



## **Hobbes, Aristotle, and Human Happiness**

During his life in philosophy Thomas Hobbes engaged in several debates. Among his sparring partners the dearest to him was not a contemporary (such as Descartes, White, Bramhall, or Wallis) but Aristotle. This article explores the tension between Hobbes and Aristotle as it appears in metaphysics (including the study of nature), ethics (including psychology), and politics. The article will close with a comparison of their conceptions of human happiness.

First impressions would suggest that Hobbes's ridicule of Aristotle is thoroughly intended and his appreciation of the Philosopher sensationally low:

And I beleeve that scarce any thing can be more absurdly said in natural Philosophy, than that which now is called *Aristotles Metaphysics*; nor more repugnant to Government, than much of that hee hath said in his *Politiques*; nor more ignorantly, than a great part of his *Ethiques*.<sup>1</sup>

Hobbes's phrasing is certainly impressive, but if the claims he makes are left unspecified, they remain merely words. Having said that, when explicating Hobbes's position toward Aristotle and Aristotelianism two issues must be taken into consideration: the exact target and the exact content of Hobbes's criticism.<sup>2</sup>

The interrelations between Hobbes and Aristotle and Hobbes and Aristotelianism have been studied at great length and in detail.<sup>3</sup> To summarise the major conclusion in Hobbes's own words: vain-philosophy or spiritual darkness derive "partly from Aristotle, partly from Blindnesse of understanding".<sup>4</sup> It is fairly clear that Hobbes's primary target is a combination of selected Aristotelian doctrines and their adaptation to the Catholic dogma, or, to follow his own coinage, "Aristotelity".<sup>5</sup> To be content with this, I think, is to overlook the nuances of Hobbes's position. Following Sorell, Hobbes's stance can be classified as opposing (anti), (inter)dependent of, neutral (un), or in favour of. As we shall see, Hobbes was and remained anti-Aristotelian on a number of matters, but when his own thinking (in particular, his political theory) matured, he became on certain issues un-Aristotelian. Nevertheless, Hobbes was dependent on Aristotle and Aristotelianism (at least as a convenient target, but also, for example, in his psychology),<sup>6</sup> and, ultimately, he agreed with and even valued Aristotle on certain subjects.<sup>7</sup> So there is no single answer concerning the relationship between Hobbes and Aristotle or Hobbes and Aristotelianism, instead both need to be evaluated in the light of the more exact objections and agreements Hobbes puts forward in his writings.

### **1. Study of nature and metaphysics**

When Hobbes alleges that Aristotle's metaphysics is absurd, he criticises two things. First, this is a critique of metaphysics as such, that is, the way Aristotle and especially Aristotelianism understand first principles and concepts and the fundamental nature of reality. Equally important is what consequences their conception has for the study of nature.<sup>8</sup>

Hobbes comments on a number of issues in Aristotelian metaphysics,<sup>9</sup> but the substantial differences arise on two levels. On a general level, the disagreement is between hylomorphism (from Greek *hyle* (matter) and *morphe* (form)) and materialism. To Aristotle and Aristotelians there are two substances, material (such as the body) and immaterial (such as the soul), whereas to Hobbes the only substance is matter. For the discussion at hand, the disagreement on a particular issue, the concept and the doctrine of essence, is more relevant. Hobbes sees two sorts of problems with this doctrine.<sup>10</sup> First, it is a conceptual mess. At best, such concepts as ‘abstract essence’ and ‘substantial form’ are names of names, instead of things or ‘impressions of imagination’. But even this conclusion requires the rebuttal of the sensible understanding of the very nature of the world (that it consists of bodies) as well as concessions in reasoning. In fact, these concepts are “the names of *Nothing*”, the workings of deluded minds. The second problem is more pressing. Absurd metaphysics has practical consequences for the study of man and society.

## **2. Ethics and politics**

When commenting on the ethics and politics of Aristotle and that inspired by him, Hobbes has many objections. Of these, two objections are in my opinion central: that we are by nature fit for society and the question of equality.

At the beginning of the second part of *Leviathan* Hobbes summarises Aristotle’s *zoon politikon* argument as follows:

It is true, that certain living creatures, as Bees, and Ants, live sociably one with another, (which are therefore by *Aristotle* numbred amongst Politicall creatures;) and yet have no other direction, than their particular judgements and appetites; nor speech, whereby one of them can signifie to another, what he thinks expedient for the common benefit: and therefore some man may perhaps desire to know, why Man-kind cannot do the same.<sup>11</sup>

Two conclusions can be made from this passage. Firstly, Hobbes does not see any plausible reason to claim that sociability is natural, understood as the innate, universal quality of human beings. This is correct. The stronger claim, and the second conclusion, suggests that the case is the opposite, namely that there is an inbuilt tendency towards aggression and hostility in human beings; in other words, that human beings are asocial by nature. This conclusion is not correct.

The questions of the general and more specific nature of human beings are related to Hobbes's criticism of Aristotle's metaphysics and the doctrine of separated essences. As in the case of nature, so in the case of man, there is no independent immaterial layer, say, the immaterial soul, that would constitute what it is to be a human being. It is true that Hobbes adopts the common definition of a human being: man is a rational animal, but then again the idea is so common that not much can be made out of this similarity. More can be said about how Hobbes and Aristotle understand the definition. To Hobbes, a definition is a name that singles out certain features that we take to be typical to human beings,<sup>12</sup> whereas to Aristotle these characteristics

constitute the form or the essence of human being, which brings us to the core of Hobbes's complaint.

Hobbes's critique of Aristotle's psychology is based on his anti-essentialism. Though Hobbes speaks of mankind and its natural condition and of human nature in a way that suggests some universality, his understanding of human nature is qualified. It refers to some general patterns of behaviour, not to immutable intrinsic qualities. Hobbes is sure that we cannot ultimately define some sort of universal human nature, but he does not deny that we have some dispositions from birth that are common to us all. And yet again, it is a completely different thing how these are manifested in the case of an individual.<sup>13</sup>

The above-mentioned stronger conclusion also fails for two further reasons. It is at odds with some textual evidence. Hobbes explicitly denies that human nature is the cause of asocial behaviour.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, the stronger claim would require crossing, in modern terminology, the fact-value gap. That is to say, Hobbes's critique is that were we to think in either way (human beings are social or asocial), further normative conclusions from this fact alone do not follow. That someone is strong does not make him or her morally superior. Similarly, if someone is not fit for society, this does not make him or her a better or worse person.<sup>15</sup>

The idea of universal human nature is the first of the normative conclusions of Aristotelian political philosophy that should be abandoned, but it is not necessarily the primary target of Hobbes's critique of Aristotelian ethics and politics. The salient

point is Aristotle's claim that there is a natural inequality between human beings.

Hobbes writes:

The inequality that now is, has bin introduced by the Lawes civill. I know that *Aristotle* in the first booke of his Politiques, for a foundation of his doctrine, maketh men by Nature, some more worthy to Command, meaning the wiser sort (such as he thought himselfe to be for his Philosophy;) others to Serve, (meaning those that had strong bodies, but were not Philosophers as he;) as if Master and Servant were not introduced by consent of men, but by difference of wit; which is not only against reason; but also against experience.<sup>16</sup>

The idea here is not only that human beings are equal, but also that they are equal even when they are different from each other. This pluralistic reading of human nature, not a vulgar interpretation of the *homo homini lupus* formula is, I believe, more in accordance with Hobbes's original view.

To summarise, whereas Aristotle has a thick, objective, and uniform conception of human nature and is a supporter of natural inequality, Hobbes is a psychological anti-essentialist who defends the natural equality of all human beings regardless of rank, wealth or other such artificial criteria. The contrast between the two thinkers does not seem to provide much room for agreement on the fundamental question of human happiness.

### 3. Human happiness

In Aristotle's eudaimonistic ethics natural sociability and human happiness are connected so that the sociability of human beings is of the highest kind in a sense that they are able to communicate, reflect, and agree on a common good – though, if I have understood the current scholarship correctly, it is the *eudaimonia* of an individual that is the ultimate goal of Aristotle's ethics. He was also definite about what constitutes happiness and that every rational person is able to understand and willing to subscribe to this.<sup>17</sup> When this is contrasted with another unforgettable passage from *Leviathan*: 'the Felicity of this life, consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers",<sup>18</sup> the opposition between the two thinkers appears to be diametrical.

It is true that in Hobbes there is no shared, universal, and uniform conception of human happiness and to him the kind of metaphysical conception of goodness embedded in Aristotle's ethics is "but an idle term",<sup>19</sup> but despite this, curiously enough, Hobbes is not that far from his classical predecessors. He also has one common good, peace, which is in harmony with the real personal good of every rational human being, namely self-preservation.<sup>20</sup> Self-preservation explains, on the one hand, how common and individual good are not mutually exclusive, and that there is a common denominator between individuals, on the other hand. And even though the tendency toward aggression is a lasting and central theme in his political theory, Hobbes suggests that human beings are rational enough to find a solution. Accepting Hobbes's plural view of the aims of human life, felicity is different for different people and different for one person at different times, and there seems to be

no single goal in human life. This is *non sequitur*, though. Self-preservation is a starting point and not the only or even the primary goal of human life. We also strive for what Hobbes calls “commodious living”.<sup>21</sup> We do not find in his political treatises, of course, a precise statement about what this commodious living (say reading novels in the morning and fishing in the afternoon) would consist of but this is in line with his anti-essentialism. In so far as the conception of the good life and the happiness of an individual does not damage others or pose a threat to public peace, others should not intervene in his or her way of life. As he writes in *Leviathan*:

A fifth Law of Nature, is Compeasance; that is to say, *That every man strive to accommodate himselfe to the rest*. For the understanding whereof, we may consider, that there is in mens aptnesse to Society, a diversity of Nature, rising from their diversity of Affections; not unlike to that we see in stones brought together for building of an Aedifice.<sup>22</sup>

To conclude: Hobbes critique of Aristotle is coherent starting from certain metaphysical issues and running through psychology and ethics all the way to politics. The central piece in this critique is the idea of essences, be it substantial forms, the idea of a universal human nature, or the idea of a universal common good as the part of fulfilment of our rational essence. Though Hobbes does not have a uniform and unequivocal conception of human happiness based on the essential qualities of human nature, he still maintains that there are certain common features in human nature as well as a set of principles that regulate the social interaction that we are able to agree

on. The modernity of Hobbes's account is that he does not deny that human beings normally live together and manage to do this quite well, but he does object to the inclusive normative conclusions deduced from this empirical observation. Self-preservation, the smallest common denominator, instead of some overarching view of what it is to be a human being, is what gives human happiness a framework. This outcome, Hobbes thought, was free of the linguistic manipulation of the key normative concepts of 'good' and 'evil', and acknowledged the variety of goodness in private life. In these respects Hobbes provided a modern conception of the morally meaningful life.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP[UP], 1996), XLVI, 461-2. The following editions of Hobbes's works are used: *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes[EW]*, 11 vols. (London: John Bohn, 1839-1845); Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969); Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> I have not dealt with the historical question of the sources and possible influences (e.g., Pierre Gassendi) of Hobbes's anti-Aristotelianism here. For an account on this subject, see Paganini's article mentioned below.

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<sup>3</sup> For a brief and perceptive account, see Douglas Jesseph, *Squaring the Circle: The War Between Hobbes and Wallis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 60-61. Hardly any study fails to comment the issue and I am indebted to the following previous studies: Tom Sorell, "Hobbes and Aristotle," in *Philosophy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Conversations with Aristotle*, ed. by C. Blackwell and S. Kusukawa (Aldershot-Brookfield: Ashgate, 1999), 364-379; Donald Rutherford, "In Pursuit of Happiness: Hobbes's New Science of Ethics," in *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 31:1-2 (2003), 369-393; Cees Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism: The Late Aristotelian Setting of Thomas Hobbes's Natural Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); "Sense and Nonsense about Sense: Hobbes and the Aristotelians on Sense Perception and Imagination," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's 'Leviathan'*, ed. by P. Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 82-108; and Gianni Paganini, "Hobbes's Critique of the Doctrine of Essences and its Sources," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's 'Leviathan'*, 337-357.

<sup>4</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XLVI, 462. See also *Leviathan*, XLIII, 418 and Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Philosophy, First Section: Concerning Body*, "Epistle dedicatory," in *EW*, I, xii. Other accounts of this history of spiritual darkness include Thomas Hobbes, *An Historical Narration Concerning Heresy, and the Punishment Thereof*, in *EW*, IV, 387-396; Thomas Hobbes, *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance, clearly stated and debated between Dr. Bramhall, Bishop of Derry, and Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, in *EW*, V, 62-65; and Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth: Or the Long Parliament*, in *EW*, VI, 213-218.

<sup>5</sup> Hobbes uses the term twice. In *Leviathan* (XLVI,462) and when he cites himself in Thomas Hobbes, *Six Lessons to the Professors of Mathematics, One of Geometry, the Other of Astronomy, in Their Chairs set up by the Noble and Learned Sir Henry Savile, in the University of Oxford*, in *EW*, VII, 348). OED (on-line edition: <[dictionary.oed.com](http://dictionary.oed.com)>, entry: "Aristotelean, Aristotelian," accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2008)) mentions the term as rare and the single example that it gives is from Hobbes.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough discussion of this point, see Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism*, Ch. II and "Sense and Nonsense about Sense."

<sup>7</sup> Hobbes's appreciation of Aristotle's rhetoric and treatises on animals was recorded by John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, 2 vols., ed. by A. Clarke (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1898). I, 357. For a discussion, see John Harwood, "Introduction," in *The Rhetorics of Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Lamy*, ed. by J. T. Harwood (Carbondale & Edwardsville; Southern Illinois UP), 1-32; Leo Strauss, *The Political*

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*Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), Ch. III; and Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), Ch. 6.

<sup>8</sup> This line of critique is not covered here for reasons of space. For a discussion that illuminates the broader Early Modern context, see Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), Ch. III, which should be read along with critical remarks by Noel Malcolm, “Hobbes and Roberval,” in his *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford UP), 187ff.

<sup>9</sup> These include the concepts of time, place, and the doctrine of motion. See Hobbes, *Concerning Body*, II.7.3; Hobbes, *Six Lessons*, 222; cf. *Leviathan* XLVI, 467-468 and *Concerning Body* I.6.18; Thomas Hobbes, *Seven Philosophical Problems, and Two Propositions of Geometry*, in *EW*, VII, Ch. I, esp. p. 7; cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Decameron Physiologicum; Or Ten Dialogues in Natural Philosophy*, 120 and Ch. VIII, esp. p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> See Hobbes, *Elements of Law* II.6.9, 153-155; *Leviathan* XLVI, 463-464; *Concerning Body* II.8.23-24; *Decameron Physiologicum*, 81.

<sup>11</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVII, 119. Cf. *On the Citizen* I.2, 21-22, 24-25 & V.5, 71. For Aristotle’s argument, see *Politics* 1253a3-6 and *History of Animals* Bk. I, esp. 487b32-488a17. I use *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols., ed. by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *An Answer to Bishop Bramhall’s Book, Called ‘The Catching of Leviathan’*, in *EW*, IV, 305; Cf. *Elements of Law* I.I.4, 2; *Concerning Body* I.2.14.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Hobbes, *Leviathan* XI, 70.

<sup>14</sup> *On the Citizen* (‘Preface to the Readers,’ 11 (“Some object that this principle being admitted ...”)) is perhaps the clearest on this point:

<sup>15</sup> Again, the account that appears *On the Citizen* (I.2, 24-25) is the most perceptive.

<sup>16</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan* XV, 107. Cf. *Elements of Law* I.XVII.1, 87-88; *On the Citizen* III.13, 49-50. Aristotle’s discussion can be found from *Politics* I.5, 1254a17-1255a3.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1102a5-17.

<sup>18</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan* XI, 70. Cf. *Leviathan* VI, 46; *Elements of Law* I.7.6-7, 29-30.

<sup>19</sup> Hobbes, *The Questions*, 194.

<sup>20</sup> Hobbes, *Elements of Law*, I.14.13-14, 74. Cf. *On the Citizen* I.7&15, 27&31 and V.4, 70-71; *Leviathan* XIV, 91-92.

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<sup>21</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII, 90. Cf. *Elements of Law* II.9.4, 180.

<sup>22</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan* XV, 106; Cf. *Elements of Law* I.XVI.8, 85; *On the Citizen* III.9, 48.