

Reading Guide

Contract and Commonwealth: Thomas Hobbes

Readings for 29 March 2011

READINGS (REQUIRED)

- [A] “Political Philosophy: Introduction” From Gendler, Siegel and Cahn, eds. *The Elements of Philosophy: Readings from Past and Present* (Oxford, 2008), p. 280.
- [B] Hobbes, “Contract and Commonwealth.” Selections from *Leviathan*, Book I, chapters 13-14; Book II, chapter 17. Reprinted in *The Elements of Philosophy*, pp. 282-286, (skim 286-288), 288-291, (skim 291-292), 292-295.

[A] “Political Philosophy: Introduction” From Gendler, Siegel and Cahn, eds. *The Elements of Philosophy: Readings from Past and Present* (Oxford, 2008), p. 280.

Background

This one-page selection comes from the introductory material in an anthology that I co-edited. It was written (by one of my co-editors) as an introduction to the section that follows it in that anthology; since we will be reading many of those texts in the next two weeks, it provides a useful overview of the issues that we will be addressing in this unit of the course.

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

Please read page 80, and the first few lines of page 81.

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following terms and concepts:

Terms and Concepts: political authority, convention, social contract tradition, absolute sovereign

Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What is the fundamental question that modern Western political philosophy attempts to answer? What sorts of answers might be offered to that question?

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[B] Hobbes, “Contract and Commonwealth.” Selections from *Leviathan*, Book I, chapters 13-14; Book II, chapter 17. Reprinted in *The Elements of Philosophy*, pp. 282-286, (skim 286-288), 288-291, (skim 291-292), 292-295.

Background

The British philosopher Thomas Hobbes lived from 1588-1679 (he was born roughly 25 years after Shakespeare, who lived from 1564-1616.) His most famous book—*Leviathan*—is one of the most important works of early modern political philosophy.

Additional details about Hobbes’ moral and political theory can be found at:
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hobbes-moral/>

Leviathan is divided into four Books, each containing between 4 and 16 chapters. We are reading selections from near the end of Book I (chapters 13-15) and the beginning of Book II (chapter 17.) A table of contents for the entire book, along with a reproduction of the book’s famous frontespiece, can be found at: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hobbes/thomas/h68l/> (The Beinecke Rare Book Library here at Yale has several copies of the first edition among its holdings.)

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

- Book I, Chapter XIII
 - read paragraphs 1-14
- Book I, Chapter XIV:
 - read paragraphs 1-15
 - skim paragraphs 16-25
 - read paragraphs 26-33
- Book I, Chapter XV
 - read paragraphs 1-5
 - skim paragraphs 6-34
 - read paragraphs 35-41
- Book II, Chapter XVII
 - read paragraphs 1-15

IMPORTANT NOTE: Though the text that appears on the class web page should be readable, it is written in a somewhat archaic style. If you are having trouble with the text, you might find it helpful to read the text alongside Jonathan Bennett’s modernized version, which can be found at: http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/f_hobbes.html.

Reading Questions:

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

Chapter XIII

- (1) In what ways, according to Hobbes, are all human beings approximately equal? What implications does he take this to this have? (XIII:1-5)
- (2) What, according to Hobbes, causes human beings to quarrel with one another? Why does he think that “during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war”? What are the characteristics of this state of war? What is day-to-day life like in such a state? (XIII:6-9)
- (3) Why does Hobbes think that “to this war of every man against every man ... nothing is unjust”? Do you agree? (XIII:13)

Chapter XIV

- (4) Make sure you understand the following terms and concepts:
 - Right of nature (XIV:1)
 - Liberty (XIV: 2)
 - Law of nature (in general) (p. XIII:14; XIV:3)
 - First and second laws of nature (XIV:4-5)
 - Reasons for renouncing/transferring rights (XIV:6-8)
- (5) What are some of the rights which Hobbes thinks are inalienable? (XIV:8) Why does he think this? What are some of the corresponding contracts that Hobbes thinks we cannot enter into? (XIV: 29-30)
- (6) What is the difference between expressed contracts and contracts of inference? (XIV: 13-14)
- (7) What is the status of a contract extorted by fear, according to Hobbes? (XIV: 27)
- (8) What mechanisms are available, according to Hobbes, for “hold[ing] men to the performance of their covenants”? (XIV: 31-33)

Chapter XV

- (9) What is Hobbes’ response to Glaucon’s challenge? (XV: 4-5)
- (10) What role does Hobbes’ statement, “Do not that to another which thou couldn’t not have done to thyself” play in his theory? (XV:35)

Chapter XVII

- (11) What does Hobbes mean by the term “commonwealth”? With what goal do human beings enter into what Hobbes calls “commonwealths”? Why does Hobbes think entering into commonwealths is the best way to achieve that goal? What alternatives does he consider and dismiss? (XVII: 1-15)
- (12) What are some of the reasons that Hobbes thinks it is not possible for human beings to live as ants or bees do? (XVII: 6-12)
- (13) What role do the italicized words in paragraph XVII:13 play in Hobbes’ theory? What is the connection between these words, and the formation of the commonwealth? What does Hobbes mean by the term “Leviathan”?