
Introduction

Thomas Hobbes famously posits, as “a general inclination of all mankind . . . , a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.”¹ The parts of that passage that stick in the schoolboy’s mind are “power” and “death.” Here I want to shift attention to a less-remarked part of that passage, and to use that as a springboard for exploring a contrasting concept.

The Hobbesian trope that I shall take as my foil is the “perpetual and restless desire” that he posits as part and parcel of that “general inclination of all mankind.” Call this the practice of “striving.” It has many mottoes. “Never content yourself with what you have: always seek more.” “Always press on: never stand still.” “Be not complacent or content: be always on the lookout for the main chance.” Emphases vary. But the underlying spirit of “striving” runs through them all.

Striving has been a major driver of human history. It lay at the heart of the French Revolution. It was immortalized in the final ringing words of Danton’s rallying cry, enjoining his listeners “to dare, to dare again, ever to dare!”² It is not only rabble-rousers who champion striving as an ideal, however. Many more reflective writers (Hobbes himself conspicuously *not* among them) have seen striving of that sort as something very much to be celebrated and admired.

That sentiment was particularly strong among the German romantics. Recall how, in Goethe’s telling of the tale, Faust

promises to surrender his soul to the devil the moment he ceases to strive.

FAUST: If ever I lie down upon a bed of ease,
Then let that be my final end!
If you can cozen me with lies
Into a self-complacency,
Or can beguile with pleasures you devise,
Let that day be the last for me!
This bet I offer.

MEPHISTOPHELES: Done!

FAUST: And I agree:
If I to any moment say:
Linger on! You are so fair!
Put me in fetters straightaway,
Then I can die for all I care!³

Faust eventually comes to speak precisely those words, and his soul is forfeit. But in the end, all that striving nonetheless turns out to be Faust's salvation. As demons are escorting Faust to hell, angels swoop down and whisk him to heaven instead, proclaiming:

ANGELS: Who strives forever with a will,
By us can be redeemed.⁴

Striving was a much-vaunted ideal among English romantics, as well. Recall the famous last line of Tennyson's poem "Ulysses": "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."⁵ Those words are inscribed on countless school crests around the world. The motto has even made its way to Antarctica, on the cross erected atop Observation Hill to commemorate the deaths of Robert Scott and his party returning from their trek to the South Pole in 1912.

“Striving” of that sort is familiar enough as a description of empirical reality, from its microfoundations in Hobbes’s “matter in motion” to its macromanifestations in turbo-capitalism.⁶ Hobbes himself clearly saw ceaseless striving as leading to no end of mischief. Still, he regarded it as a fact—an unfortunate fact, but a fixed fact nonetheless—about human nature.⁷

Many shrewd diagnoses of the sources of discontent under late capitalism turn on pointed critiques of just such striving. Tibor Scitovsky traces the “joylessness” of market economies to a vicious cycle—much the same as the one that Hobbes (indeed, even Plato) foresaw⁸—whereby satisfaction of one desire leads to arousal of another, leaving people constantly dissatisfied and questing for more.⁹

Here, however, I shall be less concerned to critique that familiar practice of “striving” than I shall be to describe and defend a contrasting practice. I do so by drawing together various strands around the oddly neglected theme of “settling.” This too takes many forms:

- “settling down” in a situation and a place;
- “settling in,” accommodating ourselves to our circumstances and our place;
- “settling up” with people we have displaced, unsettled, or otherwise wronged in the process; and
- “settling for,” learning to make do in our newly settled circumstances.
- “settling on” a belief or value, project or commitment, way of being or way of living.

Those variations on the theme of settling overlap and interweave in such a way as to constitute a stark counterpoint to “striving.”

To foreshadow, I will show that what runs through all these forms of settling is a quest for “fixity.” Accordingly, a generalized

version of “settling on” turns out to be the “master notion” within this cluster. Settling on something, holding it fixed at least for a time, is centrally implicated in all those other forms of settling. It is also a primary source of the value of the practice of settling in our lives. And, as I shall show, the practice of settling is indeed valuable (although any particular act of settling or the terms of any particular settlement might, of course, be problematic).¹⁰

Notice, though, that I characterize settling as a “counterpoint” to striving, not an absolute alternative to it or wholesale substitute for it. Settling, I shall argue, should be a complement to striving. In the end, a judicious mixture of both is required. I shall say more in chapter 4 about how the two models might fit together.

First, however, I need to say much more of a purely descriptive sort about “settling” in its many modes, in order to get that part of the composite firmly on the table. That more purely descriptive part of the project comes in chapter 1, which offers an inventory of various different modes of settling drawn from a wide range of primary and secondary sources. With those descriptive resources in hand, I then turn in subsequent chapters to the more philosophical task of defending the practice of “settling” (chapter 2) and distinguishing it from other cognate practices with which it might readily be confused (chapter 3).