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Thomas Hobbes, war and 'the natural condition of man':
plus ça change …

In the beginning was the Warre, and the Warre was with man, and the Warre was man.

It is customary in any commentary on Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and his best-known work, *Leviathan*, to emphasise the influence on him of the pre-eminent thinkers of his time, men with whom he had personal dealings (such as Bacon, Descartes and Galileo), forerunners of the Age of Enlightenment. It is also well recognised that Hobbes was much influenced by the civil disorders in England during his own time. However, the influence on him of the great writers and thinkers of ancient Greece has been less well recognised.

Hobbes was first and foremost a classical scholar. After finishing his university studies, his first employment was with the Earl of Devonshire, whose excellent library was at his disposal. He made full use of this for 20 years, eventually publishing his first major work in 1628: a translation of Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. This was at a time when the king and Parliament in England were already at loggerheads. It was clearly intended as a cautionary tale, which Hobbes himself admitted later in his life, saying that he 'wished to point out the unsuitability and danger of democracy'. He seems to have adopted this point of view from Thucydides in light of the latter's account of the decline of Athens.

By 1628 Hobbes' opinions about the nature of humankind, war(re), fraud and corruption, and the need for unity maintained by a strong ruler were well established. Those views derived from his classical studies and were undoubtedly reinforced by his observations of the emerging conflict in England. His later exposure to Euclidean geometry and to the Galilean laws of motion inspired him to elaborate, systematise, justify and legitimate those preconceptions, as subsequently articulated in *Leviathan*.[1] There is found his often-quoted description of the natural, egoistic, asocial person, driven by fear and self-interest:

> Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor the use of commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time;

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no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short.

This colourful and arresting passage has captured the imagination of generations of readers. But how original is the image it presents? The answer would seem to be: not at all.

War was endemic to the world of the ancient Greeks. Brought up on Homer, their history began with the legendary Trojan War, and thereafter city-states – from their beginnings until the eventual

in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of Time, is to be considered in the nature of Warre, … So the nature of Warre, consisteth not in the actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary.

Thucydides also rejected all consideration of the gods or fate in human affairs, and attributed blame for the causes of war and its miseries entirely to humankind's nature and behaviour, a

have been solitary, notwithstanding the time he spent sulking in his tent, but it was certainly 'poore, nasty, brutish and short'.

More generally, if less poetically, a similar picture of natural, asocial man appears in another text which would have been well familiar to Hobbes. Aristotle, in *Politics*, states that, 'The man who is incapable of working in common, or who in his self-sufficiency has no need of others, is no part of the community, [and is] like a beast or a god.' Aristotle was right to refer to gods and beasts. The Greek gods, being immortal, had no fear of 'death' and were able to give a free rein to their pursuit of self-interest. They were indeed supreme egoists, who recognised no authority apart from themselves – except superior force: that is, the will of Zeus. 'Obey my orders', says Zeus in *The Iliad*. He does not explain his will, but threatens and enforces. He seems more nearly the prototype of Hobbes' sovereign than do Plato's absolutist philosopher king(s) or statesmen/lawmakers. Indeed, at one point Hobbes calls the sovereign 'a mortal god'.

As for Achilles himself, a man who lived and died by war, deliberately choosing glory and an early death, he seems almost to be an exemplar of Hobbes' egoistic, natural man.

loss of their political independence – were almost continually at war with one another. The primacy and permanence of war are constant themes in Greek literature. Thus, in *The Iliad*, says Odysseus: 'We Achaeans are the men whom Zeus decrees, from youth to old age, must wind down our brutal wars to the bitter end until we drop and die, down to the last man.' And in *The Laws*, through the Cretan Cleinias, Plato averred that, 'Peace is just a name [and] The truth is that every city-state is by *natural law* engaged in a perpetual undeclared war with every other city-state [emphasis added].'

One of these city-states, Athens, despite a protracted lull in the fighting from 446 to 431BC, was for all practical considerations continually at war from 480 to 404BC, including its conflict with another city-state, Sparta, from 431 to 404BC – described by Thucydides as 'the never-ending war'. This history resonates in Hobbes' definition of war:

For Warre, consisteth not in Battell only, or in the act of fighting: but

view obviously accepted also by Hobbes.

Hobbes, in depicting the dreadful condition of people living in a permanent state of war, 'everyman against everyman', in the state of nature, contrasts the horror of that situation with its absence: the many positive developments that could be expected to accrue to people living in secure, peaceful co-existence. This is not a new device, as once more there is a classical precedent. Homer, in *The Iliad*, evokes images of peaceful life in order to emphasise the futility of war. This dichotomy between peace and war, between creation and destruction, is epitomised in the scenes emblazoned on the shield of Achilles. Hobbes might well have drawn his own inspiration from that source.[2]

As for Achilles himself, a man who lived and died by war, deliberately choosing glory and an early death, he seems almost to be an exemplar of Hobbes' egoistic, natural man.[3] Achilles is described in *The Iliad* through the voice of Apollo as being 'like some lion going his barbaric way, giving in to his own power, his brute force and wild pride'. His life may not

How can people rise above their natural condition then? Hobbes tells us that this may occur only when people generally are aware of the dreadfulness of their situation, realise that their self-interest would be better served by peace than war, and begin to apply their reason to that end. As a basis for the development of his subsequent argument, Hobbes affirms Socrates' dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living, a point of view never more compelling than in the instance given. However, uniquely he concludes that the only way of securing lasting peace is if all people submit themselves to the will of an overlord, a sovereign who can demonstrably impose and enforce order as and how that sovereign sees fit.[4]

Certainly, Hobbes shared Plato's hatred of anarchy, and desired law and order in society, as well as a reliance upon reason (enlightened self-interest) to control people. But he differed markedly from Plato in that he was concerned with practical considerations, mainly the checking of egoistic subjects, and the preservation of a state of peace based on a regime of fear upheld by superior force,

rather than the inculcation of moral values or the establishment of right laws.

Nevertheless, Hobbes foresaw that difficulties would derive from any extended peace, and its attendant advances, especially overpopulation and poverty:

> The multitude of poor, and yet strong people still increasing, they are to be transplanted into Countries not sufficiently inhabited: where neverthelesse, they are not to exterminate those they find there; but constrain them to inhabit closer together, and not range a great deal of ground, to snatch what they find; but to court each little Plot with Art and labour, to give them their sustenance in due season. And when all the world is overcharged with Inhabitants, then the last remedy of all is Warre; which provideth for every man, by Victory, or Death.

As with the concluding lines of his depiction of the life of people in a state of nature, Hobbes here imbues his final sentence with a dramatic aspect which catches the reader's attention. Yet whereas in the first case there is a steady build-up of literary tension, a foreshadowing of worse to come, in the above instance this is absent. Instead, after a somewhat prosaic discussion, the denouement is almost casually sprung upon the reader, without any intimations of horror or despair. This time Hobbes is displaying a different attitude towards Warre, seemingly implying a therapeutic war, an essential bleeding of the body politic. But then what?

No enlargement on this pronounce-ment was offered, and Hobbes instead proceeded to other matters. It constituted a total anticlimax. Perhaps he thought it too remote a prospect to warrant elaboration. On the other hand, what was there to say? Did he hope for a full recovery, a return to business as usual, for the survivors? Or did he envisage a relapse into the state of nature?[5] He clearly did not have a rosy view of the world. Like his preceptor, Thucydides, he was a pessimist. His analysis of natural man as an egoistic creature, fearful, deceitful and incorrigible, continually needing to be subdued and constrained by nothing less than an absolute dictator, shows that he expected the worst. Looked at in this way, a passage in his writing that has largely been disregarded, because it was offered only *en passant*, assumes a greater significance.[6]

Hobbes may have been admitting, rather indirectly, that he was not confident that in the long run the measures he proposed for establishing and preserving an orderly society would be sufficient. The forces of anarchy might be overcome temporarily, but sooner or later they would be resurgent. In the final analysis then, Hobbes' psycho-social-political vision, like the history of ancient Greece, begins and ends with war. Even though any interwar period of relative peace can be regarded as an improvement on the state of nature, and on war in general, it is worth remembering that in Hobbes' terms it will always be a precarious peace, made possible only by the imposition of the most oppressive measures; an uncertain peace, requiring constant vigilance in its maintenance, and enforced by all necessary means. In the Hobbesian syntax of never-ending war, peace is merely punctuation.[7]

In 1939, in a world which had not fully known peace for a quarter of a century, and only four years before her death, Simone Weil wrote in her essay 'L'Iliade ou le poème de la force':

> The true hero, the true subject, the center of the Iliad, is force. Force as man's instrument, force as man's master, force before which human flesh shrinks back. The human soul, in this poem, is shown always in its relation to force; swept away, blinded by the force it thinks it can direct, bent under the pressure of the force to which it is subjected. Those who had dreamed that force, thanks to progress, now belonged to the past, have seen the poem as a historic document; those who can see that force, today as in the past, is at the center of all human history, find in the Iliad its most beautiful, its purest mirror.

Certainly Hobbes, so familiar with *The Iliad,* as with much else in Greek literature, was one of those who saw clearly that force, one way or another, is at the centre of all human history. He hoped, perhaps only fleetingly, that given the will, and backed by the most stringent of controls, force could become humankind's instrument for forging a better way, that instead of remaining a rampant, ubiquitous threat it could be successfully channelled for the common good of all. Yet he was clearly dubious about this prospect, leaving us with the suggestion that, in the end, and despite our best endeavours, even because of them, force would eventually reassert its dominion, and that 'continuall fear and danger of violent death' would once more prevail in the world. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, Warre without end. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

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1 The idea of motion as a fundamental principle of the cosmos would not have been new to Hobbes. Through Plato and Aristotle he would have been aware of the ideas of Heraclitus, who held that motion and change (flux) were perpetual, and that these, together with conflict, provided the underlying dynamism of the universe. As a corollary, Heraclitus saw war as an inevitable part of human existence and believed that mankind was necessarily constrained and directed only by force. These views are entirely consistent with Hobbes', as expressed in *Leviathan*.

2 W.H. Auden's poem 'The Shield of Achilles' is similarly inspired by the same source.

3 Glory was one of Hobbes' three principal causes of conflict: first, competition; secondly, diffidence; and thirdly, glory.

4 In essence, Hobbes offered a social version of a 'creation myth'. 'The natural condition of man', the asocial state of nature, served as a primal chaos. Human intelligence reacts with chaos and eventually there is conceived and brought forth an archman: the sovereign. Wielding the absolute power inherent in their being, the sovereign imposes order on chaos, thereby creating the prerequisite for the emergence and development of social life. The sovereign continues to oversee the state of order and acts at will to reassert it over whatever outbreaks of chaos threaten it. Thus, the sovereign's role, from conception onwards, is god-like.

5 Of course, the state of nature could be regarded as 'business as usual', one part of a cycle of rise and fall, a Darwinian process of natural selection in which the strongest and cleverest successively survive until at last they either transcend the cycle, or the earth's resources are depleted to the point where the human species can no longer exist, except perhaps in small numbers in a perpetual state of nature.

6 At the time Hobbes was writing, the idea of world overpopulation would have seemed far-fetched enough to be disregarded. Today the pendulum has swung almost to the other extreme, so that the concept of world overpopulation has become commonplace. Any modern student of *Leviathan*, while appreciating Hobbes' foresight, would be just as likely to disregard the passage.

7 Hobbes foreshadowed the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), while reversing the latter's proposition. To Hobbes, politics was nothing more than the continuation of war by other means.