

THE FRAGILITY OF CIVILIZATION IN HOBBS'S HISTORICAL WRITINGS

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Most people do not think of Hobbes as an historian, but his political science rests on the sweeping historical claim that all past and present civil societies are radically defective because they have never been free of “disorders of state and change of government by civil war.” The reason this historical premise is easily overlooked is that Hobbes makes no attempt to prove it in his scientific treatises on politics, such as *Leviathan* and *De Cive*. In these works, Hobbes begins by examining the faculties and passions of men in the state of nature, a condition in which all political authority is dissolved; he then constructs the Leviathan state – a new form of government that will establish a secure and lasting foundation for civil society. By proceeding in this fashion, Hobbes excludes from the outset an analysis of the traditional forms of political authority and the historical causes of civil war. His treatises, therefore, are incomplete statements of his political teaching: they present the solution to the past failures of civilization, but they take for granted an understanding of the problem.

For scholars who draw their interpretations from the political treatises, Hobbes's procedure creates difficulties because the original understanding of defective civil society has been reduced to a simple psychological teaching, according to which the passions for security, profit, and glory have rendered men “apt to invade and destroy one another.” But this teaching does not explain why the civil societies of the past have been unable to control these passions; nor does it identify the immediate causes of war, such as class conflict, economic competition, political faction, religious sectarianism, dynastic struggles, racial strife, military rivalry, or any of the other historical causes of war. Because the historical record has been expunged from the state-of-nature teaching, scholars have tried to explain Hobbes's view of the fundamental political problem by referring to the intellectual context of Hobbes's life and times or by searching in other parts of the treatises for models of human conflict.

While illuminating in certain respects, such investigations overlook the fact that Hobbes himself analyzes the defects of previous civil societies in his extensive set of historical writings. These writings appear in separate books, most notably in *Behemoth*, Hobbes's history of the English Civil War and in *A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England*, his analysis of England's political and legal institutions. In addition to these major works, Hobbes wrote short histories, such as "An Historical Narrative on Heresy," a work on "Ecclesiastical History" in Latin verse, an introduction to his translation of Thucydides, and a few short essays that have been identified recently as early discourses by Hobbes on Tacitus, Roman history, and law.¹ Despite their variety, all of these writings are part of the scholarly discipline that Hobbes calls "civil history" and provide the best insight into his understanding of past and contemporary civil societies.

In the argument that follows, I will attempt to piece together these writings into a coherent whole and to show that they constitute a Hobbesian philosophy of history – an account of the evolution of man from barbarism to civilization and an explanation of the inherent fragility or self-destructiveness of civilization. After presenting the account, I will bring Hobbes up-to-date by comparing his views on the fragility of civilization with Samuel Huntington's views in *The Clash of Civilizations*. I will suggest that Hobbes was more optimistic than Huntington about overcoming the anarchical tendencies of civilization but that Hobbes's optimism reflects some of the naïve illusions of the early Enlightenment about changing man's irrational behavior.

The History of Barbarism and Civilization

A survey of Hobbes's historical writings shows that Hobbes investigated the condition of civil society from the time of ancient Egypt to 17th century England. His sources were the great historians, poets, and philosophers of antiquity and the lesser-known historians of contemporary Europe. From the works of Diodorus Siculus, Caesar, Josephus, and the Old Testament, Hobbes acquired a knowledge of the ancient kingdoms of the Near East, such as Egypt, Israel, Persia, Assyria, and India. From the works of Thucydides, Tacitus, Plutarch, Seneca, Lucan, Cicero, as well as from historical observations in Aristotle's *Politics* and *Metaphysics* (Bk. 1), Hobbes acquired an

¹ See Noel B. Reynolds and Arlene Saxonhouse, ed., *Thomas Hobbes: Three Discourses: A Critical Modern Edition of Newly Identified Work of the Young Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

understanding of the republics of ancient Greece and Rome. And from the works of contemporary historians, such as Selden, Heath, and the common law historians, as well as from Tacitus, Hobbes developed his views on the origins of feudal Europe and the institutions of monarchy, gentry, and church. Judging from these sources, one can infer that for Hobbes the known civilized world consisted of three types of society: the ancient kingdoms of the Near East, the republics of ancient Greece and Rome, and the monarchies of Christian Europe.

In addition to studying the kingdoms and republics of the civilized world, Hobbes investigated the historical condition of those people he calls savages or barbarians. Drawing from many of the same sources, Hobbes describes at least three distinct peoples as savage or barbaric: "the savage people of America" and "those that live near the Poles" (that is, the Indians and Eskimos of North America); the Germanic tribes of prefeudal Europe and their descendents who became the Saxon tribes of early England; and the barbaric people who lived by plunder and rapine before the founding of the Greek city-states.²

As this overview suggests, the primary theme of Hobbes's writings on civil history is the distinction between barbarism and civilization – a distinction we can begin to understand by reflecting on his terminology. When speaking of the societies of the past, Hobbes sometimes uses terms that emphasize their political characteristics – "commonwealths," "cities," or "polities" – and at other times uses terms that emphasize their civilized characteristics – "civil society" or "civil life."³ He uses both sets of terms interchangeably because he regards civilization as a condition that combines a certain level of political development with a certain manner of living. Whenever government became sufficiently strong and well-established to provide peace and leisure, men began to cultivate philosophy or the arts and sciences. Thus, Hobbes observes as a general rule that "commonwealth is the mother of peace and leisure; and leisure, the mother of philosophy. Where first there were great and flourishing cities, there was the first study of philosophy."⁴ Civilization,

² *Leviathan*, ch. 10, p. 83; ch. 13, p. 114; ch. 30, p. 324; ch. 46, p. 655. And *De Cive*, V.2; *De Corpore*, I.7; *Dialogue on the Common Laws*, pp. 163-63. References are to Sir William Molesworth, ed., *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 11 volumes (London: John Bohn, 1839-45): *De Cive*, EW 2; *De Corpore*, EW 1; *Leviathan*, EW 3; *Behemoth*, EW 6; Joseph Cropsey, ed., *A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); and Bernard Gert, ed., *Man and Citizen* (*De Homine and De Cive*) (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

³ *Leviathan*, ch. 9, p. 71; *De Cive*, X.1; *De Corpore*, I.7; *De Homine*, X.3.

⁴ *Leviathan*, ch. 46, p. 660.

in other words, has been a condition in which government provided the leisure for intellectual cultivation. In the savage or barbaric condition, by contrast, political authority has been so weak and underdeveloped that no one has the leisure to cultivate the arts and sciences or to practice philosophy.

Using this standard, Hobbes is able to trace the evolution of man from barbarism to civilization. In the most primitive condition, the only form of political authority was that of patriarchs or conquerors who ruled over families and tribes by "natural force." Hence, Hobbes says, "the beginning of all dominion amongst men was in families; in which the father ... was absolute lord of his wife and children ... [and of those] enemies they took and saved, [who] were their servants."⁵ In this condition, a continuous struggle for survival occurred, as clans and tribes waged war for territory, scarce goods, and servants. Accordingly, plunder and piracy were not regarded as dishonorable; indeed, it was "a manner of living, and as it were a certain economy, which they called *lestriken*, living by rapine."⁶ The harshness of life was mitigated only by a primitive code of military honor which required magnanimity in victory and by the economy of plunder which counseled victors to spare the people, animals, and instruments that were useful for production. As for the cultivation of the arts and science, only the "arts necessary for a man's life" were developed in the condition of barbarism. Primitive men lived by immediate sense experience because they lacked the leisure to cultivate speech, to develop writing, or to acquire systematic knowledge.⁷

Of the several historical conditions from which this description is drawn, the one Hobbes discusses in greatest detail is that of the Germanic and Saxon tribes of prefeudal Europe. In the *Dialogue on the Common Laws*, he traces England's political institutions to a prehistoric era when the island was inhabited by Saxon tribes whose ancestors came from Germany. As a "savage and heathen people," they lived "only by war and rapine ... written laws they had little, or none, and very few there were in [that] time ... that could write or read." Among such savages, authority was either paternal or by conquest, and the "succession of lands was determined by the pleasure of the master of the family ... [or by] natural descent, [which] as held for the law of nature, not only amongst the Germans, but also in most nations before they had written laws."⁸ The prehistoric era was followed by a period in which the Saxon tribes came under Roman domination and England developed written laws and customs. Although this marked the beginning of political consolidation,

⁵ *Dialogue on the Common Laws*, p. 159; *Leviathan*, ch. 17, p. 159.

⁶ *De Cive*, V.2.

⁷ *Dialogue on the Common Laws*, p. 198; *Leviathan*, ch. 46, p. 665.

⁸ *Dialogue on the Common Laws*, p. 190, 198-99.

England remained divided into many petty kingdoms, each of which developed the custom of meeting with a council of advisors to design laws. The third era began with the conquest of Saxon kings by William the Conqueror who established a great monarchy and brought England to the state of civil society.

In the *Dialogue* and in *Behemoth*, Hobbes indicates that this general pattern was followed in the origins of all civilized nations. He remarks that "great monarchies have proceeded from small families ... [which were extended] by war, wherein the victor not only enlarged his territory, but also the number and riches of his subjects ... [And in this] manner, which is by war, grew up all the great kingdoms of the world, viz., the Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, and the Macedonian monarchy; and so did the great kingdoms of England, France, and Spain."⁹ As for the republics of Greece and Rome, their development was a variation on this theme. In early Greece, men lived by plunder and piracy until city-states were formed; thereafter, "the Greeks had for a while their petty kings, and then by sedition came to be petty commonwealths [that is, small republics]; and then growing to be greater commonwealths, by sedition again became monarchies." Similarly, Rome began with primitive tribes consolidated into monarchy; then, "in Rome, rebellion against Kings produced Democracy, upon which the Senate usurped under Sylla, and the People again upon the Senate under Marius, and the Emperor usurped upon the People under Caesar and his Successors."¹⁰

As a general rule, then, the evolution from barbarism to civilization followed a typical pattern: families, tribes, and small kingdoms were consolidated by war or agreement into commonwealths, which were either great monarchies or small republics. This political development was accompanied by a measure of peace and leisure, which allowed for intellectual development in various spheres, from the cultivation of speech and writing to the development of arts and sciences and philosophy.

To this point, Hobbes's analysis seems to indicate that the evolution from barbarism to civilization is a kind of progress. But is this really the case? Which condition is superior with regard to human felicity and misery? According to Aristotle, civilization as such is superior to barbarism. As Aristotle says in *Politics*, Bk. 1, the growth from families to tribes to cities improves men by making them increasingly self-sufficient and civilized; in political societies, they rise above "mere life" and attain the "good life," understood as a life of leisure devoted to the exercise of the moral virtues in politics and the culti-

⁹ *Dialogue on the Common Laws*, pp. 95-96.

¹⁰ *Behemoth*, p. 252; *Dialogue*, p. 196.

vation of the mind in philosophy. For Aristotle and other classical philosophers, the good life is the end of civilization and includes all of the elements of a happy or self-sufficient existence.

Now, Hobbes agrees with Aristotle to a certain extent. Political consolidation into small republics and great monarchies constitutes progress because it brings some relief from the wars among clans and tribes. In addition, the increase in leisure and the advancement of the practical arts bring increased freedom from necessity and scarcity, enabling civilized people to enjoy some of the "commodities of mankind." In these respects, civilization provides greater happiness or felicity than pre-civil life and is superior to it. But Hobbes stops here in his agreement with Aristotle about the superiority of civilization and warns his readers about those aspects of civilized life that make it more miserable than savagery.

Hobbes's crucial insight is that the founding of cities and commonwealths turned the human mind to higher things than immediate sense experience and practical arts; it led to the development of speculative and moral sciences as well as to the formulation of general principles in philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence. As a result, a new type of authority arose: the primitive rule of patriarchs and conquerors was replaced by the rule of philosophers, priests, lawyers, orators, and intellectuals of all types who sought to rule *not by natural force but by opinion*. However, the replacement of force by opinion has not made civilized life happier or better than barbarism. Rather, it has produced a new kind of warfare that primitive men were spared by their ignorance: in civilized societies, the wars among tribes for territory and plunder have been superseded by wars among learned intellectuals over opinions and doctrines.

A change in human passions also occurred as civilized people began to pursue intellectual activities. According to Hobbes, savages were motivated by appetites for necessary things and confined their passion for honor and glory to competition for goods, children, servants, or military command, leading to displays of self-sufficiency in sparing the vanquished and abstaining from cruelty. For primitive men, honor was magnanimity. By contrast, civilized men feel secure from want and seek honor and glory in unnecessary things – in titles, symbols, and above all in opinions and claims of knowledge. In civilized societies, magnanimity degenerates into vainglory, which is a false sense of sufficiency, measured not by possessions and command but by flattery and agreement. The most powerful form of vanity among civilized men is *intellectual vanity* – the desire to be esteemed wise and learned by having one's opinions and doctrines recognized as the authoritative wisdom of society. This desire for intellectual recognition is the cause of civilization's mis-

ery and degradation; for “man is most troublesome, when he is most at ease; for then he loves to show his wisdom, and control the actions of them that govern the commonwealth.” Moreover, intellectual vanity causes men “to hate and be hated by reason of the disagreement of opinions,” creating malice and cruelty of a kind unknown to savages.¹¹ Hobbes’s conclusion (later developed by Rousseau) is that the government, leisure, and intellectual cultivation that traditionally were thought to mark the superiority of civilization have made it as miserable as and in certain respects more cruel than savagery.

The Stages of Civilization

This critical insight provides the theme of Hobbes’s history of civilization. While each of the civilized nations of the world has been independently founded, a general development of world civilization can be traced through three stages – from the ancient kingdoms of the Near East to the republics of Greece and Rome to the monarchies of Christian Europe. It is a development characterized by the ever-diminishing influence of coercive power and the ever-increasing influence of learned opinions and doctrines.

The first stage of civilization might be called the “prophetic age” (this is my label) because intellectual cultivation took the form of prophecy and inspired poetry. In the preface to *De Cive*, Hobbes describes this historical period as a time when prophets, priests, and poets sought knowledge of the divine and natural order and used it to enhance the authority of rulers. As Hobbes remarks, “the most ancient sages” delivered their opinions “either curiously adorned with verse, or clouded in allegories, as a most beautiful and hallowed mystery of royal authority.” Hobbes even speculates that these sages deliberately “chose to have the science of justice wrapped up in fables, [rather] than openly exposed to disputation” so that kings could keep “their empires entire, not by arguments, but by punishing the wicked and protecting the good. Likewise, subjects ... were not kept in peace by disputations, but by power and authority ... [and] revered the supreme power as a certain visible divinity ... whereof it was peace and a golden age.”¹² Hobbes’s point is that, during this early stage of civilization, political rulers were supported by religious and poetic authorities who created myths about the divinity of kings in order to promote obedience – an arrangement that Hobbes

¹¹ *Leviathan*, ch. 17, p. 157; *De Homine*, X.3; *De Cive*, X.9.

¹² *De Cive*, Preface.

looks upon with nostalgia as a time when naïve belief in authority produced a “golden age” of civil peace.

If we turn to other writings, we can see that the account in *De Cive* is somewhat idealized. In *Behemoth*, Hobbes includes a lengthy narrative on Diodorus Siculus, a Roman historian of the first century B.C. whom Hobbes refers to as one of the greatest historians (“the greatest antiquary perhaps that every was”). What Hobbes admires about Diodorus is his ambition to write a universal history of civilization from ancient Egypt to Roman times as well as his detailed lessons on “how philosophy, together with divinity, have much conduced to the advancement of the professors thereof ... next to the authority of kings themselves, in the most ancient kingdoms of the world.”¹³ Drawing upon Diodorus as well as the Old Testament, Hobbes describes the relations between civil and religious authorities in ancient Egypt and Israel.

The Egyptians, Hobbes remarks, are “the most ancient kingdom in the world, and their priests had the greatest power in civil affairs, than any subjects ever had in any nation.” The power of the priesthood was derived in part from its status as a hereditary class in a hierarchical society. However, the real source of its power was its control over opinions and beliefs about the gods, natural events, and law. Quoting Diodorus, Hobbes says “the priests had most credit with the people, both for their devotion to the gods, and for their understanding gotten by education.” The Egyptian priests were also influential as counselors to the king, “partly executing and partly informing and advising, fortelling him by their skill in astrology and art in the inspection of sacrifices, the things that are to come, and reading him out of their holy books, such actions ... as are profitable for him to know.” The priestly caste also supplied the judges in Egypt because of their reputation for knowledge, as symbolized by the medallions worn by chief justices which were inscribed with the word “truth.”¹⁴ Although political authority was virtually usurped by the power Egyptian priests had over the minds of kings and subjects, the result was a fairly stable civilization in which public disputation of laws and opinions was avoided.

By contrast, the kingdom of ancient Israel was disrupted frequently by conflicts of opinion among rival prophets. As Hobbes reveals in *Behemoth* and *De Cive*, civil-religious authority was unified in the early period of the Jewish commonwealth because Moses was the political leader and the foremost prophet. But the distinction between coercive power and the authority to interpret the word of God left Moses open to challenge by a number of rivals

¹³ *Behemoth*, p. 276.

¹⁴ *Behemoth*, pp. 278-79.

during his lifetime – by Korah and his accomplices, by Aaron the high-priest and his sister Miriam, and by other prophets. Each of these groups disputed Moses's exclusive claim to prophecy and raised the threat of sedition. However, as Hobbes also shows, Moses was able to repulse these challenges because he skillfully used a certain method of punishing his rivals. Instead of disputing their doctrines, Moses exposed the ambition behind the doctrines, thereby discrediting the purity of their claim to speak for God and inciting the people's anger against them. After Moses, the Jewish nation became a "priestly kingdom" in which the interpretation of divine law and the word of God belonged to the high-priest who was also the king. This, too, was a troubled period. The high priests were continually challenged by prophets for the right to interpret the law and word of God; but they lacked the political skill of Moses in punishing their rivals, leaving the nation in a continuous state of turmoil.¹⁵

In sum, life in the ancient kingdoms of Egypt and Israel was not quite the golden age described in *De Cive*. Authority was based on the coercive power of kings as well as the learned opinions of priests and prophets, creating a potential source of conflict. The problem was mitigated by the fact that the priesthood had a natural basis as a hereditary caste which limited the scope of rival opinions. Hobbes also indicates that the most unstable nation, ancient Israel, was the exception rather than the rule: the Israelites were "a people greedy of prophets," meaning the peculiar problem of the Jewish people was the appeal of independent prophets (although even this problem could be managed by skillful leadership).¹⁶ With these qualifications, Hobbes's view of the prophetic age as a period of relative stability (if not a golden age) can be sustained.

Further support for this judgment is provided by Hobbes's account of the republics of Greece and Rome. They were more unstable than the kingdoms of the ancient world, even though the priestly class was weaker in Greece and Rome than in the ancient kingdoms ("In Greece, one man and one woman had the priesthood," rather than a hereditary caste). In fact, the poets were "the principal priests" because they delivered tales about gods and spirits to the people and codified doctrine. Furthermore, as Hobbes observes in his commentary on Diodorus, the Greeks were the first to free philosophy from religion. Previously, philosophy was equated with the explanation of natural events by astrology, magic, and inspection of sacrifices (although Egyptian and Chaldean priests also practiced astronomy and mathematics). But it was "philosophy after the manner of the Greeks" that finally separated

¹⁵ *De Cive*, XVI. 13-15.

¹⁶ *De Cive*, XVI.14.

the study of nature from prophetic arts and weakened the power of priests.¹⁷ As a result, the ancient republics never suffered from a division between political rulers and priests: their "civil laws were the rules whereby not only righteousness and virtue, but also religion and the external worship of God, were ordered and approved."¹⁸

Although philosophy and politics took precedence over religion in Greece and Rome, the republics were inherently unstable because the authority of received opinions was subject to public dispute. In this case, the received opinions were not derived from divine law but from political notions of justice and prudence interpreted by legislators, orators, and philosophers. The peculiar problem of the classical republics was political factionalism caused by two new kinds of intellectual discourse: rhetoric and dialectic. In this period, Socrates compounded the instability by inventing political science or civil philosophy which began a new stage of civilization, the philosophical age of public disputation.

Hobbes's early thoughts on Greek civilization are expressed in the introduction to his translation of Thucydides. There, he refers to Thucydides as "the most political historiographer that ever writ" because his subject is the political realm in the strict sense: the public life of the Greek city-states where government was exercised by citizens in the assembly and forum. In recording their history, Thucydides shows the inherent defect of Greek political life to be the instability of opinion caused by public deliberations about justice and policy. The deliberations were dominated by "demagogues contending for reputation and glory of wit" who created factional strife in domestic affairs, while encouraging hazardous adventures in foreign and military affairs, all for the sake of intellectual honor and glory, that is, for the sake of seeing their opinions preferred before others. The only hope for stability, Hobbes observes, was for sober statesmen to oppose the demagogues; but this was an exercise in futility, and most honorable men, such as Thucydides himself, simply withdrew from politics with a sense of resignation about the self-destruction of Greek political life.¹⁹

During this era, new problems arose when Socrates invented civil philosophy, which Hobbes describes in the preface to *De Cive* as follows. Philosophy first appeared in the ancient world as natural philosophy when prophecy was superseded by rational investigations into "the faces and motions of things" (physics) and "their natures and causes" (metaphysics). Similarly, the

¹⁷ *Behemoth*, pp. 278-81; *Leviathan*, ch. 45, p. 638.

¹⁸ *Elements of Law*, II. 2.6.2.

¹⁹ Introduction to Thucydides's *The Peloponnesian War*, Hobbes's translation, EW8.

study of justice was originally part of divinity science in which rational inquiry existed only in embryo, barely "glimmering forth as through a cloud of fables and myths." After natural philosophy arose, Socrates invented civil philosophy because he "set so great a value on this, that utterly abandoning and despising all other parts of philosophy, he wholly embraced this [civil science]." While the beginning of natural philosophy was "to the advantage of mankind," the invention of civil philosophy produced misery and civil strife. No longer could political sovereigns rely on protective myths or the skillful punishment of rivals to rule; they now needed rational doctrines of right upheld by argumentation. The golden age of naïve obedience was over, and the philosophical age of disputative politics had begun.

The precise reason for this historic development was the method of dialectic or disputation that Socrates and his followers introduced. Their method was to examine commonly received opinions to in order to attain true knowledge, which meant that they questioned the conventional definitions of justice in order to discover a higher standard of natural justice. The Socratic revolution thereby challenged established laws and opinions and made the appeal to higher justice the accepted practice of philosophers and intellectuals. Thus, when Hobbes attacks the troublesome men of antiquity who loved "to dispute," he does not simply mean that they happened to disagree with established opinions. He means they were practicing the dialectical art of disputation, whose very method was to dispute received opinions and thereby to unsettle society.²⁰

The philosophical method begun by Socrates eventually transformed the civilized world. As Hobbes observes, "men were so much taken by this custom that in time it spread itself over all Europe, and the best part of Africa; so as there were schools publicly erected and maintained, for lectures and disputations, almost in every commonwealth."²¹ With the advent of Christianity it became part of divinity science and was established in universities and churches. The result was a new stage of civilization characterized by the popularization of disputative philosophy. In this age, the most casually educated men, even the common people, became practitioners of disputative science and owners of a doctrine: "Now at length, all men of all nations, not only the philosophers but even the vulgar, have and do still deal with this as a matter of ease, exposed and prostitute to every mother wit, and to be attained without any great care or study."²² In Hobbes's age, disputation in religion and politics has be-

²⁰ *De Cive*, Epistle Dedicatory.

²¹ *Leviathan*, ch. 46, p. 667.

²² *De Cive*, Preface.

come the ideal of civilized living for common people as well as the philosophers. It is the most advanced stage of civilization in which everyone owns a doctrine and intellectual vanity is a universal passion.

The problems of this age appear in Hobbes's analysis of the monarchies of Christian Europe. His writings follow his usual pattern of describing the development of political institutions out of conquest and hereditary succession and the development of cultural institutions based on opinion and learning. The political institutions of Western Europe – its monarchies and gentry – arose from the pre-civil state when Germanic tribes roamed the continent and Saxon tribes inhabited England. These tribes were ruled by warlords and petty kings whose realms were eventually consolidated by conquest into great monarchies, forming the nations of Europe. In the process, the warlords became a civilized gentry – a class of aristocratic families distinguished by symbols of honor, such as heralds and hereditary titles. The heralds were originally coats of arms used by the German warlords to identify their soldiers; when they were forced to lay down their arms, the designs were kept by families as signs of honor or distributed by monarchs as honorific rewards for service. Similarly, titles such as duke, count, marquis, and baron were once designations of military offices in the German militia and other armies; later, in more peaceful times, they were made into mere titles of honor, without power or command. In the evolution from warlords to gentry, the code of honorable conduct was also transformed from one of military prowess and magnanimity, acquired on the battlefield, to one of gallantry and vanity, derived from reading romances.²³ In describing the origins of monarchy and gentry, Hobbes shows that political consolidation brought peace among warlords, followed by the redirection of honor from the recognition of possession and command to the vanity of titles, symbols, and gallantry.

Accompanying the growth of political institutions in Europe was the development of the church and the universities. They were shaped by the philosophical tradition begun in ancient Greece and its disputative method of reasoning, which shaped Christian Europe in two important ways. First, it implied that knowledge was acquired by reasoning from authority, which among the classical philosophers meant the authority of common opinion and among Scholastics meant the authority of the Bible and the classical authors. Appealing to authority was virtually equated with knowledge. Second, the search for knowledge was focused on words or speech, on the assumption that speech provides access to the nature and causes of things. The Greeks first developed this view of knowledge because they invented rhetoric and dialectics,

²³ *Leviathan*, ch. 10, pp. 81-84; ch. 6, p. 46.

the original arts and sciences of speech. Indeed, Hobbes says, "the Greeks had but one word, *logos*, for both reason and speech ... [because] they thought there was no reason without speech." Surprisingly, Christianity did not alter this view, despite its appeal to revelation as the highest form of knowledge. For the study of Scripture consisted of analyzing "the Word of God ... [which in Latin is] *sermo*, in Greek *logos*, that is, some speech, discourse, or saying."²⁴ The synthesis of classical philosophy and scriptural studies turned dialectics into academic disputation, in which Schoolmen reasoned from Scripture and ancient texts to define the meaning of words. They also transformed classical rhetoric into a more stylized form of public preaching, involving dramatic gestures and indoctrination through repetition of words. University disputation and public preaching thereby became the most highly honored activities in the Christian world, creating a civilization of academic speech.

In Hobbes's view, this stage of civilization is the most unhappy period of history. For the scholars and preachers of the Western world cultivated the arts of speech and spread their disputes to all sectors of society. By endorsing the Protestant idea that everyone could interpret Scripture for himself, they made every individual an amateur practitioner of disputation and introduced a new phenomenon, religious sectarian warfare. In the ancient world, Hobbes says, civil sovereigns never allowed private men as much freedom to preach publicly as they are allowed in Christian Europe; as a result, "there was no such [public preaching] permitted in all the world outside of Christendom, nor therefore any civil wars on account of religion."²⁵ Such wars cause great misery because disputes over doctrines and words multiply the number of sects indefinitely and the disputes of sectarians call forth intense malice and cruelty.

Hobbes's conclusion, then, is that the long march from barbarism through the prophetic, philosophical, and Christian stages of civilization has followed a persistent pattern of replacing savage wars over territory and plunder with "civilized" wars over doctrines and words.

Doctrinal Warfare in Behemoth

This history of civilization provides the context for Hobbes's most important historical work, *Behemoth*, and points to his distinctive interpretation of the English Civil War. For Hobbes, the civil war was not about the particular deeds of King Charles I nor about class warfare nor even about the strug-

²⁴ *Leviathan*, ch. 4, p. 25; ch. 36, p. 407.

²⁵ *Behemoth*, pp. 243-44.

gle for power as such. It was a war over doctrines whose sources were deeply rooted in Western civilization and whose leaders were motivated by intellectual vanity – by the desire to be recognized as the wisest or most learned of men and to have their doctrines and opinions established as the authoritative wisdom of society. As Hobbes says in commenting on the folly of the civil war: “It is a hard case, that there should be two factions to trouble the commonwealth ... and that their quarrels should be only about opinions, that is, about who has the most learning, as if learning should be the rule of governing all the world.”²⁶

The structure of *Behemoth*, which Hobbes outlines in the Epistle Dedicatory, highlights this distinctive view of the English Civil War. Part I uncovers the underlying causes of the rebellion, the seditious “opinions in divinity and politics” that arose from the Western tradition and that were taught in the universities. Part II exposes the artifices of the rebels, namely, the techniques of rhetoric and indoctrination that they used to corrupt the minds of the people and to incite them against the king. Only in parts III and IV does Hobbes actually narrate the events of the civil war from 1640 to 1660; here, his aim is to show how legal opinions about taxation, the conscription of soldiers, and military strategy crippled the king and led to a circular movement of power – from the Stuart monarchy under King Charles I to the Long Parliament and its “Rump,” to Cromwell and his son, then back to the “Rump” and the Long Parliament, and finally back to the Stuart monarchy under Charles II. The continuous message throughout the book is the devastating effect of doctrinal warfare and learned folly on the exercise of sovereign power.

Hobbes begins his account by identifying the leaders of the rebellion and uncovering the historical origins of their seditious doctrines. The foremost leaders were the Presbyterian ministers who maintained that spiritual authorities may intervene in politics to defend the faith and that subjects may disobey the law if it violates their conscience. Hobbes shows that this doctrine has ancient roots, going back to the beginning of Christianity when the Papacy created it in order to conquer the world by controlling the minds of princes and people. The strategy of the clergy was to transform Christianity from the ethical religion of Jesus, which stressed actions and intentions, to a dogmatic religion of priests that stressed doctrines and beliefs. By making “rightness of opinion [rather] than of action and intention” the test of salvation, the clergy acquired control over the minds the people which surpassed the influence of the state.²⁷

²⁶ *Behemoth*, p. 275.

²⁷ *Behemoth*, p. 243.

The key to their control was developing the notion of heresy, which Hobbes claims was borrowed by the Christian clergy from the Athenian schools of philosophy and transformed from a neutral term meaning "a private opinion" to a term of condemnation meaning wrong or false opinion. Henceforth, the mission of Christian clergymen became the defense of orthodoxy and the punishment of heresy by the device of excommunication. Using the pretext of defending orthodoxy, they intervened in politics and subordinated emperors and princes. And by teaching the people that one is damned if "he die in a false opinion concerning the Christian faith," they captured the minds of the common people.²⁸

As the Papacy grew, it developed other weapons besides excommunication to maintain its hold on the minds of people. In the 12th century, it developed the universities and an order of traveling preachers as instruments of domination which Hobbes describes as the "second polity of the Pope" – the medieval phase of the Church which surpassed the early phase by "turning religion into an art." It drew upon Aristotelian philosophy and Scripture to define Christian orthodoxy and developed disputation and rhetoric to defend it. The Papacy also trained traveling preachers to disseminate its academic doctrine to the people, directing their allegiance away from their political sovereigns and toward the Church.²⁹

When the Reformation challenged Catholic orthodoxy, this strategy for intellectual domination did not change; it merely changed hands. As the power of popes was broken in England, the bishops arrogated to themselves the right to define orthodoxy and used the techniques of excommunication, disputation, and rhetoric to become the established Church of England. But the Reformation also undermined the traditional strategy of domination by doctrine. By translating the Bible into the vulgate and allowing everyone to interpret Scripture for himself, it produced an explosion of sectarianism that was the immediate cause of the English Civil War. For the right of the bishops of the Church of England to define orthodoxy was challenged by Presbyterians who in turn were challenged by a variety of independent sects who proclaimed direct inspiration in proclaiming the word of God. Meanwhile, the King was unable to settle the disputes because all the sectarians asserted the right of the clergy to stand above the state and to speak directly to the consciences of the people. As a result, no power was capable of preventing the theological disputes about Christian orthodoxy from degenerating into sectarian warfare.

²⁸ *Leviathan*, ch. 46, p. 684.

²⁹ *Behemoth*, p. 184.

After uncovering the seditious opinions in divinity, Hobbes turns to the political and legal opinions responsible for the civil war. For the rebellion was fomented by an alliance of Presbyterian ministers who rejected the orthodoxy of the established Church and a group of “democratical gentlemen” who challenged the legitimacy of monarchy.³⁰ The gentlemen championed the cause of the Long Parliament by accusing King Charles of tyrannical behavior and declaring that democracy or republicanism was the only just form of government. In uncovering the source of their doctrine, Hobbes shows that it did not arise spontaneously from the political arena but was created by ambitious intellectuals for the purpose of domination. Indeed, Hobbes claims that the very idea of distinguishing just and unjust regimes (like the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy) was an intellectual invention – the invention of Socrates and other Greek philosophers who sought to diminish the power of kings and to defend the republics of their times, while making themselves the arbiters of justice.

Not surprisingly, Hobbes thinks that the gentlemen who were educated in classical literature at the universities fancied themselves to be as wise and learned as the philosophers of old and to possess a title to rule by virtue of their wisdom. As party leaders, they attacked monarchy as an unjust regime and used rhetoric and eloquence to arouse the anger of the common people, who otherwise were politically indifferent and “would take any side for pay or plunder.”³¹ By accusing the King of treason for subverting the laws of the realm, the democratical gentlemen turned the people into democratic partisans and led them in rebellion.

Allied with the radical republicans was a more moderate group of educated gentlemen, the lawyers of the common law. While joining the opposition to Charles, they were less interested in overthrowing the King than in limiting royal prerogatives because their doctrines were derived, not from classical literature and its abstract principles of justice, but from English common law and its notions of customary procedure. Unlike the democratical gentlemen who sought absolute power for the Long Parliament, the lawyers were drawn primarily from the House of Lords and favored a sharing of power among King, Lords, and Commons. They believed that England was a “mixed-monarchy” by ancient tradition and that all power should be limited by customary procedures.³²

³⁰ *Behemoth*, p. 192.

³¹ *Behemoth*, p. 166.

³² *Behemoth*, pp. 303-20.

Despite the moderation of the lawyers, Hobbes condemns them as harshly as the radical republicans. For their opposition to royal prerogatives and their insistence on legal procedures destroyed the King's capacity for self-defense. They opposed the King's efforts to raise taxes and conscript soldiers without the consent of parliament; and as counselors to the King, they continuously opposed his drive for total victory in the civil war by urging truces and treaties, which "took off the courage of the best and forwardest of his soldiers."³³ Their doctrines blinded them to the imperatives of sovereign power, which requires extraordinary action in extreme situations. As a result, the lawyers, who merely sought to limit prerogative, were as devastating in their effects as the Presbyterian ministers who maintained the supremacy of church over state and as the democratical gentlemen who challenged the legitimacy of monarchy.

From this overview of *Behemoth*, we can see the essential features of Hobbes's critique of 17th century English society. The structure of authority was inherently unstable because it rested on claims of authoritative wisdom by clergymen, gentlemen philosophers, and lawyers who were trained in the universities. As educated intellectuals or scholars, they claimed to be wiser and more learned than the political sovereign and to be guided by laws above the will of the king. But they turned out to be ineffective rulers because they could not agree about which higher law – divine law, natural law, or common law – should be supreme, and they had no appreciation for coercive power. Moreover, they fought among themselves over whose interpretation of higher law was best. Driven by intellectual vanity, each self-appointed wiseman sought to acquire a following for his doctrine among the common people and to have it established by the state as orthodoxy or authoritative wisdom. At the same time, the king was fatally weakened by a division of sovereignty between state and church or, more generally, between his own coercive power and the doctrines of intellectual authorities. All of the sectarians, despite their disagreements, conspired to keep the political sovereign subordinated to higher laws. This division was an invitation to anarchy because the state remained dependent on scholars who conspired against its sovereignty but who failed to agree amongst themselves about which doctrine was supremely authoritative – the problem of doctrinal warfare. This problem explains why King Charles was incapable of defending himself and of preventing the intellectual disputes of the universities from erupting into the open violence of the English Civil War.

³³ *Behemoth*, p. 307.

Can The Enlightenment Save Civilization?

Hobbes's view of the inherent fragility and self-destructiveness of civilization expressed in *Behemoth* and other historical writings usually puts in him in the camp of "realists" or "pessimists" about the human condition. Such labels are inaccurate, however, because Hobbes thinks that the historic failures of civilization can be overcome through the process that later became known as the Enlightenment – bringing light to the kingdom of darkness by re-educating the intellectual leaders and the common people in a way that cures their irrational and self-destructive behavior. Even in *Behemoth*, Hobbes sometimes sounds surprisingly optimistic about a solution:

B: For aught I see, all the states of Christendom will be subject to these fits of rebellion, as long as the world lasteth.

A: Like enough; and yet the fault ... may be easily mended, by mending the Universities.³⁴

The apparently simplicity of Hobbes's argument is that the civilizational problem of doctrinal warfare originating in the universities can be solved by a change in the universities – ridding them of the seditious doctrines and learned folly that has destabilized Western civilization and 17th century England. Hobbes sometimes seems so optimistic about saving civilization through re-education that he speaks of an "everlasting" commonwealth in *Leviathan* and even of "immortal peace" in *De Cive* – a permanent solution to the fragility of civilization that anticipates later theories of "perpetual peace" (by Kant and other modern philosophers).³⁵ This would constitute a new and final stage of civilization characterized by lasting civil peace, freedom from false doctrines, and the enjoyment of commodious living.

When described in this fashion, Hobbes sounds like a philosopher of history whose outline of world history from barbarism through the several stages of civilization (ancient Near Eastern, classical republican, Christian medieval, and finally, modern enlightenment) is an early version of "progress." Of course, Hobbes's vision lacks the crucial element of inevitability that the later theorists of progress (such as Condorcet or Hegel or Fukuyama) see in the movement of history toward the modern age. Hobbes admits an element of chance in finding a king who will purge and reform the universities. But once the universities are properly reformed, Hobbes shares with other

³⁴ *Behemoth*, p. 252.

³⁵ *De Cive*, Epistle Dedicatory; *Leviathan*, ch. 30, pp. 324-25.

philosophers of the Enlightenment the optimistic belief that modern civilization will be different from past ages because it is based on enlightened thinking and the promise of transforming human behavior. In other words, there is an "end-of-history" argument in Hobbes's hope for immortal peace: Modern civilization will be different from all previous stages because the Enlightenment will free the human mind from the irrational doctrines of the past.³⁶ How could Hobbes believe that such an historic change could occur? And, what is different about Hobbes's teaching that will prevent it from becoming one more "doctrine" in the endless doctrinal conflicts that have destabilized civilization in the past?

For Hobbes, the answer turns on the distinction between two mental habits: the old habit of trusting in authority vs. the new habit of self-reliant thinking. The traditional mental habit is to trust in authoritative wisdom – to trust in intellectual authorities (such as priests, prophets, scholars, and other wisemen) who claim privileged knowledge of higher powers and who impose on others in the name of orthodoxy. By contrast, the new and enlightened mode rejects authoritative wisdom as a form of dangerous pride – as the frightening illusion of self-righteous fanatics who believe that they alone are wise. In rejecting authoritative wisdom, enlightened thinking encourages a more democratic mode of reasoning that teaches people to think for themselves – to form their own judgments using the evidence before them rather deferring to the wisdom of authority. This will enable people to see their civil sovereign as an artificial creation of their will rather than as a ruler sanctioned by higher powers.

In explaining Hobbes's hope for radical change, the great Hobbes scholar Leo Strauss has argued that it all turns on the distinction between two basic passions: vanity and fear. Vanity is the passion that inclines men to believe in authoritative wisdom – to believe that they alone are wise, that they are self-appointed spokesmen for God or higher powers, that they may impose their doctrines on others because of their superior wisdom. This is the passion that has endangered civilization with religious fanaticism, sectarian disputes, and doctrinal warfare throughout history. By contrast, the fear of violent death enlightens men about their mortality and vulnerability and teaches them to be wary of submitting to self-appointed intellectual authorities.

³⁶ Stephen Holmes misses this optimistic side of Hobbes in his reading of *Behemoth*; see for example his statement: "the human mind will never be free of ... intoxicating doctrines" ("Introduction" to Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth or The Long Parliament*, Ferdinand Tönnies ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990], p. 1). In contrast, see David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

Hobbes thinks that history can be changed if vanity is countered by fear – if men can be re-educated to feel a reasonable fear of death and its positive desire for self-preservation. Mankind will then arrive at a new stage of civilization – a stage characterized by security, prosperity, personal freedom, and enlightenment (a stage that is often referred to, both positively and negatively, as “bourgeois” civilization).³⁷

In attempting to come to terms with Hobbes’s philosophy and to form a judgment about its overall truth claims, we need to ask if Hobbes’s hope for changing the course of history toward an enlightened civilization of everlasting peace is a real possibility. If it is not a real possibility, then a more pessimistic view of history and human nature than Hobbes’s view is warranted. Interestingly, this question is now at the center of an important debate between Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington about “the end of history” vs. “the clash of civilizations.” Their debate is illuminated by our study because it shows that the decisive issue between Fukuyama and Huntington is the same issue raised by Hobbes: whether or not the modern Enlightenment can save civilization by transforming human behavior in a permanent or lasting fashion, especially by bringing an end to the great ideological or doctrinal conflicts of civilization.

In this debate, Fukuyama sides with Hobbes and the Enlightenment philosophers by arguing that the process of modernization – combining modern natural science, capitalism, and the demand for recognition of individual rights and human dignity – has created the conditions for the lasting triumph of modern liberal democracy over all other ideologies. The proponents of this view think that the Enlightenment is capable of changing the world by bringing about “the end of history” in which all of the great ideological or doctrinal wars of the past are over.³⁸ They are “optimists” about historical progress.

By contrast, Huntington sides with the “pessimists” who question the power of the Enlightenment to change the world. Huntington agrees with such thinkers as Edmund Burke, Friedrich Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and many religious conservatives who argue that man is basically irrational in the sense of being a religious animal who will always bow down to authoritative wisdom. They also see man as a creature driven by a need for nobility or heroic struggles who will never be content with a bourgeois life of security, personal freedom, and materialism. The shock of Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* is precisely its challenge to the naïve assumptions of the modern

³⁷ See Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), especially chapters 2, 7, 8.

³⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), especially chapters 5, 6, 19.

Enlightenment about historical progress and human nature. Huntington reasserts the pessimistic view that history is not progressive – it has not really changed nor come to an end – because the possibility of doctrinal warfare over the highest religious and philosophical truths will always exist and, in fact, will be more likely to occur in the future as ancient civilizational claims are reasserted against modernity by Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, Christianity, and other cultures (as well as by sectarians and fundamentalists within those cultures).³⁹

This debate about the course of civilization is difficult to resolve because there is impressive evidence on both sides. On the one side, the Enlightenment has changed history in the West by helping to overcome the terrible religious wars of the past and by giving Americans and Europeans some of the blessings of freedom and prosperity while spreading this promise to other parts of the world. Moreover, the Enlightenment's most powerful agent, modern natural science, is a universal force that challenges or subverts traditional notions of authoritative wisdom wherever it is permitted to go.

On the other side, the Enlightenment itself quickly became a new kind of secular religion that produced new doctrinal wars – such as the ideological wars of the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution which made the tyranny and slaughter of the religious wars look relatively mild by comparison to the totalitarian state and its systematic murder of millions in the name of abstract justice and utopian dreams. The Enlightenment has also produced reactions in the modern world by religious fundamentalists who reject bourgeois modernity for its secularism and materialism. As I see it, the experience of Jacobinism, communism, fascism, and religious fundamentalism indicates that the optimism of the modern Enlightenment about changing man's irrational behavior was naïve because men will continue to seek an ultimate faith through authoritative wisdom and will not be afraid to die for the sake of the future or the afterlife (as the twisted religiosity of the suicide bombers and religious terrorists so clearly demonstrates). Hobbes was therefore wrong to think that the desire for self-preservation based on the fear of violent death could become the ultimate concern of enlightened humanity. What fundamentalists prove (to the shock and awe of enlightened Western intellectuals) is that the ultimate fear is not the fear of violent death but the fear of the loss of meaning in a secularized world of soulless materialism or the fear of the degradation of life in a Hobbesian-bourgeois civilization where people have no higher purpose than material comfort and personal freedom.

³⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), especially chapters 2-4.

Judging from these observations, I would draw the following conclusions about the course of world history. Of the two views of civilization – the traditional one based on authoritative wisdom vs. the modern one based on enlightenment – the enlightened view has the upper hand at this moment in history. The modern West, led by America, is currently the dominant force in the world and will remain so for at least another generation. But it is naïve to think that the Enlightenment's version of skeptical rationalism and dogmatic materialism is more powerful than the appeal of authoritative wisdom in the long run. The triumphs of the modern Enlightenment have always been insecure (as I noted above in pointing to the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century and of religious fundamentalism in the 21st century and as is further indicated by the entrenchment of post-modern irrationalism in today's universities). Moreover, even though the traditional view of history is more pessimistic about the stability of civilization, it possesses a more enduring and, in a way, more noble vision of man that will never die out. According to the traditional view, man is a religious animal who bows down to authoritative wisdom because the deepest longings of the human soul are for immortality and eternity and these longings will never be satisfied with skeptical reason or the one-dimensional reality of bourgeois happiness. Of course, the possibilities for perverting the traditional view by using it as a pretext for doctrinal warfare and terrorism are frightening (though not as frightening, as I noted above, as the perversions of secular political ideologies growing out of the Enlightenment).

I would conclude, therefore, that Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis is more convincing and bracing than Hobbes's "enlightenment" and Fukuyama's "end-of-history" thesis. The fragility of civilization is a problem that will never be overcome by some new historical force. We will simply have to rely on our courage and prudence to defend civilization as best we can, while remembering that the pessimistic view of history actually upholds a higher and more noble view of man than the enlightenment view. This awareness will be no small comfort as we face the perennial threats and challenges to civilization.