the Paradox of Hedonism, Gauthier introduces the terms 'straightforward maximizer' and 'constrained maximizer'. What do these terms mean, and how does Gauthier recast the paradox in terms of straightforward and constrained maximizers?