

Unnatural and Undesirable:
An Analysis of *Utopia* and *Leviathan*
Through the Lens of
Desire and Reason

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In politics, both reason and desire are often the driving forces in political systems. However, how do we create a better opportunity for people to succeed in these systems given the seemingly opposing forces of reason and desire? This is the central question at the core of Thomas More's *Utopia* and Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*. More and Hobbes both offer differing takes on the role of reason and desire and their practical influences in politics. In this essay, I will argue that More's idea that man is naturally good and any miseries are brought about by the desires created by society is a stronger argument than Hobbes' contention that man is naturally inclined towards ills out of self-interest and that man causes the miseries in society rather than the system itself. I will first begin by describing More and Hobbes' ideas, followed by a comparison of these two author's arguments. I will then attempt to explain what each writer would say about each other's theories. Finally, I will explain why More's argument is stronger. More's argument is stronger as it understands that men and women are only as free as the system we are bound by and that, in order to bring about positive change, society has to change these boundaries. Hobbes' argument, while still being insightful, fails to understand that men and women may still choose to act in morally good ways, through reason, without the boundaries placed on society by a "Leviathan"-style government.

To begin More looks at the purpose of life in *Utopia*. For the imaginary Utopians, the purpose of life is written as a series of rules to follow. The first "rule of reason" states that they must follow the natural teachings of God because he has given us life, and therefore, the capacity for happiness while the second "rule of nature" dictates that the goal of life is to live as happy a life as possible and to help all other people towards this goal (*Utopia*, 60). It is important to note the equivocation of "reason" and "nature." By equating these two concepts, More is showing that

humans are naturally reasonable and, because humans are naturally reasonable, it is reasonable for people to help each other on their own personal pursuit of happiness.

How do people live a life of happiness? More believes that happiness comes from pursuing pleasure, a pleasure defined as living according to the virtues that God or nature has bestowed upon us (*Utopia*, 60). When a person lives according to their virtues, More believes that they are living a natural life and, thus, are living in reason and are pursuing pleasure. Moreover, it is important to note that More establishes two different kinds of pleasure: “true pleasure” and “false pleasure” (*Utopia*, 61-62). True pleasure is the pursuit of every mental and physical activity that is in accordance with one’s naturally granted virtues (*Utopia*, 61-62). This includes pursuits such as education, physical exercise, and taking care of one’s health. For the Utopians, these are “true” pleasures because they are reasonable pursuits that lead to one having a better quality of life and greater happiness.

On the other hand, the Utopians consider false pleasures to be activities that, while at first seeming to be pleasurable, are in fact empty of any genuine fulfillment (*Utopia*, 62). These are pursuits that can be considered as unnatural and unreasonable as they are not in accord with one’s virtue. These false pleasures include many facets of European society at that time including wealth, power, and vanity (*Utopia*, 62). These facets are the issues More is addressing directly: that the desires created out of the political system are actually false desires and are leading people away from being naturally reasonable individuals pursuing true happiness. In order to keep people from pursuing these false pursuits, More believes that we must create a political system that leads people to choose their natural reason over their unnatural desires.

Hobbes, on the other hand, takes a markedly different stance on the role desire and reason play in the political system in *Leviathan*. He sees reason as being derived through logical conclusions much in the same way that someone would complete simple arithmetic (*Leviathan*, 22). Similarly to math, Hobbes notes that it is important for our logical conclusions to be checked by others to make sure that we have come to the correct decision (*Leviathan*, 22-23). Desire, in the eyes of Hobbes, is the wanting of something that a person loves but does not have (*Leviathan*, 28). At our most basic natural core, Hobbes believes that what we desire above all else is to live and be free. In what he calls “the right of nature,” he concludes that each person can use his own natural power to do anything and everything to protect their own life and freedom (*Leviathan*, 79). In life or death situations, Hobbes postulates that it is reasonable for a person to do whatever it is necessary to protect their life and freedom as to do anything else would be considered extremely unreasonable.

However, when every person everywhere has the same freedom to do whatever they can to protect their life and liberty, Hobbes believes that this would naturally lead to what he calls a “state of war.” This is a system in which everyone is engaged in a violent struggle with one another as it is reasonable to do so in order to protect their own lives and liberty (*Leviathan*, 80). In such a system, there is no “common power to keep [people] all in awe,” power such as an authoritative government (*Leviathan*, 76). Instead, it is only the natural reason of man that dictates what is correct and reasonable, and, in the state of war, this includes the worst violent and heinous acts in order to survive and live free.

To keep man from descending into the chaos of the state of war, Hobbes maintains that we must follow the “law of nature,” a logical derivative of the right of nature. In the “law of

nature,” man is unable to do harm to himself as it risks taking away what is most desirable to himself, namely freedom and life (*Leviathan*, 79). However, in order to not do harm to ones’ self in the natural state of war, Hobbes believes that people must work together in order to preserve their own lives. To not do so, according to Hobbes, would simply be unreasonable.

Ultimately, Hobbes believes that the natural state of war would inevitably lead to people living lives that are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (*Leviathan*, 76). In such a condition, it would be impossible for people to form communities, societies, and eventually, governments. Thus, in order to follow the rule and law of nature, there must exist “the terror of some power, to cause [the rule and law of nature] to be observed, [as they] are contrary to our natural passions, that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge and the like” (*Leviathan*, 106). This “terror” for Hobbes would be an authoritative government that would keep society from descending into its natural state of war and, instead, lead people towards happier lives.

When comparing More and Hobbes’ views on society, there are a number of similarities despite their overall differing viewpoints. Most importantly, although obviously, is the fact that both authors use reason and desire as the main forces driving human behavior. This is perhaps because of the rise of proto-capitalist ways of thinking in Europe during More’s lifetime and the continued growth of these ideas throughout Hobbes’ lifetime. However, what is important to note is that while More illustrates reason and desire as opposing forces, Hobbes illustrates reason and desire as in accord with one another. More’s depiction of desire as being a product of the political system we exist in, and that we must create a political system that incentivizes reason over desires stemming from “false pleasures,” is starkly different from Hobbes’ view. For Hobbes sees our desires as being a reasonable product of the state of war. It is natural, for example, for a

man to desire food when he is starving as he needs food to live and he should do whatever he can to eat so he can live. In this way, Hobbes sees desires and reason as naturally working together to keep us alive.

With these comparisons in mind, how would More and Hobbes react to each others argument? More would likely believe that it is not natural for someone to inflict some kind of pain, whether it be physical, economic, or social, upon another person. To follow a person's "desire" to buy someone else's land in order to build a farm is unnatural because you are causing economic pain upon them. In the kind of political system that Hobbes imagines to be the best for society, there are economic winners and losers; someone inevitably has to suffer the repercussions of someone else's decision. Even with an authoritative-style government, this kind of economic pain would still be inflicted upon another person and, therefore, the system cannot be considered reasonable. Furthermore, even in a state of war, it is not a guarantee that the absence of a political system would keep man from acting out of the innate goodness within his heart. At a young age, people do not intrinsically want to hurt another person without justifiable reason. And those that do, More would argue, are probably suffering from some kind of pain caused by the system that exists, such as being homeless due to their parents not having jobs.

Hobbes would likely argue that to assume someone would not, at least part of the time, choose their desires over reason is irrational. Human beings, in the eyes of Hobbes, are not always capable of making reasonable decisions every time, all the time. Furthermore, desires are extremely influential. Desires can often seem rational and are capable of overwhelming one's decision-making. Therefore, it is a matter of personal opinion to determine what actions are made out of reason and out of desire. Finally, not all desires are adverse. Is it wrong for a child to

desire attention and love from their parents? Is it wrong for a person to desire a better job in order to earn enough money to live in a place free from crime? Not all desires are inherently destructive and to claim that they are is simply irrational.

Ultimately, which author has the better argument? While Hobbes makes a compelling case, More's argument is more powerful. Reason is our most important human characteristic. Reason is what allows man to build great cities, negotiate political agreements, and create societies. It is what distinguishes us from animals and keeps us from being inhuman. In other words, reason keeps us out of the state of war, a condition that Hobbes assumes we would inevitably descend into without law. However, this is a massive assumption. As previously stated, people do not simply jump into violence without the presence of a political sovereign. They do so only when pushed to their extremes, extremes that can be considered unreasonable in any other context.

Furthermore, while Hobbes uses reason as part of his argument, he uses it in conjunction with desire. What he fails to recognize is that our desires are often driven by the systems and situations that we find ourselves in. Take, for example, a poor child in a third world country. She desires to have clean water because she has only had filthy water her entire life. However, she *only* desires clean water. She does not desire other drinks because she is not aware that other options exist. It is the poverty that she finds herself in that dictates her desires. If she was to finally have a drink of clean water, it can be assumed she would be reasonably satisfied and would not desire other drinks.

Finally, Hobbes fails to recognize that the people in power are, fundamentally, human. Even in political institutions, those that wield the most influence are still capable of inflicting the

kind of pain that is found in the state of war upon his or her citizens. Take, for example, a hypothetical government that, despite not being in a civil war or at war with any other country, still commits state-mandated executions of political dissidents. Is it reasonable for them to do so? According to their authority and power, Hobbes would say yes. Why? Because this country has created a political system in which they can do so and, more importantly, it is reasonable and beneficial to do so. However, the majority of reasonable people would say that these acts are violent atrocities and they are unjustified.

In the end, More's argument is stronger because it recognizes that people react to the systems that they find themselves in. Human beings are amazingly adaptable. We can adapt to harsh climates, incredible stresses, and the most unimaginably difficult political systems. However, despite this adaptability, is this right? Should human beings be forced to adapt to restrictive, violent political systems? More would argue no and I am inclined to agree with him. Instead, we should seek to change our politics to create the best systems for humans to thrive in, not simply rely on adaptability. To do so would not only be the right choice but the most reasonable and desirable one as well.

Works Cited

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More, Thomas, and George M Logan. 2011. *Utopia*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.