

*The following paper was submitted for a philosophy class on Ethical Theories. It covers the main aspects of Thomas Hobbes' moral philosophy.*

Hobbes' moral philosophy, taken in its entirety, undoubtedly lays upon a foundation of purely practical reasoning. That is, according to Hobbes, people who adopt morally acceptable standards of interpersonal conduct elect to do so solely in order to avoid what he terms the "State of Nature": a theoretical pre-political, pre-moral state of affairs where roughly equal self-interested individuals compete for scarce power, such that every person eventually comes to adopt a general strategy of anticipatory violence, ultimately driving themselves into a state of continuous war "of every man against every man" (chap 13, para. 8). Under such a bleak predicament, every rational and self-interested individual is persistently intent on preliminarily striking others, resulting therefore in a constant state of violence where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (chap. 13, para. 9). Thus, as to avoid such a distraught condition, Hobbes contends that all rational individuals, acting solely based on their own self-interests, ought to "seek peace and follow it" (chap. 14, para. 4), further arguing that individuals should be willing to lay down their natural liberty of securing power to attain their future desires at all costs, in order to achieve such a generally peaceful state (chap. 14 para. 5). This strong inclination towards a general condition of peace and safety characterizes Hobbes' first and fundamental "Law of Nature", a term he employs in order to describe a "general rule, found out by reason, by which man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life" (chap 14, para. 3). That is, Hobbes' "Laws of Nature" stand as general precepts of reason, which he maintains every rational and self-interested individual should undeniably elect to follow in an attempt to avoid great suffering. Compliance with the several "Laws of Nature" comprises the full extent of Hobbes' theory of morally acceptable interpersonal conduct. As such, one can readily see how Hobbesian morality establishes itself not on the basis

of some intrinsic sentiments of mutual compassion, but rather upon purely practical considerations, such that every rational individual who chooses to comply with the “Laws of Nature” does so strictly on the basis of pragmatic, self-interested reasoning.

Since Hobbes takes human beings to be rational and self-interested creatures, he argues that it ought to be the case that people should organize and elect to collectively comply with these “Laws of Nature”, even going so far as to establish a political sovereign capable of coercively enforcing them, so that a general state of widely dispersed peace may flourish among society (chap. 13, para. 8). This widespread peace that follows from an aggregate compliance with Hobbes’ “Laws of Nature” can adequately be thought of as a public good, for it is by its very nature non-excludable, and indiscriminately benefits all of those in some given peaceful society. Nonetheless, it follows that such a public good would still benefit some particular individual that somehow fails to follow through with moral standards of conduct that contribute to the creation of this ubiquitous peace in the first place. Such is the case with the character of the “fool”, described by Hobbes, which does not share the penchant for persistently abiding by the moral standards of interpersonal conduct and the sacrifices which accompany them, like the other rational individuals around him do (chap. 15, para. 4). Indeed, calculating that he should not be excluded from enjoying the collective state of peace which surrounds him should he fail to follow through with his commitment to the “Laws of Nature”, the “fool” judges it rational for him to forfeit his side of moral covenants, which in turn allows him to reap the benefits of the public good of peace without having to make the sacrifices that typically burden others who do so. As such, the “fool” strives to engage in a type of moral free-riding, for his actions should allow him to share in the benefits of the collective peace and security surrounding him without having to constantly pay the price for doing so, like other rational individuals do.

The idea that it may be strategically effective for some individuals to refuse to follow through with their sides of moral covenants challenges the fundamental notion championed by Hobbes that his “Laws of Nature” are very precepts of reasoned thought. Such is the case because, were the strategy of moral free-riding to be a successful one, it could to be shown to be rational for certain self-interested individuals to adopt this strategy of moral defection, a fact would directly contradict, and significantly undermine, Hobbes’ foundational claim that any and all enlightened and self-interested individuals ought to, at all times, decidedly abide by the “Laws of Nature” in order to avoid the dreaded “State of Nature”. Thus, in response to this challenge posed by the “fool” and his behavior, Hobbes contends that the strategy of moral free-riding is utterly irrational, such that no enlightened, self-interested individual would ever attempt to pursue it. Indeed, Hobbes makes the case that any individual foolish enough to attempt to persistently forfeit their side of covenants would undoubtedly suffer the consequences for doing so by either being physically ostracized from society, or by being excluded from all future covenants with its members, who eventually learn of, and adapt their behavior to, such deceitful strategy (chap. 15 para 5). Any one of these outcomes, Hobbes argues, would be catastrophic for the “fool” who suffers them, for the individual who loses the security that prevails in society would surely perish, alone and without aid, among the “State of Nature” (chap. 15 para 5). As such, given the possibility of such hugely detrimental outcomes, and given that he maintains that no “fool” can ever be certain that his actions will not be discovered, Hobbes concludes that any attempt at adopting a strategy of moral free-riding among a cooperative society would be wholly irrational, and that no truly rational individual would ever seek to do so (chap. 15 para 7).

Nonetheless, since Hobbes’ response to the strategy of moral free-riding necessarily relies upon free-riders having their behavior discovered, it seems to largely fall short of its intent of

entirely denouncing its efficiency, especially with regards to cases where the probability of having one's act of noncompliance with a given moral covenant discovered remains virtually nonexistent, and the expected payout for doing so considerably large. On the one hand, Hobbes' response fails to adequately decry the efficiency of a noncooperative moral strategy in the short-term, for it focuses solely on the long-term implications of repeatedly failing to follow through with one's covenants, but says nothing of the fact that, in the short-term, one can easily imagine the possibility of individuals getting away with breaking their moral covenants without being detected, and thus avoiding suffering any immediate repercussions. Furthermore, and perhaps even more troubling for Hobbes' moral theory, it remains the case that, given the setup of a Hobbesian state of general peace, it is not too difficult to imagine that a given "fool", especially one who is particularly adroit in his abilities of deception, may be able to adopt a long-term strategy of selective noncompliance with certain moral matters and still manage to evade detection by those around him. Indeed, though Hobbes contends otherwise, it does in fact seem plausible that some "fool" might know with great certainty that some repeated act of moral defection will in fact fail to be detected, even in the long-term.

The issue of the "fool" and the general strategy of moral free-riding does pose a significant problem for Hobbes' moral philosophy, for it carries with it troubling implications concerning Hobbes' account of morality on the grounds of enlightened self-interest of human beings. Indeed, if one takes human beings to be rational and self-interested creatures, as Hobbes does, and nonetheless accepts the possibility that there might be instances where a general strategy of moral defection may consistently succeed in the long-term, it seems to follow that it would be rational for skillful deceivers to adopt a strategy of moral free-riding, a fact that in turn significantly undermines Hobbes' foundational claim that every enlightened, self-interested individual ought to

always comply with the “Laws of Nature”. And should moral free-riding be in fact a rational strategy for certain enlightened and self-interested individuals to adopt, there seems to be nothing else that Hobbes could possibly argue in order to deter such behavior, for his entire moral theory is based strictly upon the pragmatic considerations of rational individuals, and the fact that these should always do what proves most beneficial to them, which in this case would include moral free-riding. Furthermore, were it to be the case that enough rational individuals think it promising to pursue a strategy of repeatedly defecting from moral standards of behavior, the entirety of Hobbes’ system of collective security would possibly be put at risk, for it is only through aggregate compliance with the “Laws of Nature” that the “State of Nature” can be eschewed and a general state of widespread peace maintained.