

Brain, Blood, Benevolence: Cumberland's Anti-Hobbesian Use of Thomas Willis's *Cerebri Anatome* (1664)

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In his book of 1672, *De Legibus Naturae*, Richard Cumberland tries to refute Hobbes's theory of human nature, demonstrating that man is not a *homo insociabilis* but a *homo benevolens*. Using Thomas Willis's *Cerebri Anatome. Cui Accessit Nervorum Descriptio et Usus* (1665) as well as the works of other physicians and anatomists, Cumberland tries to show that human body (especially thanks to its peculiar brain, blood, and plexus nervous) predisposes men to a sociable life and to the building of a peaceful and civil society.

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The book by Richard Cumberland (1631-1718) *De Legibus Naturae* (1672) is one of the most famous anti-Hobbesian works from the second half of the 17th century. It is a voluminous text consisting of 421 pages whose main objective is to deconstruct the ethical-political theory formulated by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in *Leviathan* and in other works such as *De cive*, as shown by the very title of the book: *De Legibus Naturae Disquisitio Philosophica. In qua earum Forma, summa Capita, Ordo. Promulgatio, & Obligatio è rerum Natura investigantur; Quinetiam Elementa Philosophiae Hobbianae, cum Moralis tum Civilis, considerantur & refutantur*. The elements of Hobbes's moral and civil philosophy are considered and refuted! The main Hobbesian argument in Chapter XIII of *Leviathan* can be summarized (using some of Hobbes's caption appearing in the original text as *marginalia*) as follows:

Men by nature equal
(Nature hath made men equal in the faculties of body and mind)
↓
From equality proceeds diffidence
↓
From diffidence war
(Out of civil states, there is always war of every one against everyone;
in such a war nothing is unjust)

Hobbes explains that:

And as to the faculties of the mind, (setting aside the arts grounded upon words, and especially that skill of proceeding upon general, and infallible rules, called science; which very few have, and but in few things; as being not a native faculty, born with us; nor attained (as prudence,) while we look after somewhat else,) I find yet a greater equality

amongst men, than that of strength. For prudence, is but experience; which equal time, equally bestows on all men, in those things they equally apply themselves unto. [...] From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end, (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only,) endeavour to destroy, or subdue one another. And from hence it comes to pass, that where an invader hath no more to fear, than another man's single power, if one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united, to dispossess, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labour, but also of his life, or liberty. And the invader again is in the like danger of another. (Hobbes, 2012, pp. XIII, 2-3)

Given this pessimistic view of human nature, according to Cumberland the Malmesbury-born philosopher considered the *lexnaturalis* as a mere calculation of reason: a sort of solution to allow getting out of the unpleasant *natural* situation of “war of all against all”. How? By building an *artificial* peace through the creation of the state. Cumberland interprets the Hobbesian vision as the fruit of a coldly calculating logic and sides against the idea that the law of nature is just a device designed to lead a *naturally* antisocial man towards forced and *artificial* sociality—a sociality that ultimately rests exclusively on selfish and utilitarian grounds.

Cumberland's aim is therefore to re-establish the *intrinsically rational* value of the law of nature, following in the footsteps of the Stoic tradition of the *recta ratio*, while trying to demolish what he considers the modern version of Epicureanism, that is precisely Hobbes's philosophy (see Santi, 2018).

Cumberland equates Hobbes with Epicurus because in his view they share the same conception of the supreme pleasure (*summa Voluptas*) as the absence of pain; this idea results in what Cumberland deems to be a very serious doctrinal error on the part of Hobbes: to believe that the search for society is not immediate and natural for man, but only mediated and instrumental or, to put it in other words, to believe that it is the product of the escape from pain for fear of evil (*ex metu mali*). In fact, the philosopher writes:

[...] I can see an affinity between Epicurus's concept, who places the supreme pleasure (which for him coincides with the supreme good and the ultimate goal) in the removal of pain, with Hobbes's, who teaches us that men seek society for fear of evil. (Cumberland, 1672, p. 274; my translation)

Under these circumstances, as Cumberland points out, namely assuming that *societas* is the result of man's fear of evil (*metus mali*), laws end up being reduced to being the mere result of his escape from pain and of the removal of the latter (*amotio doloris*), resulting from the underlying *fear* that, in the absence of common norms, the others can cause pain by stealing property and endangering the person's safety.

Hobbes's error therefore consists in considering mutual *fear* and not mutual *benevolence* as the factor that leads men towards a harmonious life in a society governed by law (*Civitas*).

Cumberland considers this unacceptable and his theoretical action, which he expounded in *De Legibus Naturae*, consists precisely in refuting Hobbes in order to reaffirm the intrinsic sociality of man as a being who binds himself to others in *Civitas* out of *benevolence* and not out of *fear*. This would be proved by modern science itself, but how?

If on the one hand for Hobbes moral laws, including justice, are laws of nature that develop in men as *theorems of reason*, rational devices to get out of the state of nature (which is a state of universal war), for Cumberland, on the other hand, it is the very order of nature that demonstrates the existence of a first cause and, consequently, of a universal justice from which justice and the other moral virtues derive; therefore, man is naturally predisposed to virtues through the laws of nature (*Leges Naturales*); these, in fact, are nothing but:

Propositions endowed with a certain immutable truth, which direct voluntary Actions towards the Choice of Good and the Escape from Evil, inducing an Obligation towards certain external acts—even without Civil Laws and without considering establishing a political Regime through agreements. (Cumberland, 1672, p. 1; my translation)

Hobbes had stated exactly the opposite, namely that the obligation deriving from the laws of nature, which are moral laws, is only valid *in foro interno*; in order for an obligation concerning external actions to exist there is a need for the coercive power of civil laws (which contain the natural ones). Cumberland argues instead that the obligation is already in itself *in foro externo*.

But how to demonstrate that the human being is *in itself* and right from the beginning a *moral* being and therefore is not the kind of antisocial animal described by Hobbes, forced to develop a morality, which is, so to speak, secondary, mediated by circumstances and instrumental to survival?

In an extraordinarily modern way—probably under the influence of Samuel Parker (see Parkin, 1999, pp. 195-199)—Cumberland turns to the science of medical anatomists to refute Hobbes; the fact that his refutation is successful is questionable, but what matters is the type of theoretical operation he performs, calling into question the most recent discoveries in the field of brain science precisely to reveal what he believes to be Hobbes's *philo-sophical* and *physio-logical* error.

An attentive reader of the scientific articles published in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*—although not himself a member of the Royal Society of London—Cumberland considers medical and anatomical science in particular trying to use the latest anatomical-physiological discoveries enunciated in the writings of the most eminent physicians in an anti-Hobbesian sense.

Cumberland does not confine himself to being particularly attentive to the new knowledge acquired by science, but he even goes as far as to turn it in the very foundation of his attempt to restore the law of nature and, with it, the consubstantial *morality* of man. He clarifies this from the very first pages of *De Legibus Naturae*, in which he argues that moral philosophy is all reduced to *vera Physiologia*: “[...] the entire Moral Philosophy ultimately turns into the Doctrine of Natural Laws, either known from experience in the natural observations of all things or identified by true Physiology and established as his Conclusions” (Cumberland, 1672, p. 3; my translation).

“Physiology” is here to be understood as the doctrine of *fâsis*, i.e., the “doctrine of nature” or “natural philosophy”; thus, moral philosophy is entirely reduced (please note the totalising force of this statement) to the *true* doctrine of human nature.

What is then the authentic nature of man based on *vera Physiologia*?

In Paragraphs XXIII-XXXI of the second book of *De Legibus Naturae*, Cumberland proceeds to “scientifically” found the main thesis set out in paragraph XXII, i.e., the thesis of the *natural* sociability of man as a being biologically predisposed to develop *benevolence* towards his fellow creatures; indeed, he states the following:

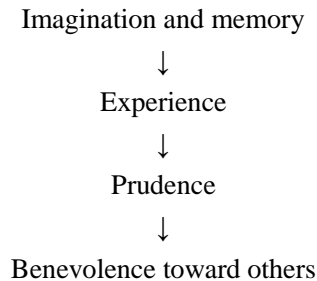
[...] all these details from which Hobbes would like to infer that man is more malevolent and insociable vis-à-vis his own species than brute animals are, can be backfired on him with great advantage, as very clear indications of the fact that man was so constituted by nature as to be much more suited to benevolence towards his congeners than are the other kinds of animals. (Cumberland, 1672, pp. 131-132; my translation)

Thus, while Hobbes traced out the signs of natural human unsociability, Cumberland captures the traits of a man who is instead benevolent by nature towards his neighbour. Man is by no means *malevolus et*

insociabilis, as argued by Hobbes, but he is a rational and moral being, who is able to recognise the conditions for his own personal happiness in the pursuit of the common good.

It is at this stage of his analysis that Cumberland turns to science in order to prove the truth of his theories and show the error of Hobbes's ones.

The basic thesis argued is that man is a naturally moral being, since his body, the *humanum corpus*, is predisposed to support imagination and memory, *imaginatio/phantasia* and *memoria*, whose use results in the development of experience and prudence, from which arise mutual benevolence and the awareness that personal good and common good are far from being against each other and are instead compatible:



Cumberland uses the scientific theories of Thomas Willis in his *Cerebri Anatome. Cui Accessit Nervorum Descriptio et Usus* (1665) to demonstrate that the human body is—so to say—a moral body, because compared to the animal body it is provided with a larger brain and a greater quantity of blood:

The human Fancy and Memory are assisted by, 1. The *Brain*, which, in proportion to the Bulk of his Body, is much *greater* in Man, than in any other kind of Animal: 2. *Greater Quantity of Blood and animal Spirits* thence form'd, and their *greater Purity*, from the erect posture of the Body; a *greater Vigor and brisker Motion*, by means of the freer Passage into the Brain, thro' the unbranch'd Tubes of the Caroid Arteries. (Cumberland, 2005, p. 432)

The brain controls the whole body and is responsible for the deliberative functions. There are also other bodily properties that incline men to the common good. Cumberland quotes extensively from Willis's work, persuaded as he is that the functioning of the nerves, the nature of the "Plexus nervous peculiar to man" and the special "Connection of the pericardium with the diaphragm" explain the character of men as a being whose reasonable mind is capable to control the affections and passions in the pursuit of individual as well as general happiness.

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