Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

Fear of death, especially violent death. We all feel this emotion, consciously or not. The events surrounding what the world knows simply as "9/11" illustrate the primacy of fear, and how it connects with a need for security. This means that Hobbes, writing in the mid-17th century, joins Machiavelli in the fundamental premise of realism that people are basically fearful, and any threat of violence awakens in them a strong desire for protection. Throughout America today, the response to 9/11 is evident everywhere, from the increased security at airports to the support of the Patriot Act to the war in Afghanistan.

Hobbes was born in southern England in 1588 during that time of continuing international conflict that historians refer to as the "wars of religion." Relentless strife engulfed England, Spain, France and Germany. The circumstances surrounding the moment of Hobbes' birth serve as a key to grasping his whole philosophy. The story, as related by biographer John Aubrey, is this: when the Spanish Armada sailed to invade England in 1588, it was a terrifying sight for the British to behold. This was the famed "Armada of Catholicism," the most formidable mass of naval power that the world had yet seen: 30,000 men and 2,400 pieces of artillery, a stupendous fortress on the sea. Aubrey wrote that: "The day of Hobbes birth was April 5, 1588, on a Friday morning. His mother fell in premature labor with him upon the fright of the invasion of the Spaniards." The shock and awe coming from that sudden glimpse of imminent violence became the midwife for Hobbes, and many years later, he reflected back on that instant of terror and said that unbeknownst to his mother, she gave birth to twins: himself and FEAR. It became his constant companion through life. One of my students wrote on her exam that Hobbes suffered from an "Armada complex," but it is rather Hobbes' philosophy that is marked by the Armada. The Armada is Hobbes' 9/11 and we can understand his relevance better since that tragic morning in 2001.

As in the 20th and 21st Centuries, there was plenty to fear from violence in the 17th. Hobbes was too sensitive a person to ignore his age of turmoil; not only endless international war, but a fierce English civil war from 1642-48 witnessed the beheading of their king, Charles I, followed by the bloody rule of Oliver Cromwell and the forces of the Puritan Revolution. Hobbes lived a long life but he concluded at the end that war always prompted fear and set off an especially vicious virus of insecurity. Peace at any price became his aim.

So this is the personal context and historical background of Hobbes' realism: born into a state of war, Hobbes yearned for a state of security. He wanted not the good self-examined life of virtue that Socrates idealized for Plato, but only safety and survival. This was enough for him, as it has been for all realists.

The American philosopher, Leo Strauss, correctly observed that "Hobbes drew all his logical conclusions from this principle of fear of violent death. He denied the moral value of all virtues which do not contribute to the making of a powerful State, to consolidating peace, to protecting man against the danger of violent death." (The Political Philosophy of Hobbes)

Hobbes announces his main concerns in the opening pages of his masterpiece, The Leviathan. The title means any hugely powerful being, and this is what he wants to suggest as the sort of State or "Commonwealth" that will give people the security they need. As we noted,
he bluntly contended that "it is a good general rule about men" that they are always "liars and deceivers, fearful of danger and greedy for gain" or acquisition of power.

Hobbes follows this view unequivocally with his opening assertion that "Passions are the same in all men, desire, fear, hope," and this means that "the characters of man's heart, blotted and confounded as they are with dissembling, lying, counterfeiting, and erroneous doctrines" will prevail over reason or appeals to virtue.

Hobbes asserts that this realist conception of human nature should be evident from observation, especially of our human senses, because if we simply look around us, we must notice that we are sensual and not rational animals. Certain kinds of senses or passions motivate us most. The main determinants are two contrasting types of passions. Hobbes calls these appetites and aversions. What we desire or find attractive, we call good, and, again in contrast to Plato, the "good" is no more than what appeals to our appetites. Aversions are all those things that we shun or avoid. We hate these as evil, and evil is no more than that. There is no eternal or transcendent basis for good and evil. Our life experience is only matter in motion. We react as sensual creatures to one passion or another, moving toward a desirous object or away from a fearful one. Reason is merely a calculator or mediator between appetites and aversions, and not a primary force in shaping our everyday behaviour.

Again, by careful observation of human experience, we can determine the most appealing of all our appetites is a desire for power over others in one form or another. We all, by nature, whether we admit it or not, seek control. We yearn for security but this can come only through power. One of Hobbes main maxims goes: "I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death."

Why are we so driven? Not because of some mindless urge to power trip. Hobbes' really important insight, that extends further than any of Machiavelli's realism, is that we want power because we are afraid. Aversion trumps appetite, and the strongest aversion is fear, especially fear of violent death. The deepest cause, therefore, of the "perpetual and restless desire of power" is insecurity. We are all sheep in wolves' clothing. People seek to control others, but not because it's fun to dominate, in some sadistic sense. It's rather that underlying this drive to be on top is a terrible fear of winding up at the bottom. In our imagination, life at the bottom could be, in Hobbes' most famous phrase, "worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Sound extreme? Not after 9/11, especially if you happened to be living then in New York city.

But there is a big problem. Every person desires security, freedom from fear. Yet, in the very search for security, as we seek to acquire power or control to escape danger, we undermine our own quest. This is because our actions only awaken in others an increased insecurity. The result is that as we seek security through power, ceaseless struggle follows. Our world becomes more unsafe.

This, then, is the paradox: people, by nature, pursue security and happiness as basic to their being. But their very pursuit leads to increased fear and conflict. If we were rational creatures, then reason might allow us to resolve this paradox, but experience shows that we are not. People are instead inherently irrational, incapable of finding a safe route to survival or freedom from fear.
Hobbes presents his solution for this problem that is logical realism. He says that since the passions got us into this dilemma, only they, and not reason, can resolve it. We come to a point when we exclaim, not with reason but in a cry of agony, that we can't take an overwhelming sense of insecurity anymore. In this spirit of maximum aversion to our increasingly unsafe and insecure existence, we are driven to an agreement. This is the formation of a social contract, a new constitution that will give us what we most desire, PEACE.

The contract is Hobbes' theory of a device to rescue us from our own self-destructiveness. It is a covenant of each member of the future Leviathan or supreme state authority that promises to abide by the will of an elected Sovereign, or all powerful leader. It is motivated by fear, acknowledging that only by giving up many civil liberties and rights can we obtain the greatest freedom, liberation from fear and the highest goal, attainment of peace. To attain this end, the powers delegated to the Sovereign are extensive: total legislative, executive and judicial authority, completely unchecked, and including even the right to appoint a successor. The Sovereign can censor religion at will, seize private property, and punish without trial those who threaten the state.

There is only one condition for his having such extreme power: he must keep the peace. The social contract, therefore, is a voluntary and free expression of the will of each individual to authorize the creation of what is truly an authoritarian state. Once authorized most free expression naturally ceases, and, rightly so, because the alternative, as Hobbes perceived it, is more war. Under what circumstances may subjects resist or disobey such an authority? Only if the Sovereign cannot fulfill the requirements of the contract, to ensure peace. If he fails in this one respect, the terms of the contract are broken, its entire legitimacy is denied, and he must resign. Peace is given at any price, but if paid and the bargain not kept, then the only alternative is a new contract.

John Plamenatz, a renowned Oxford political theorist, writes this opinion of The Leviathan: "Hobbes demolishes in turn all the arguments put forward to limit the sovereign's authority: that there is a spiritual or religious power independent of him, that there are fundamental laws regulating the use of power by which he is bound; that his subjects have a right to disobey him for conscience sake, and that they have rights of property which he cannot touch. No one before him ever made so elaborate and uncompromising a case for absolute government."

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