

LETTER ON HOBBS

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Dear John [Watkins],

I am sorry I have been so long about it, but I haven't had a moment to spare since I had your letter about Hobbes.

These are the reflections it provokes in me. You refer to p. 292 of my essay, but I think the main point is argued on p.254 [The reference here is to *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays* (London, 1962 edn – pp 301-302 in 1991 edn)].

1 *Death*

(a) I take it that we agree that death itself is not the significant thing in Hobbes's argument. Every man has certain expectations about remaining alive and an *untimely* death (i.e., one before the normal span of life is complete) is one that human beings are naturally averse from, but that is not the real point.

The point is being killed: or at any rate that's where we begin.

But it is not being killed in any manner (e.g. struck by lightning or buried in an earthquake); it is only being killed by another man. Why is it this and not other ways of being killed that are relevant? What does being killed by another man signify?

It signified a failure in the 'race' for precedence which constitutes human life – failure, not in competition with the natural world, but in competition with other human beings. And this I take to be the central point; and this is what is meant by shameful death. To be killed by another man is *eo ipso* shameful or dishonourable because it is signified that inferiority vis-à-vis other men which is the centre of all human *aversion*.

In other words, desire is directed, not towards survival, but towards being *first* (and thus being 'honoured' and meriting 'honour'); and aversion is directed towards being dishonoured. This is what it is to be a man and not an animal.

Thus, being killed by another man is the limiting case. There are many conditions short of this to which a man may be averse – indeed, all conditions in which one's inferiority is demonstrated and one suffers the dishonour which is the consequence of inferiority – but death is, so to speak, the paradigm case.

(b) But all this needs modification. For what a man wishes to avoid is not merely being killed by another man, or being in some lesser way dishonoured or shamed in human intercourse, but *fear* of this condition. What he wishes to reach is a condition in which he no longer has even to *fear* being dishonoured. And this is a very large demand; it is the demand for a settled condition of life in which dishonour is unlikely, so unlikely that it may cease to be a disturbing consideration. On my reading of it, this entails a condition of life in which the characteristic of being a 'race' for precedence is, if not abolished, then very greatly reduced. The *civitas* is this condition.

2. *Fear*

Fear is a passion. And so long as it remains a passion may be the cause of all sorts of conduct which may or may not promote peace. If, in competition with other men, I am fearful of being worsted I may retreat into a world of 'vain glory' in which I have wonderful dreams of being top-dog which satisfy me so long as they last. And these, no doubt, will contribute to 'peace', though they won't give me any notable protection. On the other hand, fear of being worsted may lead me to murder.

As I see it, fear (that is fear of being worsted, and perhaps killed) becomes a notable contributor to peace when, by some subtle transformation which Hobbes does not explain in detail it becomes 'rational fear', or becomes the cause of rational behaviour of being invaded by 'reason'. At all events fear, as a passion, is common to men and to animals; in men it is (unavoidably) informed by imagination, forecast of the future etc.; and in man, by being informed by imagination may become rational, or the motive force of rational conduct. And, of course, rational conduct is always an endeavour for peace.

Perhaps the point is that, in Hobbes, 'Peace' – the absence of war of all against all – i.e., the absence of unrelieved competition for the first place.

The war of all against all is a condition of fear – instinctive fears which may lead to all sorts of erratic conduct, and of rational fear which leads to the conclusion that the *civitas* is a necessity if fear is to be abolished.

Hobbes identifies at least some sorts of fear with 'humility' and I suppose 'humility' is a kind of instinctive aversion from strife; but it is not the sort of fear which could generate the *civitas*.

Very best wishes to you,

*From
Michael Oakeshott*