



“SAFE TO DO WHAT?”

Morality and the War of All against All in the Arena

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When Katniss Everdeen volunteers to take her sister's place in the 74th Hunger Games, she's thrust into a brutally violent contest and needs to decide how to act. Should she be guided by a sense of right and wrong in the arena? Or should she be willing to take any action necessary to survive? After all, morality might just get her killed.

For Gale Hawthorne, the answer seems clear: There are no moral rules in a death match. If you're not willing to abandon the constraints of morality, you'll be the victim of someone who is. For Peeta Mellark, however, a different answer is equally clear: one person may sometimes have to kill another, but even then, we still have obligations to one another as human beings. On the night before the 74th Hunger Games, Peeta tells Katniss, in answer to her question about whether he's willing to kill, "When the time comes, I'll kill just like everybody else. . . . Only I keep wishing I could think of a way . . . to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I am more than a piece in their Games."¹

Gale and Peeta champion competing views about morality. Gale reflects the perspective of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who argued that in the absence of any dominant power to make and enforce rules, we have the right to do whatever we see fit. Peeta's attitude, on the other hand, is closer to the views of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), a German philosopher who insisted that morality imposes obligations on us and ought to guide our conduct no matter what.

Other residents in both the Capitol and the districts line up on opposing sides of this question. Coriolanus Snow and Alma Coin seem to side with Hobbes and Gale: they know what they want and they won't let morality hinder their pursuit of it. In contrast, Primrose Everdeen and Cinna are willing to do what morality demands, even at the risk of their lives.

Then there's Katniss, torn between these worldviews, just as her heart is torn between Gale and Peeta. When we first meet her, she doesn't seem to have a very strong sense of moral duty. Granted, she has *some* concern for others, but her concern doesn't really extend past her family and her closest friends. Entering the arena for the first time, she accepts its murderous logic of kill or be killed. But through firsthand experience of just where that logic leads, she gradually comes to glimpse the possibility of something more than the logic of survival at any cost.

“The Dark Days Must Never Be Repeated”

We can't understand the moral dilemmas posed to the participants in the Hunger Games without first understanding the political context in which the Games take place. By all indications, Panem was formed largely out of a concern for security and order. The governments of North America had collapsed under the weight of a devastating ecological crisis. According to the annals of Panem's history, “the disasters, the droughts,

the storms, the fires, and the encroaching seas swallowed up so much of the land" that people were forced to engage in a "brutal war for what little sustenance remained."²

Such a life must have been miserable until a centralized authority was established to eliminate conflict and restore order. Later, however, that stability was threatened by the Dark Days, a time of rebellion and civil war that saw the thirteen districts of Panem rise up against the oppressive and exploitative rule of the Capitol. We don't know many details of the Dark Days, but it's clear that both sides suffered heavy casualties. Finally, the Capitol obliterated District 13 (or so the other districts believe) and forced the remaining twelve to sign the Treaty of Treason, bringing an end to the civil war.

The history of Panem recalls the chaos and destruction of the English Civil War (1624–1651), during which Thomas Hobbes wrote *The Leviathan*, his most famous political treatise. Hundreds of thousands were killed in battle, and countless others were ravaged by the plagues and starvation that often accompanied warfare during this age. For Hobbes, this devastation offered a glimpse of the "natural" condition of human existence, or what life must have been like prior to the formation of stable governments. He argued that in such a lawless "state of nature," "there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no culture of the Earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society."³

Hobbes's account of the "state of nature" resembles the conditions prior to the formation of Panem and during the violent uprising of the Dark Days. Unable to secure the fruits of their labor from theft or pillage, the citizens of Panem were forced to abandon their leisurely pursuits and commit themselves entirely to war for dominion over others, destroying any possibility of

a good life during these violent and volatile periods. Only under the order imposed by the Capitol before and after the Dark Days were there schools and the development of the industries specific to each district. Reflecting on the similar turmoil caused by the English Civil War, Hobbes concluded that those of us lucky enough to live under a government powerful enough to maintain order would be wise to obey the political authorities whoever they might be, because life under any ruler is preferable to the hellish state of nature.

To rescue us from this nightmare, Hobbes advocated the establishment of what he called a "common authority"—a single, centralized, sovereign political authority, powerful enough to impose its will on everyone—to provide order and peace. The alternative is the Dark Days, a cycle of perpetual strife that haunts our lives with "continual fear and danger of violent death."⁴ We must enter into what Hobbes called a "social contract," an agreement to obey the laws established by the will of a sovereign power, such as the Capitol, that's strong enough to maintain order and end the perpetual conflict of the state of nature. The political authorities must have virtually unlimited power to prevent any possibility of a rebellion that would throw society back into the state of nature, with all of its consequent chaos and bloodshed.

The Hobbesian social contract is only an implied agreement to which we tacitly consent whenever we live under a system of laws and enjoy the peace they afford us, but "the dreary Treaty of Treason" that ended the Dark Days puts the social contract in writing. It empowers the Capitol to use any number of harsh tactics, including the annual Hunger Games, to remind the districts "that the Dark Days must never be repeated."⁵ Under the terms of the pact, the people of the districts agree to submit to the Capitol's authority, but like Hobbes's sovereign power, the Capitol is not bound by any contractual restraints. Instead, the people give up all of the personal sovereignty and liberty they held in the state of nature. In exchange, they receive the

basic security of living in an orderly society, instead of fighting for their lives in the state of nature.

Regardless of what the political authorities may demand of us, no matter how oppressive they may be, Hobbes believed that life is better when we abide by the rules than when we reject the authority of the sovereign and cast ourselves back into the perpetual violence of the state of nature. That might explain why the citizens of the districts seem willing to accept their fate for so long. Oppressive rules are still better than the alternative offered by the chaos of the state of nature. And in case the districts forget what it's like to live in the state of nature, the Capitol has provided the Hunger Games as an annual reminder.

***Bellum Universale* at the Cornucopia**

By artificially re-creating the Hobbesian state of nature, the Hunger Games serve as a reminder of what life is like without a strong authority. In the arena, the tributes must vie for scarce resources and use any means at their disposal to kill the other contestants. The Capitol has engineered the arena to create a deadly competition in which contestants are locked in a struggle for survival. Perhaps no moment in the Hunger Games is more telling of this Hobbesian state than the bloodbath that occurs when the tributes are first released into the arena and must fight for resources at the Cornucopia.

Forced to stand on metal circles and face each other for one minute, the contestants wait for a gong to sound the start of the Games. Inside the giant golden horn-shaped cone are food, water, weapons, and other tools of survival inside the arena. Going into the Cornucopia, however, means that one must battle (sometimes to the death) the twenty-three other contestants who are also in need of the same scarce and precious items. In the 74th Hunger Games, eleven contestants were killed during the savage, indiscriminate killing that followed their release onto the Cornucopia.

Hobbes believed that in the state of nature people are sufficiently equal in their abilities to pose a mortal threat to one another. We see this in the arena, too. Thresh and the Careers might be physically stronger, but the other tributes have their own advantages. Even little Rue has the ability to hide, move through the treetops, and find medicines in plants. Any of the tributes might emerge victorious in the Games. Hobbes explained, "From [the general equality of the state of nature] arises equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end . . . endeavor to destroy or subdue one another."⁶

The result is a *bellum universale*, a war of all against all. Life in the arena is, for everyone except the lone victor, eerily similar to how Hobbes described life in a state of nature: "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."⁷

Hobbes also noted that "force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues."⁸ The same applies in the arena, since, as Hobbes would argue, there can be no rules limiting what the tributes can do in their pursuit of victory without a "common authority" to enforce those rules or bind the tributes to their agreements. Even when alliances are formed, those involved know that they are temporary and that each tribute must remain perpetually on guard against the other's inevitable deceit and betrayal. Katniss understands this even as she forges a bond with Rue to help keep each other alive. The strong unite to kill the weak and then turn on one another.

According to Hobbes, there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. In the state of nature—and in the arena—we owe nothing to one another, for "to this war of every man against every man . . . nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no injustice."⁹ Each individual's fundamental right, said Hobbes, is to do whatever it takes to survive; consequently everything

is permitted when there is no sovereign power to protect us from one another. The very idea that there could be rules in the arena is dismissed by Katniss when she reminds Rue, "You know, stealing isn't illegal here."¹⁰

Even the taking of innocent life is allowed in the state of nature, according to Hobbes, just as long as it serves the overriding goal of self-preservation. After Katniss volunteers to take Prim's place in the arena, she and Gale discuss what Katniss will have to kill to survive.

"Katniss, it's just hunting. You know how to kill."

"Not people," I say.

"How different can it be," says Gale grimly.

The awful thing is that if I can forget they're people, it will be no different at all.¹¹

If Katniss can stop thinking of the other tributes as human beings, then killing them will be no different from killing an animal for food. It's just something you do to survive, like taking up hunting when she and her family were starving after her father's death. If she can stop thinking of them as human beings, she'll feel no more of an obligation to them than she does to the game animals she slays with the deadly accuracy of her bow. Would that be an "awful thing," even if it keeps her alive?

"An Enormous Kindness"

Hobbes's entire moral philosophy rests on an assumption that he seemed to share with the Capitol and the Gamemakers: rational human beings should put a premium on their own self-interest—and this means that survival must be our number one priority.¹² However awful the butchering of other human beings might seem to Katniss, Hobbes insisted that there's at least one thing considerably worse—to die at the hands of another. Because a violent death is the worst possible evil, all other considerations, even our ordinary intuitions about

right and wrong, should take a backseat to the fundamental imperative to stay alive.

But it's obvious even in the arena that a self-interested preoccupation with survival isn't the only thing that motivates people. The Careers, for instance, have volunteered to enter the arena and risk their lives to win glory for themselves and their districts. Katniss and Peeta also risk their lives for each other. And, in a refutation of Hobbesian reasoning, what saves Peeta and Katniss in the end is the responsibility they feel to each other, as well as to others like Rue.

In acknowledgment of Katniss's kindness to Rue, District 11 parachutes a gift of bread to Katniss. Later, Thresh, also from District 11, spares Katniss's life because she comforted Rue with a song as Rue drew her dying breaths. Katniss could not have foreseen this response to her acts of kindness and selflessness, but it affirms the rightness of her behavior. Reflecting on the mercy Thresh showed her, she says, "I understand that if Thresh wins, he'll have to go back and face a district that has already broken all the rules to thank me, and he is breaking the rules to thank me, too."¹³ The rules, in this case, are the Hobbesian rules that preclude showing kindness or mercy whenever that might put you at risk now or in the future. But other philosophers had different ideas about what sort of rules should guide our conduct.

One of those philosophers is Immanuel Kant, who argued that our obligations to others aren't based merely on a social contract that's enforced by some external authority, but rather on a rational imperative to be true to our autonomous moral nature. Morality is autonomous because it comes from within, giving expression to our ability to govern ourselves by something higher than the protocols of mere survival or the desire for prestige.¹⁴

Kant believed that there is a "categorical imperative," a fundamental principle of morality, which can be formulated this way: "I ought never to act in such a way that I could not also

will that my maxim should be a universal law."¹⁵ A *maxim* is a rule or policy that one sets for one's own conduct. An example would be the Hobbesian maxim that the Gamemakers hope will guide the tributes in the arena: Be willing to do whatever it takes, including killing those who have done you no harm, to ensure your survival. But it doesn't take much imagination to see that this is a maxim that no sane person would want to have as a universal law, since the result would be the world of the arena on a monstrous scale, with everyone posing a mortal threat to everyone else and all of us drawn into a *bellum universale* that renders any prospect for survival dim at best.

The world that we as rational beings would choose instead is a world where we all govern our conduct by Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."¹⁶ Treating others as mere means to be exploited for one's own ends is par for the course in the arena, where the rules of the Game demand that other tributes be regarded only as allies or enemies, instruments or impediments to achieving one's own goal. The Hobbesian logic of the arena doesn't permit the tributes to recognize each other as individuals whose welfare and happiness matters in its own right.

Peeta seems to have never accepted this logic as the last word on what we owe others. When he insists that he won't let the Games change him, part of what he means is that he's unwilling to become the sort of person who lives by Hobbesian rules alone. He's unwilling to sacrifice his human decency, even at the cost of his life. Katniss is a more complex case, however, which makes her a lot more like many of us.

When young Peeta first gave the scavenging Katniss a loaf of burned bread, he was assuming a great personal risk. Katniss was bewildered. "He didn't even know me," she reflects. "Still, just throwing me the bread was an enormous kindness that would have surely resulted in a beating if discovered. I couldn't explain his actions."¹⁷

Of course, there's a perfectly understandable explanation for Peeta's action, but it has nothing to do with the Hobbesian maxim of always putting your own safety first. Peeta risks a beating because it's the right thing to do. Strange as that motive must have seemed at the time to young Katniss, she will become more and more like Peeta over the course of their relationship, displaying a growing concern for others and a willingness to sacrifice herself in order to do what's right.

She volunteers to take Prim's place in the arena because she wants to keep her sister safe. Later she tries to protect Rue while risking exposure to the Careers. Her decision to line Rue's dead body with flowers is born of her reflection on Peeta's words about the message he would like to send to the Capitol: "They don't own me."¹⁸ Demonstrating what Kant would call her moral autonomy, Katniss acknowledges the human dignity of her slain companion, letting the Capitol know that she is more than just a piece in their Game, more than a slave to survival instincts that the Capitol can manipulate for its own purposes.

It is telling that Katniss risks her life to get Peeta the medicine he needs when he is close to dying in their cave. Using a sleep aid she received from a parachute sent by a sponsor, she drugs the ailing Peeta before heading to "the feast"—a modified version of the Cornucopia, where the Gamemakers have placed items desperately needed by the tributes to draw them back into another bloody struggle. "All I can think is that he's going to die if I don't get to the feast," she reports.¹⁹ Hobbes would advise her to worry more about the prospect of the violent death that awaits *her* if she goes to the feast, since in his mind that's the worst possible evil. Clearly, Katniss has moved closer to the Kantian position that it's much worse to neglect your moral responsibilities to others.

Throughout the struggle, Peeta and Katniss risk their lives many times to save each other. They are even willing in the end to commit suicide—the ultimate rejection of rational

self-interest—rather than let the Capitol turn them against each other. They're determined to hold on to their humanity by preserving their moral autonomy, which includes the sense of moral obligation that Katniss has come to feel, in large part because of Peeta's example. And because they do, they live to see another dawn.

"I'm Done Killing Slaves"

Questions about morality in the arena carry over to the growing rebellion in the districts. Can a rebellion by the districts be justified, given that it is (in Hobbes's view, at least) tantamount to reverting to the state of nature? And when force must be used, is everything acceptable in pursuit of one's goals? The lessons Katniss learns about morality and obligations to others in the arena help to answer this question and make sense of her development as the Mockingjay of the rebellion.

President Snow informs Katniss that her "little trick with the berries" was viewed in the other districts as "an act of defiance," signifying that "if a girl from District Twelve of all places can defy the Capitol and walk away unharmed, what is to stop them from doing the same? What is to prevent, say, an uprising?" Then, speaking words that could have come straight from the mouth of Hobbes, he warns that "uprisings have been known to lead to revolution," with consequences that any sane person would want to avoid at all costs: "Do you have any idea what that would mean? How many people would die? What conditions those left behind would have to face? Whatever problems anyone has with the Capitol, believe me when I said that if it released its grip on the districts for even a short time, the entire system would collapse."²⁰

From this point of view, it's far preferable that the Capitol be empowered to the fullest extent possible, even if that means keeping the districts impoverished and enslaved, than to revert to the hellish Dark Days of civil war. Peeta voices this same

sentiment when, after being hijacked by the Capitol, he urges the rebels to "think about what this war could mean. For human beings. We almost went extinct fighting one another before. Now our numbers are even fewer. Our conditions are more tenuous. Is this really what we want to do? Kill ourselves completely?"²¹

Like Hobbes, the Capitol is counting on fear of violent death to secure obedience. Just as Hobbes and the Capitol expect that our concern for self-preservation will override our moral scruples in the state of nature or in the arena, they also expect that rational people will recognize that it's in their self-interest to submit to a political authority whenever there is one.

The security provided by the Capitol may prevent an outbreak of the *bellum universale*, but what kind of alternative does it really offer? People in the districts suffer horribly, living in perpetual fear of the Capitol that exploits them to support the opulent and perverse pleasures of its residents. Responding to Katniss's suggestion that everyone would have been safe if only she had eaten the berries and taken her own life, Gale asks the truly relevant question: "Safe to do what? . . . Starve? Work like slaves? Send their kids to the reaping? You haven't hurt people—you've given them an opportunity. They just have to be brave enough to take it."²²

Gale challenges the Hobbesian view that life under the rule of a common authority, no matter how oppressive or exploitative, is always preferable to life in the state of nature. Hobbes would ask: Doesn't Katniss prefer her life in District 12 and want to go home while in the arena? Wouldn't she prefer servitude to the Capitol over life in civil war? But Gale disagrees: It's not just life at any cost that we should desire for ourselves, but rather a *good life*. Just because no one would want to live in the hell of the arena doesn't make suffering under the boot of a dictatorship any more tolerable.

So what does that leave us? Katniss seems to share Kant's belief that we are all entitled to the preservation not only of our

lives but also of our dignity as human beings. Consequently, we need to recognize that there are limits to what we may do to others even to advance the interests of all—and these limits apply even in wartime.²³ When Gale and Beetee unveil their underhanded strategy to wound the enemy with explosives and then allow others to come to their aid before killing them all with another, more powerful round of explosives, Katniss balks. “That seems to be crossing some kind of line,” she protests, sarcastically adding, “I guess there isn’t a rule book for what might be unacceptable to do to another human being.”²⁴ Gale responds that targeting civilians and relief personnel is just following the same rules as President Snow and the Capitol, matching their brutality to serve the greater good. Applying the Hobbesian logic of the arena to the civil war, he treats self-defense and victory as the only considerations.

But Katniss rejects that logic, believing instead that the ends we seek must be reflected in the means we use to achieve them. “Prim . . . Rue . . . aren’t they the very reason I have to try to fight?” she asks. “Because what has been done to them is so wrong, so beyond justification, so evil that there is no choice? Because no one has the right to treat them as they have been treated?”²⁵ If the rebellion seeks something beyond the cruelty and viciousness of the Capitol, if it aims at a social order that affords everyone dignity and respect, then the means used to achieve that goal should also affirm the dignity of persons.

Meeting evil with evil and abandoning all ethical restraints creates an intolerable situation in which everyone suffers. Face-to-face with a soldier from District 2, Katniss lowers her bow to make herself vulnerable as an easy kill. “We blew up your mine,” she tells him. “You burned my district to the ground. We’ve got every right to kill each other. So do it. Make the Capitol happy. I’m done killing their slaves for them.”²⁶ Katniss isn’t forced to put down her weapon by law or from compulsion by a common authority. She stops targeting the man from District 2 because she recognizes the irrationality of

continued violence that can end only when one side dominates the other or, as in the arena, everyone else is dead.

“It Benefits No One”

In his speech announcing the theme of the 75th Hunger Games, President Snow proclaims, “On the seventy-fifth anniversary, as a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol, the male and female tributes will be reaped from their existing pool of victors.”²⁷ With this declaration, Snow reaffirms the true nature of the Games as a mechanism of control to remind all of Panem of the authority of the Capitol and a warning of what awaits those who defy it. The brutality of the Hunger Games demonstrates that the Capitol will employ any means necessary to ensure its survival.

Inside the arena that message is reaffirmed. The contestants use any means to survive, killing off their opponents before they are killed themselves. The Games seem to suggest that in a struggle for survival, obligations between individuals do not exist. With no rights and no morality, the only things that matter are power and cunning.

Ironically, though, it’s in the arena that Katniss learns that one must never lose one’s humanity for the sake of domination over others. It’s also in the broadcast of the 74th Hunger Games that the girl on fire openly defies the authority of the Capitol and inspires a revolution to bring it down. As the Mockingjay, Katniss represents the possibility of autonomy and freedom in the face of authoritarian oppression. In the rebellion, as in the arena, she would not sacrifice her humanity and compassion for the sake of power and control. She assassinated Coin for bombing her own forces along with the Capitol’s. She turned from Gale because she could never forgive him for developing the plan that killed her sister and so many other innocents as a way to quickly end the war.

While awaiting the verdict of her trial for assassinating President Coin, Katniss reminds us that within the world of politics the abuse of power to control and dominate others cannot be tolerated: "Something is significantly wrong with a creature that sacrifices its children's lives to settle its differences. You can spin it any way you like. Snow thought the Hunger Games were an efficient means of control. Coin thought the parachutes would expedite the war. But in the end, who does it benefit? No one."²⁸

Hobbes argued that the sovereign is justified in using any tactics whatsoever, no matter how ruthless or oppressive, to maintain peace and order. Katniss came to see this argument for what it really was: a justification for brutality and inhumanity that robs us of the dignity that makes our lives worth living.²⁹

NOTES

1. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008), 142.
2. *Ibid.*, 18.
3. Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan* (London: Penguin, 1968), 186. Hobbes's prose has been emended in accordance with modern style.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 18.
6. Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, 184.
7. *Ibid.*, 186.
8. *Ibid.*, 188.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 213.
11. *Ibid.*, 40.
12. For more on Hobbes's belief that the concern for self-interest overrides every other motivation for rational human beings, see chapter 7, "Competition and Kindness: The Social Darwinian World of the Hunger Games."
13. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 288.
14. For another perspective on Immanuel Kant's moral ideal of rational autonomy, see chapter 11, "Sometimes the World Is Hungry for People Who Care: Katniss and the Feminist Care Ethic." Other aspects of Kant's moral theory are discussed in chapter 4, "The Odds Have Not Been Very Dependable of Late: Morality and Luck in the

Hunger Games Trilogy"; chapter 7, "Competition and Kindness: The Social Darwinian World of the Hunger Games"; and chapter 14, "Safe to Do What: Morality and the War of All against All in the Arena."

15. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 18.
16. *Ibid.*, 46.
17. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 31–32.
18. *Ibid.*, 236.
19. *Ibid.*, 276.
20. Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2009), 21.
21. Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010), 25–26.
22. Collins, *Catching Fire*, 99.
23. For more on what sort of limits philosophers have thought should be placed on the conduct of war, see chapter 15, "Starting Fires Can Get You Burned: The Just War Tradition and the Rebellion against the Capitol."
24. Collins, *Mockingjay*, 186.
25. Collins, *Catching Fire*, 123.
26. Collins, *Mockingjay*, 215.
27. Collins, *Catching Fire*, 172.
28. Collins, *Mockingjay*, 377.
29. I would like to thank Damarco Gordy Dean, Kristi Nelson Foy, Lisa Hager, Elynn Lem, and Lorra Deok Ross for their reflections and suggestions on early drafts. Thanks also to Bill Schneider for his insights and philosophical reflections.