Hobbes: Quality of Life  
Affirmative Case by Mark Csoros



Running affirmative in Stoa LD this year can be traumatizing. Negatives will accuse you of being a communist, a collectivist, and a heretic. They will quote Founding Fathers at you, lecture the judge about “Inherent Rights,” and say that you want to bulldoze retirement homes to build KKK meeting places. Okay, that last one was stretching it. But I’ve personally either run all the other arguments, or had them run against me. If that kind of rhetoric is making you tear up flowsheets and break pens, this case is for you.

The thesis is mostly taken from English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes wrote his long and rambling work “Leviathan” almost 40 years before John Locke wrote his 2nd Treatise of Government, which was far more focused on the social contract idea. If it helps, you can think of Hobbes as Locke without the refinement or focus. But, parts of Hobbes’ work are masterpieces of political thought. In Leviathan, he contrasts a limitless, lawless society (the state of nature) with a society that limits rights to preserve its citizens (the “unnatural” state of government). As a note to the observant debater: the quotations from Hobbes in this AC are slightly edited. Due to his “Olde Englishe” spelling and phrasing, I’ve taken the liberty of simplifying some of the knottiest sentences. To maintain academic integrity, however, the verbatim quotes are included in the footnotes.

This case capitalizes on the absurdity of a society that never limits private rights by contrasting it with the common sense of the real world. It’s not a value oriented case, so try not to spend your time there. Quality of Life subsumes most values, so in the rebuttals, subsume and move on. Instead, focus your time on your contentions. The point of this case is the obvious benefits that come from limiting private property rights. People simply can’t have the exclusive right to do whatever they want with whatever they can get their hands on. That’s a recipe for anarchy, social disintegration, and governmental disaster. Limits aren’t degrees of tyranny, they’re safety nets. They exist because governments have an obligation to protect their people.

Mainly, keep coming back to the obvious common sense of limitations on rights. Remind the judge how it’s easy to adhere to the rules, and that we’re blessed to live in a society that protects us by imposing laws to protect us. You aren’t advocating for tyranny; you’re advocating against anarchy. The yoke of public needs is easy, and the burden of limitations is light.

Hobbes: Quality of Life

In the very first address ever given to the Senate of the United States of America, John Adams said this: “A trust of the greatest magnitude is entrusted to this legislature, and the eyes of the world are upon you.” No pressure, right? But I would argue that all governments have the same obligation, and that every government has the responsibility to care for the people who trust them. Because I believe that the government’s care for the people must come first, I stand *Resolved: That the needs of the public ought to be valued above private property rights.*

Before I explain why I believe that, let’s go over a few definitions.

**Public Needs** are operationally defined as, “Systems such as a military force, public transportation, law enforcement and courts that are in place for the protection or benefit of the populace.”

**Private Property** is defined by Black’s Law Dictionary as, “The ownership of tangible and intangible goods by an individual who has exclusive rights over it.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

That phrase “exclusive rights” will be pretty important, so let’s define that. In the context of private property **Exclusive Rights** are defined to be the sole right to own, use, or share property belonging to an individual. Exclusivity means that the owner of property has absolute freedom with his property, and no one can tell him what to do with it. With our terms defined, let’s move to our…

# Value: Quality of Life

Collins English Dictionary defines quality of life as: “the general well-being of a person or society, defined in terms of health and happiness.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Quality of Life also includes the protection of life itself, because your level of health and happiness is pretty low when you or someone close to you is dead, or on death’s door. Fortunately, we can support quality of life by using my criterion, which is the means that we achieve the end of improved quality of life.

## Criterion: Common Sense Limitations

In order to achieve quality of life, we have to put limitations on private property rights. These limitations aren’t drastic, they’re common sense, realistic, measured ways of restricting property rights for the public need. When we don’t impose those restrictions, bad things happen. Let’s look more closely at that idea in…

# Contention 1: No Limits Harms Quality of Life

Thomas Hobbes was an influential political philosopher who wrote a lot about the limitations imposed by government. In his seminal work “Leviathan” he discusses how people living in their “natural state,” without governmental limitations, experience war and danger everywhere. Hobbes writes:

“And because the condition of Man is a condition of War, of every one against every one; in which case everyone is governed by his own Reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemies; It follows, that in such a condition, every man has a Right to everything; even to one another’s body. And therefore, as long as this natural Right of every man to everything endures, there can be no security to any man, (however strong or wise he be)…”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hobbes paints a grim picture of what happens when absolute rights are valued. When we refuse or are unable to impose limitations on private property rights, we live in a continual state of anarchy and insecurity. Fortunately, there’s an easy fix. Let’s turn to…

# Contention 2: Limits improve Quality of Life

Hobbes may be a painter of dark scenarios, but he also gives us a ray of light. He explains how societies limit certain rights for the greater good. Hobbes says:

“A man is willing, for Peace, and defense of himself, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men as he would allow other men against himself. For as long as every man holds the Right of doing anything he likes all men are in the condition of War.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Hobbes is saying that societies will only allow as much exclusive right over property as is good for the public. We only allow ourselves as much property right as we would be comfortable with other people having. Let’s look at a few examples, starting with…

## Application 1: FDA Regulations

Every civilized nation in the world has some form of food safety laws. In America, those laws are enforced and codified by the Food and Drug Administration, or FDA. They impose common sense rules on foods and medicines that are sold to U.S. consumers. For example, the FDA bans lead paint from being used in toys, because lead poisoning can have harmful effects on brain chemistry and overall bodily health. My right to freely sell toys with lead paint is violated for the public good, but that violation makes perfect sense.

## Application 2: Building Codes

Building codes restrict the freedom of individuals to build however they like. If I decide to hold up a 6,000-pound concrete floor with a few 2x4 boards, my structure won’t get approval to hold a business, and I can’t sell it, because there’s a very good chance the structure will collapse. The government sets standards and limits on what I can do with my property, because unsafe structures are a threat to the public need to preserve their life.

## Application 3: Speed Limits

Speed limits are a classic example of common sense limitations for the public need. We own our cars, but we can’t exercise exclusive rights over them. If someone is going 75 in a 40 mile-an-hour zone, they’ll get a ticket. We limit our own private property rights for the purpose of public needs.

All of these applications serve to highlight the fact that our private property rights must be limited to create a better quality of life for us all. We’ll see that in…

# Contention 3: Public needs valued above

The point of government is to impose restrictions onprivate ownership for the purpose of public needs. As Thomas Hobbes wrote, in a natural state of absolute ownership, life is short and filled with conflict. In a system of civilized government, we impose common sense restrictions on rights so that we can achieve a better Quality of Life. Because it makes sense to impose limitations on private property for the needs of the public, I ask for an affirmative ballot.

Opposing Brief

There are two strategies you can run on negative. First, you can just steamroll over the reasonability of the affirmative. You can wow the judge with how important private property rights are, and how they are of the utmost importance. You can bring up big, powerful examples of where valuing public needs led to tyranny, or harm to individuals, or hurt society in some way. A lot of conservative judges will be swayed if you just read the parts of the Bill of Rights that have to do with private property. If you are a big picture, persuasive debater who doesn’t like line-by-line refutation, this strategy might work. Just be aware that you’re attacking the affirmative case where it’s strong.

Secondly, you can use subtler methods:

1. You can argue that because we agree to limitations of our property under the social contract, we’re exercising our right to cede our rights. They aren’t being taken, they’re being given, meaning we’re ultimately using our right to do what we wish with our property.
2. You can argue that Private Property Rights are inherently self-limiting, and don’t need to be limited by the Needs of the Public. A common phrase to express that idea is: “my right to swing my fist ends where your nose begins.” In other words, I have exclusive rights over my property as long as those rights don’t infringe upon your property.

Choosing a strong moral value is going to help you. It’s true that most values will be subsumed into quality of life, but a value like Justice or Human Rights will do two things for you. It may force your opponent to spend extra time refuting it, which means they can’t spend as much time on the contentions (good for you, bad for them). It will definitely help you focus your argumentation onto a certain area. Sometimes a passionate, focused, well-presented moral dilemma will move a judge’s pen.

1. Law Dictionary: What is PRIVATE PROPERTY? definition of PRIVATE PROPERTY (Black's Law Dictionary) <http://thelawdictionary.org/private-property/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Collins English Dictionary: “Quality of Life” <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/quality-of-life> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Hobbes “Leviathan”. Section titled: “Naturally Every Man Has a Right to Everything” <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm> And because the condition of Man, (as hath been declared in the precedent Chapter) is a condition of Warre of every one against every one; in which case every one is governed by his own Reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemyes; It followeth, that in such a condition, every man has a Right to every thing; even to one anothers body. And therefore, as long as this naturall Right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man, (how strong or wise soever he be,) of living out the time, which Nature ordinarily alloweth men to live. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thomas Hobbes “Leviathan”. Section titled: “The Second Law of Nature” <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm>

   From this Fundamentall Law of Nature, by which men are commanded to endeavour Peace, is derived this second Law; "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 this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himselfe." For as long as every man holdeth this Right, of doing any thing he liketh; so long are all men in the condition of Warre. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)