PHIL 120: Philosophy of Human Nature

Topics for the Hobbes Essay

INSTRUCTIONS: Select any one of the following essay topics and compose an essay of approximately 750 words (minimum). There will not be time for a re-write on this essay. Rough drafts, and/or an individual conference with the instructor are encouraged, but not required. Misspellings, grammatical gaffes and other problems with the basic rules of writing will factor into the grade. Due date for the essay is THURSDAY, APRIL 25.

The Topics:

1. Mill and Hobbes: Respect for opinions vs. Moral relativism

Mill is what we identified in class as a “moral relativist” (see p. 6.a.1 of the Hobbes excerpts for the statement of his view and Section V of the Hobbes Outline). There is a sense in which “every person is entitled to her own opinion” under Hobbes’s view of morality. But this view is importantly different from the “entitlement” that J.S. Mill advocates. Mill too asserts—indeed insists—that people must be allowed to think their own thoughts, and to express their ideas, and to live in accordance with what they affirm as true. His reasons for defending this basic right are, however, very different from Hobbes’s.

For this essay, present the doctrine of moral relativism as Hobbes expresses it in the context of his philosophy as a whole. Then go back and read paragraphs 14 – 16 of our Mill excerpts and try to say what is different about Mill’s approach to the question of free expression.

Whose view do you find more “persuasive,” and why?

2. Callicles and Hobbes

Like Callicles before him, Hobbes argues the merits of an egotistical and hedonistic lifestyle. Unlike Callicles, however, the hedonistic value-system is not a lifestyle choice but a basic fact of human nature: we are all hedonists, according to Hobbes; hedonism is not just a good idea, as it was for Callicles, it’s the law (of human nature). Socrates, of course, disagrees with all of this.

For this essay, go back and read Callicles’s final—and aggressive!—statement of his position in the Gorgias at pp. 491e – 492d (the longer “Speech of Callicles” from 482c – 489a presents the fuller picture and you might want to reread that as well). Show how this position correlates with what you understand of Hobbes’s position. Then place this whole hedonistic conception of the “good life” for a human being into contention against what Socrates has to say against it. Why does Socrates reject the pursuit of pleasure as the best route to human happiness?

3. The two Thomases

Many of you attended Professor Stump’s Killeen Lecture on “Aquinas and the Common Good” and reported how impressed you were with her analysis of “fraternal correction” as something required of us in relation to our friends, to other people generally.

Hobbes regards human beings as just another form of human life on the planet, no different in our behavior and our motivations than the other animals around us. We, like they, are driven by our instincts. There would be no point in trying to “fraternally correct” the intentions or actions of any other person.

Compose an essay in which you first present Hobbes’s picture of human motivation as driven by the instinctual pursuit of pleasure, and then contest that view with what you’ve learned of Aquinas, either from Professor Stump’s lecture or from your reading in this class. You’ll find the sections from the Hibbs anthology under Segment 5 on our reading list helpful in this project.
4 Hobbes v. Rousseau

Hobbes and Rousseau tell very different stories about the transition from the State of Nature into Civil Society. For Hobbes, it is all to the upside; for Rousseau, it's mostly downside.

Compose an essay in which you briefly explain the differences between human life in the state of nature and in civil society as Hobbes, and then Rousseau, understand these. Whose description of our lives in civil society do you find more accurate and persuasive?

5 Human Relations

In Chapter Ten Hobbes argues that all human relations are based upon perceptions of inequality of “power,” and human actions are directed at the effort to redress or eliminate or accommodate oneself to these inequalities. We try to co-opt and utilize the power of other people in pursuit of our own selfish goals and intentions, and cooperate only with those we perceive to be in a position to help us along our way. We compete with and tread down those whose power we perceive to be less than our own.

You may approach this essay in either of two ways:

a.) Relate Hobbes’s claims to your own experience with other people. Does his view ring true? Do you agree or disagree with him, and why? Here again, a careful reading of Chapter 10 is in order, and you might find the Hobbes Outline, Section VI useful as well.

b.) Google “Is giving the secret to getting ahead” to access a recent report in the New York Times of a researcher who claims empirical evidence in support of a thesis that seems directly to contradict what Hobbes says. Read the report, and then decide whether, in your opinion, Hobbes, or the recent researcher gets it right.

6.) The transition from the State of Nature to Civil Society: Chapters 13 & 14

Explain why the Hobbesian State of Nature is the way Hobbes believes it would be. Show how the transition into civil society can be effected without the need for Hobbes to go back on his basic claims about human motivation generally.

Because this topic is essentially expository in nature, it is less complicated than the others, and a somewhat safer and easier task. Therefore, the highest possible numerical score you can receive for an essay on this topic is a 95—still an A, but with less grade-raising potential for the course.

7.) Hobbes's way of thinking, today and tomorrow

It was noted in class that, in many respects, Hobbes's scientistic way of thinking about human nature is gaining currency, becoming more and more the way we understand ourselves as human beings.

For more evidence on this claim, google “Sorry but your soul just died,” to access a 1996 article written by Tom Wolfe in which he reports, on a number of different fronts (and quite a long time ago now), how science is changing our views about human nature.

Read the Wolfe piece, then compose an essay to report your findings. You must relate what you read in Wolfe to what you understand of Hobbes. Then, state your own views on the matter.

8.) WILD CARD: If there is some other topic that you would like to pursue, some other argument that you would like to make in favor of, or opposed to Hobbes's positions, you may do that. It is necessary, if you select this option, that you speak with the instructor for clearance of your topic before you begin.