ethics

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The history of Western ethics ➡ **Ancient civilizations to the end of the 19th century** ➡
The British tradition from Hobbes to the utilitarians ➡ **Hobbes**

Thomas Hobbes is an outstanding example of the independence of mind that became possible in Protestant countries after the Reformation. To be sure, God does play an honourable role in Hobbes's philosophy, but it is a dispensable role. The philosophical edifice he constructed stands on its own foundations; God merely crowns the apex. Hobbes was the equal of the Greek philosophers in his readiness to develop an ethical position based only on the facts of human nature and the circumstances in which humans live, and he surpassed even Plato and Aristotle in the extent to which he sought to do this by systematic deduction from clearly stated premises.

Hobbes started with a severe view of human nature: all of man's voluntary acts are aimed at pleasure or self-preservation. This position is known as psychological hedonism, because it asserts that the fundamental motivation of all human action is the desire for pleasure. Like later psychological hedonists, Hobbes was confronted with the objection that people often seem to act altruistically. According to a story told about him, Hobbes was once seen giving alms to a beggar outside St. Paul's Cathedral. A clergyman sought to score a point by asking Hobbes whether he would have given the money had Christ not urged giving to the poor. Hobbes replied that he gave the money because it pleased him to see the poor man pleased. The reply reveals the dilemma that always faces those who propose startling new explanations for human actions: either the theory is flagrantly at odds with how people really behave, or else it must be broadened or diluted to such an extent that it loses much of what made it so shocking in the first place.

Hobbes's definition of good is equally devoid of religious or metaphysical assumptions. A thing is good, according to him, if it is "the object of any man's appetite or desire." He insisted that the term must be used in relation to a person—nothing is simply good in itself, independently of any person who may desire it. Hobbes may therefore be considered an ethical subjectivist. Thus, if one were to say of the incident just described, "What Hobbes did was good," one's statement would not be objectively true or false. It would be true for the poor man, and, if Hobbes's reply was accurate, it would also be true for Hobbes. But if a second poor person, for instance, was jealous of the success of the first, that person could quite properly say that the statement is false for him.

Remarkably, this unpromising picture of self-interested individuals who have no notion of good apart from their own desires served as the foundation of Hobbes's account of justice and morality in his masterpiece, *Leviathan* (1651). Starting with the premises that humans are self-interested and that the world does not provide for all their needs, Hobbes argued that in the hypothetical state of nature, before the existence of civil society, there was competition between men for wealth, security, and glory. What would ensue in such a state is Hobbes's famous "war of all against all," in which there could be no industry, commerce, or civilization, and in which the life of man would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The struggle would occur because each individual would rationally pursue his own interests, but