About 1600 Words

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What makes up a monster: definitions in *Leviathan*

Thomas Hobbes is fastidious in his use of definitions throughout his formative piece *Leviathan,* (1651) and makes sure to define each term he speaks of to such a degree it can not be either misconstrued or feel ambiguous. Each term is then carefully located within and connected to a network of other terms that are shaped into the philosophies and arguments of Hobbes, which rely on concrete syllogisms to unfurl his ideas to his readers. He supports his argument that a commonwealth will spring up by defining the nature of man and the natural conditions of man, then arguing that because of the traits present throughout the only way for survival (desirous by the definition and necessary by mans observed current survival) would be the creation of a commonwealth, which he then defines in terms that make a sovereign leader bound by a social contract desirable and obvious.

Before Hobbes can even start to argue for his Leviathan, he insists upon definitions as the way for truths to be established, in order for man to be able to make sense of anything. He states, “seeing then that *truth* consisteth in the right ordering of names in our affirmations, a man that seeketh precise *truth*, had need to remember what every name he uses stands for; and to place it accordingly;” because “men begin at settling the significations of their words; which settling of significations, they call definitions; and place them in the beginning of their reckoning.” (pp 28) In order to find the truth of any particular matter, one must decide what significations of words, or definitions, to find accurate and relevant. Truth is for Hobbes subjective and dependent on the

stances of the debaters: two people with two different views or definitions of the world cannot have rational conversation together, or at the very least any semblance of precision, and must first come together to see how their definitions vary in order to reach any similar conclusion. Hobbes supports this idea of truth or correctness by explaining that this method of discussion has been used throughout history, in the field of Geometry.

Geometry, or "the onely science that it hath pleased God to hitherto to bestow upon mankind," (pp 28) consistently relies upon the use of definitions to derive all other information from. Definitions are established, and then the only possible relationships are stated within or derived from those initial definitions. The whole field is based entirely upon a few definitions, with all studies being devoted to searching for new ways to understand how those definitions are related. Such discourses always follow the same structure: connections of words to general affirmations, then to syllogisms that lead to the conclusion. When based on definitions, that "conditionall knowledge" based on the meaning of those words is science. Contrasted with discourses based not on definitions, or on general or incorrect ones, "the end or conclusion, is again opinion, namely of the truth of somewhat said, though sometimes in absurd and senselesse words, without possibility of being understood." (pp 50) Senseless or absurd conclusions are comprised of absurd words that he defines as merely sounds without meaning, and he gives an example later of a round quadragon: whose words individually are comprehensible but when combined are obviously the result of some error in mental processes, and that only incorrect or very vague definitions of the two could result in. Hobbes also says that opinions can make sense, as in the case of generalizations or incomplete definitions resulting in conceivable conclusions, and his definition renders many other philosophies and schools all opinion based, rather than in science. By omitting to define clearly the principles of thought the rest of the philosophy is based

on, these philosophies err towards the general or improvable, as opposed to Hobbes', which is firmly supported by all the definitions he spends the first half of Leviathan writing out. Hobbes goes on, creating more definitions that increasingly support him as a scientist, rather than an opinionist.

Beyond words, Hobbes defines the subcategories of names in order to argue for the importance of precision in this aspect of speech and thought as well. He says that the correct definition of names leads to the acquisition of science, but in omitting definitions "lyes the first abuse; from which proceed all false and senslesse tenets;" leading those that commit such errors to "take their instruction from the authority of books, and not from their own meditation, [and] to be as much below the condition of ignorant men, as men endued with true science are above it." (pp 28) Hobbes again stresses the importance of definitions in the pursuit of what he calls science, or the further understanding of the world around one. In arguing that those false tenets lead to individuals complacent in second-hand reasonings and that the individual who chooses such complacency is worse off than an ignorant man who does not have the option of any reasoning supports Hobbes' argument additionally as he states that men desire the good opinion of others and in order to gain such an opinion, the pursuit of science is a good option as long as one relies on definitions as Hobbes has stated. The more precise their speech the more true their conclusions and the more intelligent they are thought to be, and the desirability of such a thing is argued in another of Hobbe's arguments. Not wholly selfish does Hobbes make man out to be, though, and that their desires can be altruistic for all of mankind's advancement is a further point.

Not only does Hobbes argue that definitions are the only acceptable basis for any argument, but he dutifully relies upon definitions for all of his further arguments. Hobbes sums up the distinction between man and animal, stating that "the light of humane minds is

perspicuous words, but by exact definitions first snuffed, and purged from ambiguity; *reason* is the *pace*; encrease of *science*, the *way*; and the benefit of man-kind, the *end*." (pp 37) This conclusion supports Hobbes' formerly discussed arguments that state man wants to pursue science (individually bound by their own capacity for reason), and allows for a gentler goal for these men than mere personal enrichment; rather the enrichment of their whole society. However, this conclusion is just another place Hobbes rests before moving towards his goal of defining the Leviathan, and this conclusion is itself made up of many smaller definitions Hobbes had to work out earlier.

To support his argument of the Leviathan, Hobbes first defines the nature of man, and then man's natural conditions. Hobbes delves inward, defining sense and imagination, their consequences, reason and science, and the ends of discourse. He defines the natural conditions of man using those same definitions to contrast man and (the more simply successful within nature) animal further, explaining how in those conditions it is every man for himself and life is "nasty, brutish, and short" (pp 97). From that more complete view, he argues that a commonwealth must arise, bound by a social contract, and that a sovereign with almost unlimited power is the best ruler for that commonwealth. These definitions are his argument, merely phrased in such a way as to seem self-evident and hard to oppose.

Hobbes describes how in their natural state, men are competitive and violent because of the strengths nature endows upon them. He writes,

> 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 neverthelesse they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end, (which is principally their owne conservation, and sometimes their delectation only,) endeavour to destroy, or subdue one an other." (pp 95)

He contrasts this with animals that can coexist rather peacefully in large groups, creating six reasons that man in a society of men behaves differently than animals in a similar situation, and building off his earlier definition of man to do so. He defines the natural laws, and the second is especially pertinent: “that a man be willing, when others are so too, as farre-forth, as for peace, and defence of himselfe he shall think it necessary, to lay down [his] right to all things;” as in a state of nature, “and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himselfe.” (pp 100) To pursue peace, as prompted by the instinctual drive for survival, Hobbes states that man must give up both some of his own personal rights to take what he wants, and give up his power on preventing others from taking what is his. Such an agreement can only be reached, as Hobbes says, “by covenant only, which is artificiall: and therefore it is no wonder if there be somewhat else required… which is a common power, to keep them in awe, and to direct their actions to the common benefit.” (pp 130-131) Now Hobbes has come to his point, finally asserting the need for a common power to oversee the covenant to keep all the actors focused on the common good. Hobbes has successfully built up his argument by defining concept after concept as they arose to link into syllogisms that have eventually led to this conclusion.

Definitions are important to Hobbes’ argument in his great work *Leviathan* as a central piece of his early point that without definition, reasoning and science fall into opinion and absurdity, and also as the main proofs for his arguments that follow surrounding the nature of man, man’s natural condition, and how that great leviathan that is the commonwealth arises out of such a state.