

HOBBES AND EXISTENTIAL MEANING¹

A discussion between INQ, an inquirer, and X, a political philosopher²

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INQ: Let's talk about Hobbes's philosophy.

X: Can there be anything new to say about it?

INQ: It's always possible to look at a philosopher in a new light.

X: Granted. But what *sort* of light?

INQ: Well, I suggest that we tackle Hobbes's philosophy in an *analytical* spirit, but that we do this as *discussants* - an *explorative team* - and not as *disputants* in a bout of verbal fisticuffs; further, we go about it in a *panoramic* way - we do a reconnaissance and map key features - and not in a *shaft-sinking* way, that is, by focusing narrowly on just one point and doing a drawn-out analysis of that. Not that the shaft-sinking way of philosophizing is unimportant, but reconnoitring is just as important. Now, one can reconnoitre with more than one aim in mind: say to map spots for later depth-analysis, but also to *integrate* the various spots conceptually. (An *unintegrated* panorama would be just a waffle.) Come to think of it, there must be many, many shaft-sinking articles on Hobbes, but I don't recall a lot of the other sort. I think we need more of the latter.

X: Yes! But what particular integrating theme are you suggesting?

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² Neither of the authors should be identified with either INQ or X in particular.

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INQ: The theme of *existential meaning*, that is, 'meaning in life'. But first: Do you think Hobbes's philosophy really has much relevance to present times and the local scene?

X: Has it *relevance ...* ? *Yes*, though with a certain proviso. One thinks of Hobbes principally as a *political thinker* - rightly so, but there are possible objections to this. He also developed an extensive metaphysical system. Another point about his being a 'political' thinker is that politics represents only a narrow field in a much wider context. We are to deal here with *existential meaning*. Well, politics *need* not enjoy any kind of priority over say social, personal, religious or even economic contexts, though Hobbes seems to have initiated this still unchecked trend.

INQ: In South Africa, I imagine the political aspect - of Hobbes's thinking, that is - tends to be stressed because of the politicization of our own society.

X: That is exactly what I meant in referring to his relevance to our world, our so heavily political world. One needs to be briskly reminded that politics is a limited field, and that those who make it the be-all and end-all of everything have, I think, changed the meaning of life in a rather repugnant way.

INQ: Certainly Hobbes did more than just spout a political theory. He developed a tripartite world view: the famous or notorious Body-Man-Citizen one. And you can look at this world view of his in two ways: at the total system, or at each part separately. If the latter, you can view a chosen part from various philosophical perspectives such as the logical, or methodological, or axiological ones. I'd like, as I intimated just now, to view his philosophy from the perspective of *existential meaning*, and the part of his system I wish particularly to discuss is his *political philosophy*. By the way, I don't mean to say that Hobbes wrote explicitly with the

phrase 'the meaning of life' in mind, as did say Tolstoy (1888)⁴, Baier (1957), or Britton (1969); just that one might look exploratively at his writings from this angle.

X: I think we could do with some more justification for spending time on Hobbes.

INQ: I'll try. First, he was, after all, one of the forerunners of objective psychology, social science, modern political philosophy, the philosophy of language, and analytical philosophy. Second, he put together a connected philosophical system from a clear-cut vantage point: resolutio-compositivo materialism, plus Euclidean deduction ... I said clear-cut, but actually his basis may not be all *that* sharp, for while some commentators regard his philosophy as very systematic (e.g. Watkins 1973:123), others don't (e.g. Walton 1974:32); again, whereas some read him as a materialist (e.g. Mintz 1969:23), one commentator thinks of him as a motionalist (Brandt 1928); and one writer thinks that what Hobbes got from natural science is of no real importance to his political philosophy (Strauss 1936), while another one judges that it is significant (Goldsmith 1966). Then one philosopher regards Hobbes's political philosophy as belonging to traditional natural law (Warrender 1957, chap. 4), while another finds this reading questionable (Raphael 1977:92); and lastly, one author claims that what Hobbes did was to transform the Aristotelian paradigm (Spragens 1973:7-8, 203-204), but another finds this idea of 'paradigm' vague (Raphael 1977:85). This long list of examples will show that interpretations of Hobbes can be numerous and controversial. We are warned ...

X: Yes . . . but have you any more reasons?

INQ: I think so. Here's a third. His writing is generally clear - lucid enough for both good points and flaws to be spotted easily. Fourth, his view of man as a machine was shocking and controversial in his time (1588-1679), and it retains some topicality in current man-machine philosophy. Lastly, one

We have, in order to gain academic utility though with some loss of discussional flow, added bracketed references to, and abstracts from, Hobbes's and other works.

doesn't usually think of hard-nosed materialists like Hobbes when wandering among the subtler shades of life's meaning, so let's do just that and see what happens. Enough reasons?

X: Hmm ... perhaps. But why single out *political* philosophy as the target among the many divisions of his system?

INQ: Again, several reasons. First, if Aristotle was right, man is uniquely a political animal ... Second, Hobbes's chief practical concern was with this area and he is remembered mainly for his socio-political philosophy. I imagine it's his *Leviathan* (1651) that comes to most people's minds when he's mentioned; more so than the mechanics in his *De corpore* (1655) or, at the other extreme, his translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (1674). One commentator has gone so far as to say that '*Leviathan* is the greatest, perhaps, the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language' (Oakeshott 1975:3). Third, as in the case of that other species of materialist, Marx, one can view Hobbes with double vision when considering existential meaning: metaphysically and political-philosophically, respectively. Well, I've thought along his *metaphysical* line; I did this in terms of a certain *set of vectors* of existential meaning. But I haven't gone far along his socio-political line - and here you are now, a specialist in political philosophy.

X: You haven't really talked me round yet. Why bother about the question of existential meaning at all? Shouldn't one concentrate rather on the political theories?

INQ: You tell me...

X: Hobbes's (and Machiavelli's) theories of power, I think, represent something *new* on the political-philosophical scene. Their theories were post-theistic, positivist. Hobbes's contractarianism owed nothing to classical theories of the origins of social organization: it is positivist to an extreme degree. This tradition of positivism permeated all of Western legal theory, with pernicious results. Although new at the time, it can in retrospect be regarded as a huge failure of political imagination. It gave

rulers unprecedented theoretical reasons for justifying abuses of power. And now I think you'd better give me a short overview both of your metaphysical vision of Hobbes's thinking, and of your set of vectors of meaning, before we go any further. I could talk with some purpose then.

INQ: Right. It's convenient to begin with the latter, that is, with the set of vectors of meaning. Some examples of such vectors - implicit, or explicitly stated - are those appearing in J.S. Mill (1873, chap. 5), Tolstoy (1886; 1888), Russell (1930), Baier (1957), Britton (1969, chap. 1) and Macnamara (1976:6-11; 1977:15). Seven meaning-vectors are explicitly identified in the last-mentioned source. They are: (1) the *logic* of the concept of existential meaning (various interpretations); (2) the state of '*arrest*' of life (to be or not to be ...); (3) *authenticity* (avoidance of alienation and deception); (4) *freedom* of the individual (determinism, libertarianism, etc.); (5) *conceptions of man* (materialistic, idealistic, etc.); (6) *concern for others* (egoism and altruism, detachment, etc.); and (7) *death* as a determinant (mortalism and immortalism, etc.). I propose that we now adopt, but stand fairly loose to, this sevenfold set of vectors while we examine Hobbes's philosophy panoramically.

X: This looks a good strategy. But, what exactly did you discover when you viewed Hobbes's metaphysical philosophy through this meaning-framework?

INQ: As regards interpretations of the expression 'meaning in life', I asked: Did Hobbes see the Meaning of Life (written with initial capitals) in the way that ethical theists do, that is, as the unfolding of a *divine cosmic scheme*; and did he see the meaning in an *individual's* life as the *role* he has in that divine scheme? Since it is not clear from his writings whether Hobbes was a theist or not, the question can't be answered with certainty. He denied that he was an atheist (Hobbes 1642), but several commentators think he was, or most probably was, despite it being very dangerous in his times to be counted one (Trevor-Roper 1957:235; Flew 1964:168; Peters 1967:45; 1956:248). What is fairly clear is that his metaphysic was a monistic, materialistic, mechanistic, non-finalistic, semi-deterministic and reductionistic one. Anyhow, if he was atheistic, he would not, of course,

have interpreted 'meaning' in the *divine* scheme-role sense, though he may well have cashed 'meaning' as a role in some sort of scheme other than a divine one.

X: Interesting. But does that exhaust your first vector?

INQ: Not at all. 'Meaning' can be translated in several other directions, too. If, for instance, we select the equivalence 'meaningful (life) = good (life)', then we find that (a) Hobbes rejected the traditional metaphysical basing of good and evil in terms of God and The Devil (Hobbes 1651, chap. 2) and appealed instead to his naturalistic principle of desire/aversion (1651, chap. 6), while elsewhere he rooted morality in the fear of violent death (Hobbes 1642); and (b) his ethics was non-metaphysically relativistic, for ... let's look at the copy of *Leviathan* which I have right here ... yes, he denied that there is 'any such thing as absolute goodness, considered without relation'; there is no 'common rule of good and evil, to be taken from the objects themselves; but from the person of the man ... (Hobbes 1651, chap. 6).

X: Farewell, first vector ... ?

INQ: Not yet. If we look next at his philosophy in terms of the equivalence 'meaningful = free', that is, free or spontaneous in the metaphysical, indeterministic sense, we find that Hobbes regarded man as a machine, an automaton, as 'nothing but' matter in motion under the pleasure/pain principle. This mechanistic reductionism seems to rule out the application of 'free', as a meaning-conferring term, to man. But, while he maintained that all actions are 'necessitated', that is, *causally* determined - as it were, by internal pushes - Hobbes also pointed out that a person can nevertheless be called free if he is not *externally compelled* or *impeded* (Hobbes 1651, chap. 21; cf. Watkins 1973, chap. 7). So a person's life is eligible, in this respect, for description by the equivalence 'meaningful = free'.

X: Regarding this hard-core 'necessitation' aspect in Hobbes: I recall it being pointed out elsewhere that, even if all life were fatalistically programmed, it could still be called meaningful - in the sense that there

would still be point in striving - provided we did not, or could not, know what the programme is (Macnamara 1977:176-179). Of course, one will never know whether Hobbes himself would find such a description of the system acceptable. It is so difficult to 'think oneself back' to an earlier age.

INQ: Incidentally, I've treated 'metaphysical freedom' in Hobbes's doctrine under meaning-vector (1), but it relates also to vectors (4), freedom, and (5), conceptions of man. And now, as I've duly provided the requested specimen of talk about Hobbes's philosophy, taken from the meaning-in-life perspective and with the focus on his metaphysics, can we move on at length to his department of political philosophy? Perhaps I should say his department of *value* philosophy, for matters of morality are sure to intrude: the interplay between politics and morals is indisputable (see Postma-de Beer 1977).

X: How about your setting the ethico-political ball (phew) rolling? You started all this.

INQ: True. I'll try mapping out a region of problem spots. Then perhaps we could search among them and aim questions and answers at one another. Under vector (1), interpretations of 'meaning', one could consider the equivalences 'meaning = purpose' and 'meaningful = good', and ask in particular whether Hobbes postulated either a topmost end or a highest good; then, taking the equivalence 'meaningful = happy', one might ask what happiness consisted in for him; and lastly, we could discuss the equivalence 'meaning = scheme-role', where 'scheme' relates to a socio-political or value context. Under vector (3), authenticity [for I think I'll omit vector (2)], one might examine what Hobbes saw as the 'true nature of man'. Under vector (4), freedom, one could inspect 'meaning = liberty' in the socio-political sense of liberty. Under vector (5), conceptions of man, one might delineate Hobbes's conception and compare it with some other ones. Under vector (6), concern for others, one could ask whether he advocates such concern, and perhaps relate his view to the egoism/altruism issue. Last, under vector (7), death, one might ask what role the fear of death has in society according to Hobbes, and perhaps touch on the influence, on existential meaning, of the mortalism/immortalism contro-

versy. But we needn't stick rigidly to the set of meaning-vectors I suggested, or to the points I have just offered.

X: Really, that's quite a list of problems you've issued. When we've mapped, there'll be little time over for shaft-sinking.

INQ: Well, what we're really hoping for now is a panoramic picture of Hobbes's philosophy. From this, spots could be selected for depth-analysis on other occasions.

X: Agreed, with enthusiasm. But where do we start painting this panorama?

INQ: With vectort (1), existential meaning. Would you say that Hobbes envisaged one key, overriding meaning of, or in, life?

X: Hmm . . . What I think of first is his maintaining that the felicity of life doesn't consist in the 'repose of a mind satisfied', for he sees no *finis ultimus* (utmost aim) nor *summum bonum* (greatest good) as conceived by earlier moral philosophers. He argues that felicity is a 'continual progress of the desire, from one object to another' (Hobbes 1651, chap. 11). In this respect, then, he wouldn't have offered a single, major meaning of life. And for him the meaningful life, that is, meaningful in the interpretation happy or 'felicitous', would be one of sustained though shifting desire; not settled quiescence.

INQ: Yes, that's significant. But what about the aspect of scheme-role meaning, *vis-à-vis* the socio-political context? Wouldn't that constitute a major, central meaning in Hobbes's view - a life of high quality?

X: Hobbes, like Machiavelli, lived in an age of terror and turmoil: two civil wars, the execution of King Charles 1, the 'Rump Parliament', Cromwell's Protectorate and the Restoration. When there is no quiet, peace seems to be the eldorado in life. No wonder Hobbes sought, in his *Leviathan*, the kind of State that would guarantee peace, stability and security for its members. And small wonder, human nature being what he thought it was, that he

stressed the necessity for a strong government - absolute monarchy would fill the bill - and the need for obedience to its authority. So, if we see the Ideal State *à la* Hobbes as his key quest, then, using the meaning-in-life vocabulary, for him the central point, the pivot, of life would be fulfilling the role of a rational citizen in a peaceful and stable society under an absolute monarch. One writer has, I'd say, captured the spirit of Hobbes's true citizen in saying that a man, to be 'complete and secure ... must enter into a "body politick"' (Ross *et al* 1974:5).

INQ: There seems to be a flash of the jackboot in his authoritarian vision of the State.

X: Not really. One commentator, though talking about Hobbes as a spokesman for the 'strong State', is at pains to show that, while the Hobbesian State is authoritarian and not democratic, it certainly is not fascist; definitely not totalitarian. Hobbes claimed, for instance, that government is set up by compact among the ruled, and this is anathema to the fascist who thinks the State lies prefigured in the *Volksgeist*. Again, Hobbes spoke only of defensive war, and this clashes sharply with the fascist view of expansive war as the highest form of national life. There are several other differences, too (Ebenstein 1947:187-188). Another modern thinker notes that Hobbes recognized that 'something else besides the exercise is required for running a State. This something else is acknowledged authority whereby the sovereign has a *right* to be obeyed, and the subjects have an *obligation to him* to obey' (Raphael 1977:39. His italics.) It is to provide for this that Hobbes brought in the idea of a supposed covenant.

INQ: The authoritarian/totalitarian contrast you draw is certainly significant in relation to existential meaning. It intimates very different attitudes to rights. One need think only of those civil rights which touch deep chords, like freedom of speech and of religion. That word 'religion' ... you know, I said just now I'd omit the next meaning-vector (2) *arrest of life*; but on second thoughts I feel we must touch on it. Did Hobbes undergo an arrest of life, such as may happen in a transition of belief from theism to atheism?

X: 'Arrest' of life ...? Hobbes did receive certain marked jolts and revelations, yes ... a jolt, when he found that the traditional Aristotelianism on which he had been reared had fallen into disrepute. He rejected it pretty sharply and I don't think he needed much prodding, but he did have two revelations: first, on discovering the deductive system of Euclidean geometry, and then on meeting the new Galilean resolutio-compositive science of mechanical motion. These events happened during successive visits to the Continent.

INQ: But I wonder if those events really lie in the battlefield, and reach the level, of arrests of life. I am thinking here of the traumatic, stop-in-tracks shock felt by the author(s) of *Ecclesiastes*, who concluded about life that 'all is vanity'; by J.S. Mill, who said of his mental crisis that 'the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down ... I seemed to have nothing left to live for ...' (Mill 1873, chap. 5); by Tolstoy, who went through a phase of profound pessimism after questioning the meaningfulness of life (Tolstoy, 1888); and by Chesterton, who said he passed through a 'condition of moral anarchy within' (Chesterton 1936, chap. 4 & 16). Was there any parallel in Hobbes's case?

X: I can't recall his mentioning anything similar - about either himself or others - in his works. Or anything in the section on Hobbes in his friend Aubrey's biographical notes (Aubrey 1950:147-159). There may have been something in Hobbes's talks or correspondence with others. All I can offer, in pretty speculative tones, is that *if* he was first a theist and then an atheist, the onset of doubt *may* have been devastating. Then, again, it may not.

INQ: I see. But another point before we go on to the next vector. Some people say that one only comes to think about meaning in life after an arrest of life; after something goes stunningly awry. But a man can also come to think about this subject because he wishes to improve or change his life, or simply because he chances to read or hear something about it. As regards the factor of Hobbes's temperament, I recall a commentator speaking of Hobbes's autobiography (1680) with its humour, occasional pathos and - 'sublime self-complacency' (Anon. 1951:613). so he may not have

experienced an arrest of life, and yet have thought about meaning in life. Shall we take up vector (3), authenticity, now?

X: Hang on. In what sense, authenticity? Hobbes would succinctly have responded with a definition: 'Authenticity, what'.

INQ: I had in mind two chief questions: What did Hobbes see as man's authentic - his true and unalienated - nature? And what had he to say about authenticity in the existentialists' sense of sincerity - of freedom from deception, both other-deception and self-deception? I suggest we handle the first question, about man's nature, later under vector (5), namely conceptions of man.

X: Concerning sincerity as trustworthiness, then: Hobbes does deal with trust during his analysis of 'honour', saying explicitly that 'to trust ... another ... is to honour him' (Hobbes 1651, chap. 10). Again, he must - implicitly, at any rate - have commended honesty for he strongly advocated a stable State, and how could deceitful men maintain any kind of covenant at all?

INQ: One moment. Didn't he think, rather cynically perhaps, that men keep covenants from fear more than intrinsic trustworthiness? After all, there's honour among thieves - but is it honour? Perhaps men, for Hobbes, deceive themselves about their own true motivations. A deep suspicion about human motives underlay all Hobbes's political thinking. Remember his view that there are no covenants without the (help of the) sword (1651, chap. 17). What did he say about self-deception?

X: Nothing as explicit and detailed as what later existentialists like Sartre have written about *mauvaise foi* (Sartre 1943/1956, chap. 2). But I will stress that he had a mechanistic vision of man as, fundamentally, a material object moved hither and thither by the dictates of the desire/aversion principle (Hobbes 1651, chap. 6). And this, no matter what a particular person might want to tell himself or others that the motives for his actions are.

INQ: Some people call Hobbes's attitude cynical and simplistic.

X: Simplistic, yes, in that he wields the battleaxe rather than rapier on the complex tissue of human behaviour. Cynical? Tongue in cheek? Well, you might alternatively say realistic, clear-sighted or undeluded...

INQ: Point taken. Shall we move on to vector (4), freedom of the individual? As we've already considered Hobbes's well-known distinction between causal determinism ('necessitation') and that sort of indeterminism which consists in freedom from external compulsion or impediment, shall we rather focus on what he said about liberty, in a socio-political or value context?

X: Agreed. Yes ... there are several angles on this liberty topic. Let's see if some of them relate closely to existential meaning. I am thinking of two. Certainly Hobbes rejected the idea of total, unqualified liberty for the individual for, according to his second law of nature, a man should be 'contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself' (Hobbes 1651, chap. 14). In fact, he explicitly espoused the age-old golden rule, saying that all his laws of nature were 'in sum, doing to others, as we would be done to' (1651, chap. 17). So, looking at Hobbes from these two angles, we can infer that respecting the liberty of others, and honouring the golden rule, would for him have been major determinants of the meaningfulness - the virtue - of a life.

INQ: Good ... he is in venerable moral company with his golden rule - if my memory serves me well, this maxim goes all the way back, beyond the Hebrews, to the ancient Egyptians living several millenia B.C. And now for vector (5), conceptions of man. To me, this vector looks very important in a socio-political light. I know it's tempting to seize on some suddenly piquant concept simply because it is at that moment intriguing, and then to promote it to a key explanatory role; but I must say I think that every mode of political endeavour, from abstract theorizing about States and ideologies to an everyday party-political prospectus, is informed - whether explicitly or only implicitly - by some image or conception of man. We must, of course, also remember personal relationships: Hobbes moved in Court

circles and was on good terms with Charles II. But to continue: For every formulation of the Ideal State that is offered, we can - we must - ask what manner of man, what type of citizen, would make that State operable, actualizable. Democracy is inspired by the vision of men as beings reasonably able to judge socio-political situations and make workable choices; dictatorships are impelled by the image of men - men apart from dictatorial rulers - as incapable of worthwhile judgment and choice. Plato was, politically, an intellectualistic elitist; the French revolutionaries saw men as free, equal and fraternal; the national socialists had a prescriptive picture of men as blindly obedient to a dictator, chauvinistic, eternally warlike, and racially unequal; *et sic deinceps*.

X: You'd have the backing, perhaps only oblique, of some noted political philosophers there. Oakeshott (1975:150-154) goes to work in terms of 'myths', by which he means 'imaginative interpretation[s] of human existence', like the medieval Christian one in which man, who was divinely created, fell into the original sin of Pride but will be saved. He also works away in terms of three main 'idioms' of morality: the contrasting moral idioms of communal ties, individuality, and the common good (1962:248-249). And Benn (1967:387-392) contends that some 'concept of man underlies every critique of political institutions.

INQ: Then I am not alone ... Before you start on Hobbes's vision of man, perhaps I should provide a backdrop by listing some other conceptions of man: we have the image of man as, variously, the star in a divinely written drama, the most complex animal, and evolutionary *faux pas*, a Sartrean being-for-itself, the ancestor of a race of androids, and the diverse species listed in the Schelerian, philosophical-anthropological typology that ranges through *Homo religiosus*, *sapiens*, *faber*, *dionysiacus*, and *creator*. then there are historical visions like the Homeric one, and also other principles of classification such as classic/romantic, biological/poetic, and material/ideal. A point that is very significant about this list, as regards our present topic, I think, that each conception of man, if viewed as prescriptive, contains a specification - probably unarticulated as such - of the meaningful life according to that particular vision. But what, now, of Hobbes's conception?

X: In Hobbes's time, men had begun shaking off the medieval theistic vision of man as a spiritually actuated, physically embodied being with a fixed role in a divinely created order and with duties rigidly prescribed by the church. Hobbes's vision, in contrast, was a materialistic, mechanistic, necessitistic, reductionistic conception of man as a machine in motion under the desire/aversion principle. And by 'machine' he understood an automaton of the nut-and-bolt, springs-and-wheels type (cf. Hobbes 1651, author's introduction). I hasten to add that this is, roughly, the majority interpretation of Hobbes's image of man, but there are other readings. One philosopher, for instance, sees Hobbes as a motionalist, rather than materialist (Brandt 1928). One textually painstaking scholar has described Hobbes as a peculiar compounder of Christianity and mechanism (Hood 1964:77-78); however, a third author (Raphael 1977:86-87) notes that two further commentators consider that Hobbes's theology can be discounted (McNeilly 1968; Gauthier 1969).

INQ: You called Hobbes's conception of man by the very sibilant and jarring name, 'necessitistic' ...? But I shan't be squeamish.

X: Be strong. Necessitistic, rather than deterministic, just as a reminder that Hobbes himself used the term 'necessity' in distinguishing between unavoidable internal compulsion and avoidable external constraint or impediment (Hobbes 1651, chap. 21): man can still be meaningfully free, to put it ambiguously. I don't mean to stray now, but another point that can be made here is the effect which the search for method had on the thinking of Hobbes, Descartes, *et al.* Modern wisdom recognizes the consequences of accepting a particular 'model' for social theory. Hobbes, fascinated by science and geometry, tried to transpose non-human science categories into the field of politics and psychology. Descartes, too, with his search for certainty, placed an impossible burden on the human sciences, and royal absolutism benefited. The essential ambiguity of human relations lost out to the absolutism of power which was made possible by the insistence on certainty in human relations.

INQ: Fair enough. Now how does Hobbes's vision look against a backdrop of other conceptions of man? We shall have to add the caution, again, that it is risky to study him from a purely 20th-century conceptual matrix.

X: Well, Hobbes's mechanistic vision hardly accords with either the supernal-star or the *Homo religiosus* (supernaturalistic) conceptions. Nor is it consonant with the existentialists' being-*for-itself* model of man ...

INQ: One could go further than you have, and say that the material Hobbesian man is, in Sartrean terminology, a being-*in-itself*.

X: Ah, novel ... On the other hand, Hobbes's conception does show some concordance with the 'most complex animal' and the *Homo faber* (Scheler's highest animal) images. I must add, since this discussion pivots on existential meaning, that the naturalistic Hobbesian and the supernaturalistic supernal-star conceptions are associated with very different formulae for the meaningful life. I'm not sure which, the conception of man or the formula for meaning, is the chicken and which the egg - probably it's just a matter of perspective.

INQ: Yes ... though there may be more to it. But what about the 'ancestor of androids' conception? There's something piquant about that. An android may by definition have human form, but it is also by definition a robot and, however sophisticated and homeostatic its behaviour, it is a machine. Perhaps the mechanist Hobbes would have been tickled by the notion of men, a race of natural machines, as the intellectual progenitors of androids, a race of artificial machines. Quite sci-fi.

X: Quite intriguing, yes. What, indeed, would be the 'meaning' of the 'life' of an android? This puts us squarely in the contemporary man/machine controversy about consciousness, thinking and feeling in robots.

INQ: Yes ... But again, does it make sense to talk about someone from that time in these terms? I suggest, with some reluctance, that we get back on the main Hobbesian road. Shall we talk about that much-quoted passage from *Leviathan* in which Hobbes maintains that, in the 'state of nature', 'the

life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes 1651, chap. 13)?

X: We must. His five adjectives in that passage are discommendatory, so they can hardly characterize the Hobbesian recipe for a meaningful life. A low-meaning, or no-meaning, life maybe?

INQ: Y-e-s ... We saw just now, from the Ideal-State angle, that the meaningful life for Hobbes was the fulfilling of the role of rational citizen in a peaceful, stable, monarchal State. To take a different starting-point now: let's substitute antonyms for his five adjectives - presumably that would give us an idea of what he did see as a meaningful life? Each of his adjectives has *several* possible senses *in vacuo*, but here's a shot at giving antonymic senses that are relevant to the tenor of his *Leviathan*: a meaningful life is one that is (1) associative, and caring-toward-others; (2) affluent, materially and/or in 'quality of life'; (3) pleasing; (4) refined, and considerate; and (5) barring accidents, reasonably long (three score years and ten?). This antonymic reversal may look like a linguistic fiddle, but then either Hobbes meant what he said with his adjectives, or he didn't. And he was pretty attentive to his wordings. Of course, the meanings of his words may have shifted since his times. (Apparently not much, as a subsequent check on usages and their dates in the *Shorter Oxford English dictionary* has indicated.)

X: After your bout of antonymic antics I want to remind you that we postponed our look at 'authentic' man [vector (3)], read in the sense of man's true, unalienated nature or self. What is the true human nature according to Hobbes? Is it the lone, fearful, distrustful one in the state of nature, or is it the controlled, peaceful, stable one in the civilized State as commended by Hobbes? For to say that man has a 'true', basic self, and an alienated self, is not necessarily to claim that it is the basic self which is the 'better' one.

INQ: We seem to have switched roles. Anyhow, I think the answer is that, seen from a descriptive perspective, the Hobbesian state of nature is the 'basic' one; while, seen from a prescriptive angle, well, the Hobbesian

civilized state is the 'commended' one. What sense Hobbes might have attached to our term 'basic' is not quite clear - he might have meant an actual, historically prior state of man; but I fancy he meant the residual nature you would come upon if, in a thought-experiment, you stripped away all the ameliorating factors from the civilized man in the preferred society. Would you say the Hobbesian view of human nature is a pessimistic one?

X: Yes and no ... One commentator divides all political attitudes into two classes: optimistic ones, in which man is thought of as perfectible (he cites democracy as an instance), and pessimistic ones, where man is seen as incapable of progressive perfectibility (he names Hobbes as an example of a pessimist). The drift of his thinking appears in his contrasting of Hobbes's pessimistic vision with Locke's more optimistic conception of the state of nature: for Locke, even in the state of nature man is guided by reason and has to adhere to natural law (Ebenstein 1947:183-185). But a second writer holds that, while Hobbes is often regarded as giving too pessimistic an account of human nature, his account is not really too dismal for, while human beings can be better than wolves, they can also be worse (Watkins 1973:131). I think we'll have to be wary of loaded comments and loose analogies in talk about pessimistic and optimistic accounts.

INQ: All right. Next, do you think that Hobbes, for all his lauding of a secure, social life in a stable State, really has an individualistic sense of existential meaning? His own career suggests that he was something of a gregarious loner.

X: I'd go along, here, with the author I mentioned just now - the one who distinguished three 'idioms' of morality. He adds the claim that the idiom which Hobbes explores is the idiom of 'individuality'. In this idiom, persons are sovereign individuals, associated not in a single common enterprise (as in the moral idiom of 'the common good') but in a venture of give and take, and of the best feasible mutual accommodation; individual choice is pre-eminent and a great deal of one's happiness resides in its exercise (Oakshott 1962:249-251). For Hobbes, then, great meaning lay in the freedom and exercise of individual choice.

INQ: A useful point. To change tack now: we've considered Hobbes-on-meaning with respect to the individual and to the State. But how did he perceive the next-level, international scene? A scene much before our eyes, these days.

X: One can expand his thinking exploratively along the following lines: nations are to other nations as individuals are to other individuals; and a nation is to world-government as an individual is to his national government. Hobbes saw nations as customarily in a posture of war: they are in a state of nature - a state of 'cold war', in modern terms. As one commentator writes, the fear of violent death now appears as the fear of nuclear war, world government as the role of Hobbes's monarch, and he hopes that nations will come to show genuine concern for each other (Gauthier 1969:207-212). One must note, here, his view that sovereigns are equals in terror. Therefore they simply can't trust one another.

INQ: Having dwelt for some time on visions of man, shall we move on to meaning-vector (6), concern for others? We have, in fact, already looked at two key facets of this vector: Hobbes, we saw, commended the associative-considerate mode of living, and he expressly advocated honouring the golden rule. Have you noticed - what can I call it? - the different 'tempers of mind' of Hobbes and his near-contemporary, Thomas More? One might say that More typified the theist, Christian mould of mind, while Hobbes was the 'new' positivist.

X: But perhaps he was a Christian *malgré lui* ... I'll only add that this matter of care for others can be examined in the context of the venerable egoism/ altruism problem. When men elect to live collectively - as Hobbes exhorted - they see this move as advantageous to all; but this 'all' consists of individuals, the self-interest of each of which is also at play. Are helping your neighbour and observing the golden rule altruistic acts, or is self-interest the fundamental motivating factor? Of course, this sort of talk applies to all views of life, not just to Hobbes's. However, I do judge from the general tenor of his *Leviathan* that he was fully aware of how tangled the skeins of motivation really are.

INQ: Tangled . . . always? Can't one ever give without thought of reward? However: it's time to turn to our last vector (7), the several feedback influences on existential meaning of that final fact - death. Tolstoy was appalled by the thought of coming death: What was the point of living on if he would one day be nothing but 'stench and worms', with all his affairs eventually forgotten (Tolstoy 1888/1921:19-20)? Camus had Meursault speak of 'that dark wind blowing from my future', making all else unimportant (Camus 1942/1960:67-68). On the other hand, some people look on death as actually intensifying one's sense of life ('tis death that makes life live - Browning, 1868-9), and virtuous theists who believe in immortality look forward eagerly to eternal beatitude in a supernatural afterlife. What was Hobbes's attitude?

X: Hum . . . not as heady as some of the ones you delineated there. I can't recall any mention in *Leviathan*, in so many words, of the inevitability of death rendering life either meaningless or meaningful. But consciousness of the effects of thought about death is detectable in various guises: as we saw, for Hobbes the meaningful life is that of a rational citizen in a peaceful and secure society - but it is nothing other than the fear of violent death that brings societies into existence at all. Ergo, death, because it generates fear, makes meaningful life possible.

INQ: Neat . . . For people who are ethical-theists, belief in an afterlife is, of course, a major infuser of existential meaning: there goes with this belief the realization that it will be prudent to keep in mind, in this life, the rewards and punishments that will accrue in the next world - eternal beatific paradise being superior to the gnashing of teeth, the worm of conscience, and everlasting fire. What did Hobbes say about all this?

X: Well, he did examine Holy Scripture meticulously (Hobbes 1651, chap. 38) in order to determine things like exactly what 'Satan' was (not a proper name but an appellative), where the places of eternal beatitude and of torment were located (on this earth), and what the actual catalogue of posthumous rewards and punishments was (already intimated by you). But we don't know whether he really accepted this ethical-theistic vision of things. The chief point he wants to bring home in his relevant chapter

appears to be the very pragmatic one that the obeying of sovereign authority will obviate 'the calamities and confusion of civil war'. Thus, Hobbes on existential meaning . . . We're almost home now. Do you fancy winding up with a shot at an overview as we near the end of this talk?

INQ: I'll try ... First, it's possible that something has simply run through our fingers here. The situation is this: we've presented an overview of Hobbes's attitudes to existential meaning, but this had to be derived chiefly by inference from his *Leviathan*, for we've had no access to any meaning-focused papers he may have written, if any ever did and still do exist somewhere. The 'standard biography' written in his own times, Aubrey's *Lives* (1950, section on Hobbes), doesn't contain much material relating to existential meaning. Nor does Hobbes's own short autobiography in Latin verse (Hobbes, 1680). However, we have at least produced a map of Hobbesian meaning-promontories, and I hope we've captured the spirit of his thought in this area.

One might summarily state the attitude we've inferred from Hobbes's *Leviathan* in these terms: the meaningful life is that of the rational citizen in a peaceful and secure monarchical State which, though authoritarian, is certainly not totalitarian; felicity, which lies not in repose but in sustained, shifting endeavour - though there is no *finis ultimum* - resides largely in the freedom and responsible exercise of individual choice, and all is tempered by reverence for the golden rule. Which is a much more tolerant stance than many people give Thomas Hobbes credit for. In fact, he was a good example of Renaissance man reaching for values lost in medieval times and, at the same time, discovering new ones.

Again, we've developed a different viewing apparatus for Hobbes's philosophy. In the act, we've noticed new facets of existential meaning, such as the special significance *for Hobbes* of political-philosophical factors in determining the meaningfulness of a life.

Several topics that could be explored on later occasions would seem to have come to light. Two examples would be the analysis of scheme-role meaning in contexts besides the religious and State ones; and the extrapolation of the analysis of existential meaning, from the individual and the nation, to the international context . . .

X: Let me interrupt by beating a drum I've already struck. We should remember how the meanings given to words such as 'sovereign' have changed. Today, 'sovereign' is an impersonal, legal expression. Hobbes, however, was thinking in terms of a living individual, albeit one trailing clouds of myth such as the 'divine right of kings' - a concept severely dented by the decapitation of Charles pater. It is interesting that Hobbes, like his near contemporary, Machiavelli, managed to see through the 'mythical' nature of government and give us an analysis of power relations which makes perfect sense to the 20th-century mind, despite all the changes in circumstance between his time and ours: his remark, 'covenants, without the sword, are but words' (1651, chap. 17), is painfully obvious to us today.

INQ: Yes, quite an achievement ... To conclude now: there are still several problems we haven't raised here. An example is the relationship of objectivity to the image-of-man vector of meaning. 'Objective' has various senses and it can be used in both a commendatory and a pejorative way. Nietzsche was alarmed at people's uncritical adoption of the disinterested scientific researcher - whose scientific objectivity was in peril of extending itself to *moral* detachment - as the archetype of man (Nietzsche 1886/1964, chap. 6, secs. 207-208). But Hobbes had greatly admired Galilean mechanics and Euclidean geometry, each of which demands objectivity; his wariness about paradigms for *Homo sapiens* was aimed rather at the Puritan and Catholic visions of man. Clearly, there remain several strands worth teasing out and discussing. Shall we continue this discussion some time, some place ...?

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UBUNTU AND THE AFRICAN CONCEPT OF THE FAMILY OF MAN

Dr Johann Broodryk

Prof Danie Prinsloo has made various valuable inputs to African philosophy and especially to the recent debates on the ancient African world view of Ubuntu, and related issues like participative management, the African Renaissance, Ujamaa, the people-centered approach and the family of man. Consequently references will be made to some of his ideas contained in papers presented at workshops on Ubuntu.

References will also be made to other well-known African philosophers for purposes of understanding or interpreting the African concept of the family of man.

In this article the relationship between Ubuntu and the family of man is to be investigated. Family of man in the African context should not be interpreted as sexist - family of man appears to be gender sensitive since it is inclusive. All human beings form part of the family of man with a strong emphasis on humanness / humanity / Ubuntu. Females are not excluded. Family of man is an expression used by various African philosophers and politicians to refer to mankind in a universal way. It will be argued that the relationship between Ubuntu and the family of man is expressed in words with different connotations from Western words referring to humanness and family variations but that the concepts are more or less the same. The words differ but the concepts are very much alike. The ideal remains the same ideal but the ways or words people use to reach such an ideal differ.

The original concept of 'family of man' indicates that in traditional African life the individual used to be part of a commune of people. This commune of people had strong interpersonal relationships and functioned as a close unit where individuals formed part of a whole like cogs of a machine. This concept of a whole relates to the extended family system (which is still a known phenomenon in various African societies today) where all become

brothers and sisters in the communal milieu. The expansion of the communal systems may increase to such an extent that references to such an expansion may be termed in concepts like 'universal brotherhood' and 'family of man'.

The concept of Ubuntu relates intensely to the concept of family of man. Since Ubuntu is a reference to humanness, it appears as if human values like love, caring, sharing, respect and compassion are applicable to both the Ubuntu world view and the concept of the family of man - family of man implies a close interrelationship between human beings.

The confusion about the usage of ideas on family of man centers around a lack of understanding of 'family of man'. It is not always clear whether 'family of man' is to be understood as universal brotherhood or as a massive extended family exceeding national and international boundaries. African communalism is more restricted to its continent but communalism per se is a phenomenon which can be identified in other societies outside Africa as well. The African concepts of family of man and communalism therefore appear not to be necessarily unique.

The underpinning idea of both concepts appears to be Ubuntu since they seem to have an affinity for a world view based on humanness and compassion.

UBUNTU

As a world view Ubuntu may play a prominent role to emphasise humanness in day-to-day interaction between human beings. To Prinsloo (1994:14) Ubuntu implies that people entertaining the same beliefs about human dignity should join hands, so strengthening their separate efforts in a combined attempt to make this world a better world for all human beings to live in. This is an important aspect of 'living' Ubuntu as a practical philosophy - the basic point is for human beings just to become human beings again through the exercising of caring, sharing, respecting and passionate attitudes and actions.

In this sense Teffo (1996:2) describes Ubuntu as a social ethic, a unifying vision enshrined in the Zulu maxim 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' (a person is a person through others). It is a humanism in African societies placing a high value on human worth which found expression in a communal context rather than in Western individualism. Ubuntu implies a basic respect for human nature and manifests itself in a person's behaviour toward other members of the community or family.

Chinkanda (1990:2) sees Ubuntu as African Humanism involving alms-giving, sympathy, care, sensitivity to the needs of others, respect, consideration, patience and kindness.

These virtues are, however, not unknown in non-African societies. All religious beliefs appear to be supporting such virtues since they order society and provide in many ways meaning to people's lives. It is the context in which they are applied, which makes the difference since African humanism involves families or communities or groups while Western humanism is more individualistic.

Mbiti (1989:2) claims that to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. However, to belong to a group may be indicating that a person is abandoning some of his personal individual freedom. Personal preferences then become subject or secondary to group approval.

Mbiti (Ibid:106) explains that only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his being, his duties, his privileges and responsibilities toward himself and toward other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone, neither does the wife 'belong' to him alone. The children also belong to the corporate body of kinsmen, even if they bear only their father's or mother's name. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The

individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.

Influence of the group you belong to is not unique. It is said (De Vos 1988:22) that man's contact with community life and other human beings provides sense to his life. It is therefore logical that group existence and group compassion will influence the individual. This form of influence has a group norm as a consequence which leads to a specific way of thinking and doing. If the majority of the group reasons that people have to function punctually in accordance with the time of a watch, it will become a generally accepted norm. It becomes part of the group culture - part of their life style. This culture is of significance to the group and does not necessarily become a prescriptive for other people.

Africans do not appear to function totally independent from their African culture, and in traditional African culture people are more bound to become organised in groups / extended families. Family relations are said (De Vos 1988:23) to be extremely important. Uncles and aunts are seen as additional fathers and mothers. If a natural father or mother dies, one of the 'other' fathers or mothers will adopt the child, even if they can not really afford it financially. They do this because the child according to this world view, belongs to the group already: there are no orphans in Africa.

According to Teffo (1994:3) Ubuntu or humanness manifests itself in a person's behaviour towards other members of the family or community. The dignity, safety, prosperity, health and development of all people are the most important priorities. The ideal person, according to the African world view, is one who has virtues of sharing and compassion. The individual has a social commitment to share with others what he/she has. The ideal person will be judged in terms of his relationships with others (Teffo 1994:8).

Ubuntu is inclusive, and not exclusive. Everyone is supposed to be a caring and sharing person in a group or family system. Every person is regarded as a piece of the whole or unit for every person is part of mankind or the family of man.

FAMILY OF MAN AND UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD

The family is regarded as the primary institution of societies and some of its major functions includes socialisation and education as well as the transmission of cultural values to young members of the family.

The family everywhere is controlled, sustained, and protected by society's mores and laws. Societies use the family in whatever form it has developed to perform definite functions which it ascribes to it. Some of these functions could be performed in other ways and by agencies other than the family - some functions the family performs only in part - but by and large the family is the most efficient human relationship structure devised by society for accomplishing certain essential functions.

A function societies universally expect families to help perform is to pass on the cultural heritage. They do not depend on the family alone to do this because all the associations and associates outside of the family lend a hand in instilling the social norms in the members of the family. But the family is the first institution to get the opportunity to transmit the ideals, beliefs, and values of a society to the pliable mind of the growing child. It introduces the child to the world of meanings by which it is to order its life in the larger society. This ordering could be coupled with a philosophy like Ta Hsüeh which is said (Magill 1986:212) to teach man to know the great virtue, to love the people, and to pursue the highest good. To make the good virtue prevail and to bring peace to the world man must first cultivate himself, and only then he can cultivate his family.

In traditional Africa an understanding of the African has been related to the family structure of each village. The majority of the inhabitants of each village were related - a closely knit kinship group, headed by the father or grandfather, with the wife, sons, daughters and their families. The size of the village varied enormously. An outstanding feature of African life, which also determines to a great extent the behaviour of the individual, is the emphasis placed on the family unit. In European society the fixed mode of behaviour has been lost and as a result the family units are breaking up. The African family links are much stronger than in the European family

and the behaviour of each individual in his relationship to the rest of the unit is governed by rules from world views or philosophies like Ubuntu. These rules are based on values like love, caring, sharing and respect.

Teffo (1996:16) noticed that in Ubuntu we can draw sustenance from our diversity, honouring our rich and varied traditions and cultures, that benefit us all being the family of man. As Prinsloo (1996:1) points out, all human beings are tautologically human in nature.

If the world can revive or learn about intense humanity or humanness, it will lead to a worldwide humanistic cohesion, caring and sharing attitudes. Family may also be seen as politicisable. The extended families are well known phenomena in Africa, and manifest politically in a norm of Socialism. An example hereof is the Tanzanian Ujamaa which, according to Nyerere (1986:13), is a family unit in Africa which is a reflection of the structure of the whole society of mankind, and it is difficult for the African to draw a line between who is and who is not his brother: 'Our recognition of the family to which we all belong must be extended yet further ... to embrace the whole society of mankind'.

'Family of man' seems to be the same as the notion of universal brotherhood. This distinctive collective consciousness of Africans is manifested in behaviour, expression and spiritual self-fulfillment, encompassing values such as universal brotherhood. Prinsloo (1996:2) interprets universal brotherhood as the involvement of man as a social being in terms of which every person should be involved in decision making which implies ownership of resolutions taken.

Ubuntu vocabulary is not unfamiliar to Western thinking. Concepts like brotherhood can be found in many contexts of Western and other forms of thinking. Some of the words may differ in different contexts, while they express the same meaning. An example is provided (Prinsloo 1996:10) where the word 'comrade' in the communist context, and 'brother' in the Ubuntu context are taken in isolation. These are different words but the context is the same. The difference is that Ubuntu brotherhood shares a

world spirit and serves to emphasise this universal world spirit, while brotherhood in other contexts appear to be a limited experience.

One can also refer to family of man, universal brotherhood, collective consciousness as sharing the same meaning although being different words. Collectivism also manifested in various ideologies around the world like Socialism, Communism, Fascism, etc. There are also other variations like brother- and sisterhood (Prinsloo 1998:1) which are also a reflection of collectivity of which a leading exponent was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who argued that the individual finds his true being only in submission to the 'general will' of the community. Krog (1998:110) says that in the African *Weltanschauung* a person is not basically an independent, solitary entity: a person is human precisely in being enveloped in the community of other human beings.

CONCLUSION

Ubuntu and 'family of man' are not concepts unique to Africa. They are found in all cultures since all cultures have affinity for humanness and good human relations, as well as the spirit of 'man' or collectiveness. This spirit of collectiveness manifests in phenomena like national holidays to celebrate or honour particular significant events dear to the hearts of the people of a nation. National anthems are also examples of the family spirit of a nation.

The difference between the African or Ubuntu understanding of the family of man and other understandings thereof is embedded in the universal character of the concept. To the African people the whole world is part of this family and this applies to unlimited universality while the universal reference to non-Africans is more limited to a specific nation or group of people.

'Family of man' in the Ubuntu context is inclusive and all human beings are part of this spirit. In the non-Ubuntu context family of man appears to be exclusive and not sharing and caring in an extended way. The basic underlying difference may be found in the concepts of extended and nucleus

families. The concepts of extended and nucleus families differ drastically and is only similar when the concept of family per se is isolated.

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