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Good Aristocrats / Bad Aristocrats: Thomas Hobbes and Early Modern Political Culture

1. The best recent writing, the most illuminating and original writing, on Thomas Hobbes has been the work of philosophers.¹ It is a curious sort of work, for philosophers tend to treat Hobbes as if he were a contemporary, a philosopher like themselves, who recently got tenure (at Harvard, say) and then published *Leviathan*, a very promising but also a very difficult piece of political theory. The text is brilliantly clear in its individual sentences, complex and obscure in its transitions and its larger arguments. The important task, then, is to restate the arguments in as direct and simple a form as possible and to evaluate them: to get the arguments right and to figure out if they are in fact right. Or, to figure out how they are wrong, for one is unlikely to be overly respectful of one's contemporaries. What is the "logic" and the "anatomy" of *Leviathan*? How do the arguments work? What are their weak points? On the other hand, philosophers have little interest in the historical Hobbes or in what we might think of as the social meaning of his work, the values he expresses, the tensions he acts out as he writes. They make a clean break with history and historical consciousness, and so they have virtually nothing to say about the question that dominated the work of the immediately preceding generation of scholars, a question usually answered, with large implications, in the affirmative: is Hobbes a bourgeois political theorist?²

When we focus on that question, we tend to treat *Leviathan* as a cultural artifact. We read it in order to understand the world out of which it came, and if we are to reach that understanding, we must read much else besides. The philosopher just reads the text. He wants to know, for example, what Hobbes had to say about the grounds of political obligation, and for that the text alone is sufficient. The argument is there, and it is right or wrong. But for the social and intellectual historian, the text alone is never sufficient, even for an understanding of the text alone. The text has a context, and these two must be read altogether. I don't mean simply that *Leviathan* reflects or echoes a given social world. Rather, the social world is constituted by the act of writing *Leviathan*, and by many other acts too, less accessible than that one and even

¹ See among others, Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Oxford, 1957); Brian Barry, "Warrender and His Critics", *Philosophy*, April, 1968; F.S. McNeilly *The Anatomy of Leviathan* (London, 1968); David Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan* (Oxford, 1968); and Michael Oakeshott, *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Oxford, 1975).

² Keith Thomas lists the leading lights of this generation: Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Lucien Febvre, Franz Borkenau, Christopher Hill, C.B. McPherson, in his "Social Origins of Hobbes' Political Thought", Keith Brown, (ed.), *Hobbes Studies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 185 and 185n.

harder to “read”. This historian’s goal is to reconstruct Hobbes’ world out of all its available artifacts, philosophical texts, public records, poems and plays, personal memoirs, physical remains of every sort. Each of these gives meaning to and takes meaning from the whole of which it is a part. And to reconstruct that whole, it isn’t necessary to join or continue Hobbes’ arguments but only to “place” and use them.

Both these projects require, however, that the arguments first be understood. It does matter what Hobbes really says.³ So the philosopher can help the historian by describing how the arguments are put together and what they mean (on the assumption that the meaning of their words and phrases hasn’t changed over time). Similarly, the historian can help the philosopher by setting limits to the range of meanings that can plausibly be said to connect with the intentions of the author or the conventions of his age. Now, recent philosophical work suggests an account of *Leviathan* that doesn’t fit the older view of the text as a portrait of market society, bourgeois values, “possessive individualism”, and so on. At the same time, philosophers don’t have an alternative view. The implied question, as I have already said, is not a philosophical question, and so there is no philosophical answer to it. There is, however, an historical view of Hobbes within which the new account makes sense, and it is this alternative view that I want to elaborate and defend. It has more to do with the aristocracy than the bourgeoisie. I want to explore in Hobbes’ work a set of attitudes toward the aristocracy that I take to be constitutive of early modern political culture. A certain view of good and bad aristocrats shapes the positive and negative ideals of *Leviathan* - and of much else that is written alongside of *Leviathan*, and after it too. But I will come to this argument about the social meaning of Hobbes’ masterpiece by way of the arguments over its philosophical meaning.

2. The strongest sense that one comes away with after reading contemporary philosophical studies of *Leviathan* is the sense of dualism: the coexistence of incompatible moral and psychological arguments (or of arguments that can only be brought together with great ingenuity) within what Hobbes claims is a single philosophical system. The dualism seems more stark than it has ever seemed before because philosophers reading Hobbes have taken the moral arguments - the definitions of rights and obligations, the account of promising and then of authorization, the first of Hobbes’ two theories of punishment - more seriously than they have ever been taken before.⁴ Seventeenth century readers tended to pass over the moral arguments; they were struck instead by Hobbes’ materialist and egoist psychology, and they were eager to explore or eager to condemn the political positions that followed from the psychology. Quentin Skinner has recently argued that we should still be guided by those contemporaries (as most historians have been): Hobbes could not have meant what his contemporary readers did not take him to mean.⁵ That’s not an implausible claim. It is indeed likely that Hobbes thought he had so qualified his moral arguments that they could fit without contradiction into his psychology and his psychological politics. In this, however, I am inclined to

³ This isn’t true, of course, if my only purpose is to take Hobbes’ argument as the starting point for my own reflections. Then all that matters is what he says to *me*.

⁴ Barry’s essay (note 1 above) is an especially forceful example.

⁵ Skinner, “The Context of Hobbes’ Theory of Political Obligation”, in M. Cranston and R.S. Peters (eds.), *Hobbes and Rousseau* (Garden City, New York, 1972), p. 142.

say that he was wrong. For all the qualifications, his account of moral obligation has force and originality, and there is no room for it within or even alongside the argument about appetite and aversion, deliberation and will. Emphasize, for example, the theory of deliberation, and Hobbes' defense of promise-keeping as a kind of moral consistency makes no sense at all.

Psychological man, as he appears in *Leviathan*, is not a creature to whom consistency can have any appeal. He deliberates and promises (or doesn't promise). Later on, he deliberates again and keeps his promise (or doesn't keep his promise). What matters in each case, and all that matters, is the relative force of alternating appetites and aversions.

I don't doubt that it is possible to work out a coherent "Hobbesist" position. Hobbes himself was the first philosopher to make the attempt, and a number of recent writers have followed after him, producing versions of "Hobbesism" increasingly far from his own, though composed (more or less) out of the same sentences and paragraphs. It is as if *Leviathan* were a puzzle awaiting solution, whose disjointed and scattered pieces must somehow be fitted together. In principle, there is only one way to do that, but since the shape of the pieces as well as the shape of the whole is in dispute, there are in fact a number of different ways. Or, at least, there are a number of plausible but different proposals, all of them interesting because they force upon our attention different features of the original text. But to the historian it is not the proposed connections but the actual disconnections that are most interesting. The lines of disjuncture point towards the strains of Hobbes' argument. If we focus on them we may, perhaps, obscure the meaning of the text, but we illuminate the meaning of the writing of the text. Whether *Leviathan* is coherent or incoherent, the reality it both constitutes and expresses - so the strains suggest - was for Hobbes deeply ambivalent.

Hobbes' clearest reference, perhaps his only reference, to the dualism of his work comes in the introduction to *Leviathan* where he writes that man is simultaneously the maker and the matter of the commonwealth.⁶ Since the commonwealth is "made" by the signing of the social contract, we can plausibly connect the role of man-the-maker with the moral argument about promising and promise-keeping. Man-the-maker is a moral agent, and the moral agent is the only hero in Hobbes' anti-heroic philosophy. By binding himself to his fellows, by committing himself, he creates political society. Hobbes compares him - it is a piece of humanistic blasphemy - to the God of Genesis who said, "Let us make man". And as Hobbes is a kind of humanist, so he is also a kind of democrat. The comparison to God is not made for the sake of some great founder or legislator. Everyman is founder and legislator by virtue of his moral agency, hence godlike in his creative power. But not only godlike, for Hobbes is, finally, committed to a kind of political pantheism. Man makes political material. The self, conceived not morally but psychologically, is inert, passive, stubborn, resistant to political form, requiring manipulation and control. Man-the-maker is autonomous, man-the-matter heteronomous. The two of them fill the political universe, and it is their uneasy union that makes for the dualism of *Leviathan*.

But the other leviathan, the state rather than the book, is dualistic only in a historical sense. If moral agency is dominant at its founding, materialism is dominant in its everyday existence. So long as leviathan survives, there is no need to repeat, only to recall, the godlike

⁶ "... the Matter thereof, and the Artificer; both which is man", *Leviathan*, introd.

creativity with which it began. Man is maker for a day, matter ever after. So far as the state is concerned, we can think of the creation story as a political myth. The myth is carried forward, as it were, by the doctrine of authorization according to which everyman is the author of whatever the sovereign does, a permanent moral agent but one who never acts, who is always acted for and acted upon. He is a mythical maker, really only matter, moved by what Bentham would later call the twin sovereignties of pain and pleasure. The ruler of the leviathan state is a psychological engineer, and when we see him at work, we wonder what meaning the social contract could possibly have for his subjects. Why bother telling them that when they obey the sovereign they are really obeying themselves, when they are incapable of obeying anyone except under the threat of punishment (or in the hope of reward)?⁷

But Hobbes would hardly have told that creation story or given it such a prominent place in his philosophy if he did not think that it served some purpose. I assume that he believed it to be true, or at least to accord it some moral logic that existed somehow alongside the psychological theory. But he must also have believed that the account of man-the-maker would be persuasive - that it would appeal to the reader's sense of himself as a moral agent, capable of living up to his obligations and opting for political obedience. From the perspective of the psychology, however, there are only two arguments for obedience: one can summon up the specter of the state of nature and the war of all against all or once can simply point to the scaffold, visible from every vista. It is hardly necessary to explain the obligations of a subject, but only to evoke in one of these two ways the universal fear of violent and untimely death. Hobbes makes both of these arguments, of course, but at the same time he lays enormous stress upon the fact of moral obligation. Perhaps he thought that all his readers shared the fundamental dualism of maker and matter. They wanted at least to think of themselves as moral agents, as we do too, even if they were commonly overmastered by pain and pleasure.

3. So far as the sovereign is concerned, "the passion to be reckoned upon is fear"⁸. He is concerned with the actual behaviour of his subjects and not with their (self-flattering) self-conceptions. But there are, Hobbes tells us, a very few people whose day-to-day behavior is in fact shaped by what we might call their integrity. He describes these few with an older moral vocabulary. They possess a "generosity too rarely found to be presumed on, especially in the pursuers of wealth, command, or sensual pleasure... and "a certain nobleness or gallantry of courage... by which a man scorns to be beholding for the contentment of his life to fraud, or breach of promise".⁹ These passages suggest that it is some notion of aristocratic honor that underlies the Hobbist account of moral consistency. In a brilliant essay on "the social origins of Hobbes' political thought", Keith Thomas has worked through all the references to honor, generosity, and magnanimity in Hobbes' work and persuasively argued that "his ethical ideal remained an aristocratic one".¹⁰ Thomas suggests that Hobbes took his practical examples from the circle of friends that met at Falkland's house at Great Tew during the decade before the revolution of 1640. The ideal was best embodied, perhaps, by Sidney Godolphin, honored in the

⁷Leviathan, Chapter XVI.

⁸ Leviathan, Chapter XIV.

⁹Leviathan, Chapters XIV, XV.

¹⁰ "Social Origins", p. 202.

dedication of *Leviathan* as the happy possessor of every virtue “that disposeth a man, either to the service of God, or to the service of his country, to civil society, or private friendship...”¹¹ Here is the good aristocrat, in whom Hobbes’ moral theory comes alive.

Whatever his immediate social context, the good aristocrat provides a moral model: he is a deontologist-of-everyday-life. His will is framed by the “justice”, not “by the apparent benefit of what he is to do”.¹² He keeps his promises because he made them. His consciousness is not a mere succession of appetites and aversions, but a unified self, governed in accordance with an ideal picture of the self. Conceivably, one could manipulate the theory of deliberation so as to account for this picture of the self and so for the good aristocrat, but in truth he doesn’t fit. On the other hand, the theory of promising is impossible without him. If there were no such people, or if the idea of honor and moral consistency had no general appeal, the social contract would be a meaningless instrument, a bond not merely weak (as Hobbes says it is) but incomprehensible. I mean here to make a theoretical point. Michael Oakeshott has argued that Hobbes requires the good aristocrat for a more practical reason. Without his commitment, the defense of the leviathan state, Oakeshott argues, cannot be guaranteed.¹³ Other men will cut and run in the face of danger or make the best possible deal with the enemy. Only of the good aristocrat can it be said with certainty that he will risk his life for his sovereign and his country. He alone will be true to the contract, firm in the (moral) knowledge that “he hath not the liberty to submit to a new power, as long as the old one keeps the field...”¹⁴ This may be right; indeed, it is hard to see how leviathan might be defended if the only passion one could reckon upon was fear. But I intend a somewhat different argument. Not in practice alone, but in principle too, Hobbes’ moral theory requires that we at least be able to imagine a man capable of “doing his duty”. For Hobbes, this man is the good aristocrat, and without this figure in his mind’s eye, he could not have written the book he wrote.

It is equally important to stress that the good aristocrat is not an idiosyncratic construction. If we set Hobbes within the larger world of European moralists and philosophers - which is surely where he would have wanted to be set - we will have no difficulty finding counterparts and analogues. Hobbes’ brief phrases refer in fact to one of the dominant ideals of early modern political thought. The praise of generosity and honor is a common theme in the humanistic literature of the sixteenth century, where these characteristically aristocratic virtues are turned into the moral requirements of magistracy.¹⁵ And “nobleness or gallantness of courage” is a common theme in the neo-classical and republican literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Not only there: I am inclined to say that the celebration of the “noble savage” - in his North American rather than his South Sea incarnation - is also a way of focusing on the qualities of the good aristocrat, here the natural nobleman, honorable, generous and

¹¹ Hobbes described Godolphin elsewhere as a man who embodied “clearness of judgment, and largeness of fancy; strength of reason, and graceful elocution; a courage for war, and a fear for the laws”. He was Hobbes’ “most noble and honored friend”. Quoted in Thomas, “Social Origins”, p. 206.

¹² *Leviathan*, Chapter XV.

¹³ Oakeshott, “The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes,” in *Rationalism in Politics* (New York, 1967), pp. 290–293.

¹⁴ *Leviathan*, review and conclusion.

¹⁵ Ruth Kelso, *The Doctrine of the English Gentleman in the Sixteenth Century*, University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature (Urbana, Illinois, 1929), Vol. XIV, Nos. 1–2.

brave). If we think of the good aristocrat as the man who keeps his promises, consents to the laws he obeys, is “author of his own punishment”, and risks his life for his country, it is not difficult to locate him in republican theory: he is the committed or virtuous citizen.¹⁶

Hobbes himself, of course, never intended to suggest any such location. He was never an admirer of the ancient republics, “the Greek and Roman anarchies”, and it was never part of his program that good aristocrats should come together and govern themselves. He does say that if all men were as generous and honorable as they are, “there neither would be, nor need to be any civil government, or commonwealth at all; because there would be peace without subjection”.¹⁷ And one might argue that peace without subjection, though within a commonwealth, is the central goal of republican theory. But Hobbes thought that goal impossible, and the whole purpose of his political theory was to hollow out the doctrines of consent and authorization, so that they are at the end purely formal. The good aristocrat indeed consents to the laws he obeys; that is why he obeys them; but he has at the same time nothing to say about their substance. Until his sovereign calls him to the service of his country, he lives happily on his rural estate. Like the aristocrat of seventeenth century garden poetry, whom Keith Thomas identifies as an alternative representation of the same ideal, he is a man of public virtue and political retirement.

Still, the account of consent and authorization, however eviscerated in Hobbes own work, provides the formal structure of later republicanism. Man-the-maker can have no practical existence except as a citizen, and it is as a citizen that we will one day appear. Hobbes works out a theory, but not yet an argument for republican politics. He gives republicanism a modern philosophical base, much as Calvin gives it a theological base. Rousseau, we might say, is their joint inheritor.

4. Good aristocrats are very few in number. The bulk of mankind, matter rather than makers, Hobbes divides into two groups, best described, I think, in his brief justification of preventative war: “there be some, that taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their own security requires; if others, that otherwise, would be glad to be at ease within modest bounds, should not by invasion increase their power, they would not be able, long time, by standing only on their defense, to subsist”.¹⁸ This suggests that the “general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death” has a twofold psychological origin. For what I take to be the larger number of men and women, the inclination arises out of fear. These people are not by nature competitive. Left to themselves, their aversion to risk would consistently outweigh their appetite for power, and they would rest content within the modest bounds of their families and their possessions. But they are forced into the war of all against all by a smaller group of people who pursue power, not as an instrumental good, but for its own sake. This second group competes simply for the sake of winning, and it is to its own members above all

¹⁶ Among Hobbes’ contemporaries, Harrington comes closest to presenting this figure, but he is most clearly visible in the later work on Montesquieu, Mably, Rousseau and Kant.

¹⁷ *Leviathan*, Chapter XVII.

¹⁸ *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII.

that Hobbes' famous account of life as a race applies: we are to conceive of them as having "no other goal, no other garland, but being foremost".¹⁹

This too is no idiosyncratic description. The same division of mankind appears in Machiavelli - when, for example, he argues that so long as the prince does not attack the property or the women of his subjects, the great majority of them will live contentedly under his rule, and he will only have to worry about "the ambition of a few."²⁰ Machiavelli provides the social reference of these two categories in *The Discourses*: "if we consider the objects of the nobles and of the people, we must see that the first have a great desire to dominate, whilst the latter only have the wish not to be dominated... to live in the enjoyment of liberty".²¹ We can take Hobbes to intend the same social reference, but with a keener moral and psychological insight. For he sees that the desire for dominions is a special form of self-regard: the root cause of the war of all against all is the desire to see oneself in the act of exercising power. It is a kind of glorying over the weakness and defeat of another human being. This is the passion of the bad aristocrat. And for Hobbes, as for Machiavelli, it is not incompatible with civil peace. Machiavellian princes and citizens alike are told that they must repress or (preferably) kill the aristocrats. Hobbes' leviathan state is designed to terrify and to tame them.

It is worth noting, I think, a certain similarity between good and bad aristocrats. They are both, as befits members of their class, children of pride, concerned above all with the way they appear... to themselves. Writing in the eighteenth century, Baron d'Holbach provides an account of moral goodness that closely parallels Hobbes' account of aggression and conquest. Why, he asks, should a man be good in a corrupt society that offers him nothing but trouble in exchange for his goodness? He should be good in order to enjoy "the tranquil delight of contemplating his own actions with... delicious complacency."²² When Hobbes writes of the noblemen who "scorns to be beholding..." he is simply describing the other side of this complacency. Both the best behaviour and the worst have their own source in aristocratic self-regard, and the admiration and fear of aristocrats is crucial to an understanding of Hobbes and Holbach alike and thus of some hundred years or more of political argument.

Between the aristocracy and the people, there is no room for anything like a Marxist bourgeoisie. Hobbes' extraordinary account of human competition, like Machiavelli's, owes hardly anything at all to the experience of the marketplace. It is sometimes expressed in metaphors of the market, but these are ancient metaphors, long ago appropriated for general use, and of little value in specifying the social meaning of the texts within which they appear. Much has been made of one of Hobbes' definitions: "The value, or worth of a man, is as of all other things, his price..." - as if this could only have been said in a bourgeois society.²³ But the likely original of that definition occurs in the *Maxims* of Publius Syrus, written around 42 B.C. "Everything is worth what its purchaser will pay for it".²⁴ (Since Publius Syrus wrote in a slave

¹⁹ The Elements of Law, Part 1, Chapter 9.

²⁰ The Prince, Chapter XIX; trans. Mark Musa (New York, 1964), p. 151.

²¹ The Discourses, Book I, Chapter v, trans. Christian Detmold (New York, 1940), p. 122.

²² Holbach, The System of Nature or, The Laws of the Moral and Physical World (London, 1817), Vol. I, p. 544.

²³ Leviathan, Chapter X; Macpherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism (Oxford, 1962), p. 37 — "A man's power is treated as a commodity ..." etc.

²⁴ Dictionary of Quotations on Historical Principles, ed. H. L. Mencken (New York, 1947), p. 1241.

society, his maxim literally as well as metaphorically to men and women). Buying and selling are universal human activities, and the reference to commerce is a commonplace of virtually every human culture. In any case, it's not a market value but self-valuation that is of crucial importance in the world that Hobbes sets out to describe."For every man looketh that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets upon himself. And upon all signs of contempt or undervaluing, naturally endeavors as far as he dares... to extort a greater value from his contempters...". Hence the duel, the most personal form of the war of all against all, which is fought "for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons, or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name".²⁵ But it is not the members of the bourgeoisie who fight duels, except imitation of their betters. Duelling is a feature of the life of a latter day aristocracy. Indeed, the marketplace is a world of peace and cooperation compared to what might be called the exchange economy of bad aristocrats.

No doubt, Hobbes did have some sense of the dangers posed by bourgeois acquisitiveness to the peace of the commonwealth. In his *Behemoth*, for example, he could hardly avoid noticing these merchants of London who sided so resolutely with the enemies of the king. But he understands the motive of the merchants only by assimilating them to the class of bad aristocrats. The critical passages comes in Part III of *Behemoth*, where Hobbes writes that "great capital cities" will always support rebellion

because the grievances are but taxes, to which citizens, that is merchants, whose profession is their private gain, are naturally mortal enemies; their only glory being to grow excessively rich by the wisdom of buying and selling.²⁶

It is not the case that taxes were resisted because they were onerous, or because they interfered in any significant way with the acquisition of wealth. There is no rational calculation here; the "wisdom of buying and selling" figures only indirectly in Hobbes' story. Gain is the glory of the bourgeoisie, and it was for that glory - their only glory - that the merchants of London rebelled, that is to say, like bad aristocrats, "for trifles". Even so, they did not take the lead in the rebellion: the "chief leaders", according to Hobbes, "were ambitious ministers and ambitious gentlemen."²⁷

Hobbes' account of individual ambition is extremist in both its style and content: alike provocative and radical. It would be difficult to find anything like it in bourgeois literature - or even anti-bourgeois literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Machiavelli provides a close parallel, political rather than psychological in form. Similar political parallels can be found in English writers reflecting upon the experience of bastard feudalism. Bacon's "overmighty subjects" are Hobbes' bad aristocrats.²⁸ What is even more striking, however, is the reiteration of Hobbes' psychological arguments by writers whose touchstone is the life of the great royal courts, for whom politics is nothing more than the intrigue of courtiers. Here is the most brutal competition of all, and when La Rochefoucauld, for example, writes about it, he exhibits the same commitment to tear away the veil of virtue and expose the naked ego behind the veil that

²⁵ *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII.

²⁶ *Behemoth*, William Molesworth (ed.), (New York, n.d.), pp. 158–59; for a very different interpretation of this passage, see Richard Ashcraft, "Ideology and Class in Hobbes' Political Theory", in *Political Theory*, Vol. 6 (February, 1978), pp. 46–49.

²⁷ *Behemoth*, p. 30.

²⁸ See *The Essays*, esp. "Of Seditions and Troubles" and "Of Ambition".

seems to animate so much of Hobbes' work. Like *Leviathan*, La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* is a portrait not only of politics but of daily life too, as an infinitely subtle and devious warfare, where all that is at issue is the aggrandizement of the self and morality is never anything more than a kind of camouflage.²⁹

What passes for generosity ... is merely ambition in disguise ...

Loyalty ... is simply a device invented by self-love in order to attract confidence...

Reconciliation with our enemies is nothing more than the desire to improve our position...

Gratitude is like commercial good faith: it keeps trade going, and we pay up, not because it is right to settle our account but so people will be more willing to extend us credit.

There speaks in the last maxim not the good bourgeois but the aristocrat in debt. The corrosive analysis of the virtues and the passions is a feature of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century aristocratic culture, and the world it invites us to imagine is a world of heroic egotism in which everyone's secret ambition, it seems, is to rule over everyone else: not to contemplate his power in a single act of conquest, but in conquest after conquest, endlessly extorting honor and regard from others. That is not, in fact, a plausible picture of social life, though one can more easily imagine a court made up of heroic egoists than a city or a country. Pascal suggested a useful qualification in one of his *pensées*: "Such is our presumption that we should like to be known by the whole world ... and we are so vain that the good opinion of five or six persons around us delights us delights and comforts us."³⁰ Hobbes and La Rochefoucauld suggest that people are not so easily delighted. Theirs is not a portrait of mankind but a particular group of men whom they knew well and who were particularly committed, as most of us are not, to a life of intrigue and aggression.

I have called these men heroes, and so I ought to point out that alongside the literary and philosophical exposure of their egotism, there also exists a perverse fascination with it. Once again, Machiavelli's view of the prince sets the tone. In England, from Marlowe's Tamburlane to Milton's Satan, the heroic conqueror or rebel whose aim is literally to rule the world (or the universe!) figures importantly in plays and poems. Formally condemned, he is often covertly admired - not for any morally redeeming features but for the very audacity and scope of his ambition.³¹ There is a certain thrill in writing about him, presumably in reading about him too, a tremor of pleasurable fear. One would not, however, want to meet him in the street or live in a state that he had seized (or endure the wars that precede the seizure). The same figure plays a part in Hobbes' philosophical imagination (though he is never admired), and it is characteristic of philosophy as distinct from literature that his presence should be universalized: as if the ambition of Tamburlane lurked in the heart of everyman. But the deeper and more realistic claim of Hobbes' argument is that this ambition ("vainglory") is explicable within a psychological theory that can also account for the modesty ("fear") of more ordinary people. Like those ordinary people, the would-be princes, overmighty subjects, heroic egotists, and bad aristocrats are part of the psychological material out of which the leviathan state must be created.

²⁹ *Maxims*, trans., L.W. Tancock (Harmondsworth, England, 1959), nos. 246, 247, 82, 223.

³⁰ *The Pensées*, trans., J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, England, 1961), No. 151.

³¹ For a subtle account of these attitudes, see Thomas R. Edwards, *Imagination and Power* (New York, 1971), Chapter I.

And the character of leviathan is determined by its most recalcitrant material: hence Hobbes' insistence on absolutism and his harsh and reiterated demand for terror. The Hobbist commonwealth looks back, as it were, to Tamburlane and is shaped by the need to repress rebellion and war - whereas the Lockeian commonwealth, by contrast, looks forward to someone more like Moll Flanders and is shaped by the need to control petty larceny and theft. But Hobbes, at least, would insist that the form of control is the same in both cases. The ruler must play upon and manipulate the appetites and aversions of his subjects. Mostly, this is accomplished through punishment and the threat of punishment. Hobbes is the first political theorist to treat statesmanship as the art (or science) of deterrence. In this sense, his true heirs are Helvetius, Holbach, and Bentham, of whom Burke rightly said: "In the groves of *their* academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows."³² But it would be wrong simply to equate Hobbes with his heirs, for that would be to miss the special force of his ideas. *Leviathan* without the bad aristocrats is an unattractive book indeed, and the leviathan state is an unattractive reality when it represents, as T.S. Eliot wrote of the puritanism of his own time, "the survival of a restraint after the feelings which it restrained had gone".³³ But Hobbist psychology is above all an account of dangerous feelings: vainglory, ambition, and covetousness, passions "perpetually incumbent and pressing". They make, Hobbes says, for individual "unquietness". Collectively, they represent "the seditious roaring of a troubled nation".³⁴ And if they are not brutally repressed, they will inevitably produce the greater brutality of civil war.

5. But what if they are repressed? Here perhaps is the connection between Hobbes and later bourgeois theory. We might think of the respectable citizens of a liberal state as bad aristocrats successfully repressed. They still run the race and still want to win, but they have been forced to accept a new set of constraints - so that winning is more than a matter of outdistancing the Joneses than of ruling the world. They are content, as most of mankind always was, "to be at ease within modest bounds". To be sure, this modesty has no specific connection in Hobbes' mind with the life or consciousness of the bourgeoisie. "Denunciation of the heroic ideal", as Albert Hirschman has written, "was nowhere associated with the advocacy of a new bourgeois ethos".³⁵ What Hobbes looked for was a classless modesty common to peasants, artisans, and merchants alike - and then to properly chastened aristocrats. He did believe, however, along with later bourgeois theorists, that these people are best conceived as individuals, not as members of a group; their deliberations are not only self-centred but solitary. The sovereign assures their obedience by threatening them one by one, as it were, with punishment, and he assures their happiness, so far as that is possible, by opening to them all those "contentments of life, which every man by lawful industry, without danger or hurt to the commonwealth, shall acquire to himself".³⁶ The singular pronoun is important. If Hobbes hates and fears the heroic egotism of bad aristocrats, he has no sense of a communalist alternative,

³² Reflections on the Revolution in France, Conor Cruise O'Brien (ed.), (Harmondsworth, England, 1968), pp. 171-72.

³³ Eliot, Selected Essays (London, 1951), p. 213 ("Philip Massinger").

³⁴ *Leviathan*, Chapters XXVII, VIII.

³⁵ *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton, 1977), p. 12.

³⁶ *Leviathan*, Chapter XXX.

no sense of the possible value of cooperative effort, shared decision-making, *amour social*. The only alternative to the heroic egotist is the repressed egotist.

It is this contrast, then, that Hobbes bequeathes to his utilitarian heirs, who develop at great length an account of the legal and constitutional arrangements that ensure repression. We can think of it as a contrast between the bad aristocrat and the good bourgeois, but I would stress that in the Hobbist account, and still in Helvetius. Holbach and Bentham, the good bourgeois has no qualities of his own. There is no feeling in any of these writers for the special forms of domesticity and sentimentality that shape his character. He is merely the matter of the commonwealth, its material base, worked up in a more or less satisfactory way. Helvetius even thought it possible to turn the repressed egotist into a brave soldier: it was only necessary to suspend one part of the repressive system and offer unlimited sexual gratification (instead of medals and honor) to returning heroes.³⁷ So public spirit might be generated by the manipulation of appetite, but not by any appeal to moral character or political commitment. Man-as-matter has no moral character and is incapable of commitment. He is, indeed, a creature of his passions, but these are no longer either noble or dangerous. Avarice is probably the chief among them, and once the dream of glory has been given up, avarice is, as Dr. Johnson wrote, "a uniform and tractable vice".³⁸ So the repressed egotist is fairly easy to live with; so long as he isn't forced into the pursuit of power after power, he is a quiet and friendly sort. One must go to some great lengths, as Helvetius suggests, to get him to fight. But for positive virtues, it is necessary to look to the good aristocrat. He remains throughout the early modern period the sole measure of human excellence.

After one gets past the excitement of exposing his nerve endings, the repressed egotist isn't very interesting. Insofar as he is idealized, it is only by a kind of negative contrast. Thomas Mann's Tonio Kröger, looking back to Machiavelli rather than Hobbes, makes the contrast very nicely: "He is nothing to [us], your Cesare Borgia ... No, life ... does not represent itself to us as a vision of savage greatness or ruthless beauty ... it is the normal, respectable, and admirable that is the kingdom of our longing."³⁹ That was already true of Hobbes, and leviathan is the name of the kingdom. But it isn't what everyone longs for. In the history of political thought, the image of the good aristocrat - greatness without savagery - remains a persistent if largely unarticulated theme. That image play a vital part, as I have already said, in neo-classical and republican theory, where the commonwealth is suddenly populated not by figures like Cesare Borgia but by proud and public-spirited citizens dressed up as Roman senators: aristocrats reborn. And it is vital in republican practice too. When the deputies of the Third Estate took their famous oath, and when the delegates of the thirteen American states pledged their "sacred honor", were they not laying claim to that very "nobleness and gallantness of courage" that Hobbes thought too rare to be presumed upon? Were they not acting out the role of man-the-maker?

That same self-image figures also in socialist thought, where a new contrast takes shape with which I can properly conclude my story of good and bad aristocrats. Beatrice Webb once sought to explain the difference between the Fabians and the guild socialists, between advocates of the welfare state, like herself and her husband, and advocates of industrial

³⁷ A Treatise on Man (London, 1810), Vol. II, p. 492.

³⁸ Quoted in Hirschman, Passions and Interests, p. 55.

³⁹ Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories, trans., H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York, 1954), p. 104.

democracy, like the Coles (it is Margaret Coles who reports her words). The Fabians, she said, belonged to the B's of the world: they were bourgeois, bureaucratic, and benevolent. The guild socialists belonged to the A's: they were aristocratic, artistic, and arrogant.⁴⁰ The comparison is, perhaps, a bit self-mocking. It is an effort to anticipate criticism from leftist intellectuals for whom the bad aristocrat had long since vanished from view, and who found a new enemy in his anti-heroic successor, the good bourgeois. The Webbs still defended the leviathan state that had made this succession possible. Their opponents within the socialist movement sought to recover what we might think of as the repressed alternative, the good aristocrat. They looked to create a republic of moral agents, men and women capable of commitment - a possibility that Thomas Hobbes, in the first philosophical account of modern politics, had both affirmed and denied.

⁴⁰ Margaret Cole, Beatrice Webb (London, 1946), pp. 65–66.