

THOMAS HOBBS

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Historical context: 1588-1679. England and Europe experiencing damaging civil dissent in 16th and 17th centuries – The continent of Europe going through 30 year war and England a civil war – the latter regarded as the most ungovernable and anarchic country of Europe. Clear that Hobbes believed that intellectual and religious ideas were the basis of all the problems.

In terms of intellectual thought, Renaissance scepticism understood but philosophers were trying to overcome the problem of the knowability of reality. Hence a deep interest in method – how could one construct a soundproof philosophical argument. Science had made great discoveries – Galileo going against all evidence of perception had demonstrated that the world was round. Hobbes is caught up in a dangerous intellectual environment – many of his conclusions were regarded as undermining the political and social order: he was often regarded as a figure of horror – an atheist. An irony perhaps when his main aim was to establish order and some freedom.

C.B. MacPherson points out that this is a time of increasing commercial development and the beginning of a new but not yet well developed market order emerging out of an old feudal system. His thesis is that Hobbes' view of man is "bourgeois" man – peculiarly individualistic and competitive and that this derives from the social and economic changes rather than the postulate of philosophical reasoning.

It is worth noting that the 17th century is a time when there is a battle for the supremacy of statute law over customary law i.e. the will of the sovereign body over the customs of the people as interpreted by judges.

The Object of the Leviathan

To demonstrate unquestionably – as scientifically and philosophically soundly as possible what can and must be the true basis of civil society and government to persuade men what they must accept and how they must act in order to get what they must want in life i.e. a quest for certainty which is hoped will prove persuasive. However, he despaired that his work would be as useless as Plato's.

The main objective is to get people to accept the sovereign nature of the state and the need for it. Machiavelli may have assumed sovereignty but Hobbes feels the need to prove its necessity.

How relevant to politics is the quest for certainty? Sheldon Wolin denies its relevance and questions the "architectonic" vision.

Method

He does not argue from history, theology or experience – from which he asserts one “concludeth nothing”. (this despite an empiricist epistemology). He prefers a form of deductive rationalism, arguing from first principles or a minimal axiomatic starting place – then constructs his theoretical model to logically flow from his axioms. He also tries to prove his minimal starting place so his work does not appear to rest on unproven assumptions. This is not an empirical method nor an inductive which he recognises will only hold true if all things remain the same. He prefers a geometric method which gives greater universal certainty for all time. But he also uses introspection on the basis that one can know what is in one’s own mind. Note his clear cut definitions. To criticize him one can disagree with the starting place or the way the argument is built or the inconsistencies or flaws in the logic. Or, as with Wolin, one could also reject the entire methodology. However, that will not necessarily destroy his entire political proposition that a coercive sovereign is needed due to men's competitive wilfulness.

Questions asked, starting places and assumptions

His basic question is “Why do people live as they do under sovereign governments?” What is the purpose of the state? What is the relationship of the state to the individual? The notion of a sovereign state employed is of a body which takes no orders, commands or limitations from any other body or organisation outside itself, nor is such a sovereign state limited internally. His aim is to demonstrate the logic and necessity of such a sovereign body. To do this he starts by analysing the nature of human beings then hypothesizes what it would be like without civil society or power to keep them in order. He can then conclude why civil society and government is constructed and what they must be like. The assumption here is that civil society and government is an artefact of man – it emanates from his will and is constructed for his purposes. Man has a capability of understanding what he himself has created. The implication of this is that civil society and government is not a gift of God – nor is it a given in nature – it is a unique achievement of man.

Construction of the Argument

Propositions:

Human beings must be understood to be autonomous, independent creatures with a right to govern themselves i.e. no one has any right to govern anyone else i.e. there is no God given right of any one (hence no reference to legitimate descent or Divine Right - such as used in previous attempts to justify absolutism). All have equal rights by nature. This egalitarian assumption negates traditional ideas of a hierarchical society.

All human beings are pretty much the same: they are very individualistic – creatures of desires, passions and aversions constantly responding to sensations received from the outside world which either give pleasure or pain. Those felt as pain are evil and those giving pleasure are good.

Men will seek their pleasure and avoid pain and can do nothing else as their will to do otherwise is not free – they are determined in this way (there is an elaborate attempt to prove this from a notion of the universe as bodies moving in space impacting on humans).

Human beings are also conceived as creatures of imagination and memory as well as being extremely competitive, delighting in being one up on everyone else. In his imagination man believes himself to be superior to others. He possesses foresight enough to wish not only his present but also his future desires be fulfilled. The achievement of his desires is dependent on his power to get what he wants. The problem is that all individuals want pretty much the same things and there is a situation of scarcity. Men are therefore apt to dispute over the things they want and led to desire power over others to stop them from interfering with the achievement of their own desires. This desire for power cannot be quenched – it is ceaseless because man can imagine the things he will desire in the future and present power cannot be relied on to be enough. Hence men are stimulated to want more and more power in order to achieve security – in the knowledge that present and possible future desires will be satisfied.

Is this a realistic picture of human nature? Possibly flattering in that it makes no reference to herd like tendencies or leader worship.

The conclusion from this picture is man's nature is his predicament. How can these self-motivated, selfish, acquisitive, competitive and often violent and aggressive creatures live together in any security? The problem is that not only will there be disputes over material goods but individuals will discover that contrary to their own ideas about their superiority most people are roughly equal in cunning and reason which makes it impossible to be one up all the time. Frustrations will result – men will be in deadly fear that they will not be respected by other men – they will not naturally come to any intellectual and moral agreements.

The next step is to postulate what it would look like if one abstracted men from civil society and government. It becomes clear that life would be nasty brutish and short in a natural state without government and civil society. Each man would be pitted against the next in an endless struggle for power and resources in which losers would be filled with passion for revenge and desire to triumph over the other. Even winners would be apprehensive and fearsome that they might lose the next round. The conclusion is that this is a situation in which no one will achieve security and life will be dangerous – no one achieving their ends. Violence is endemic and war of all against all a constant threat. The fear of death – the end of all desires and power will emerge negating every desire.

The assumption about the state of nature is that there is no natural law or moral code by which men could agree to abide because there is no basis in knowledge for this – nor in men's psyche. Hence natural law has no meaning outside civil society and anyway there is no way of proving it (note the high level of relativism here). Worth noting that the "state of nature" is a mere

hypothetical device and that Hobbes was uninterested as to whether such a state ever existed.

The solution:

There is a solution to man's predicament. This dreaded situation of war of all against all and especially the fear of violent death will encourage men to reflect on the futility of their situation and perceive a means of salvation and a way to survive and keep secure. Despite men being more creatures of passion than reason, fear makes men more prudent and rational and they will conclude that:

- a) self interest necessitates some rules e.g. peace is desirable and everyone should try to promote it.
- b) Contracts should be kept otherwise no one is secure.
- c) Each man should be contented with so much liberty against other men as he would allow other men against himself. One man could not therefore possess any more rights than another.

These rules he terms natural laws although they do not stem from nature or God but from man's self interested nature which is their only binding force. These laws are rational although man's nature is not primarily so. Hence there is an assumption about rationality and equality – but as Wolin points out it is limited to the political realm.

Rules may be rationally conceived by all but individuals will only keep the rules if others do so, hence Hobbes concludes that there must be some legitimate authority with coercive power to enforce the rules. This power must also make the rules. The rules must be regarded as applying equally to all otherwise they will not be obeyed. (Equality before the law is clearly a modern concept negating the medieval assumption of hierarchy and estates).

The contract:

On reflection, everyone will agree that a state of nature is intolerable and the way out is to make a contract or agreement for each and everyone to give up their rights to make their own decisions about right and wrong. Each will therefore give up his right to govern himself to a sovereign power "x" provided everyone else does so too. The contract in Hobbes becomes not a contract between the sovereign power "x" and the individual, but rather a contract between each and every person agreeing with one another to give up their power to "x". The sovereign power may be one man or a body of men. The argument remains the same in logic. One can imagine that the wills of all the contracting parties therefore form an artificial body – called the Leviathan.

(Note that this argument does not impress monarchists as there is no reference to legitimacy by descent, a body of men can replace one man.& obligation to obey rests on the reality of power to maintain order & peace).

The sovereign body as constituted has the power to make laws unlimited by customary or natural law and it must have the strength to enforce them and punish the citizens for disobedience. This understanding of sovereignty is modern, but liberals have been worried by its absolute nature. Political allegiance to the sovereign is absolute unless the sovereign is not doing its job of ensuring security and order. The duty of a subject is to obey as long as their life is not in danger. This is a discourse of sovereigns and subjects not citizens.

Civil society is a body with a sovereign such as this – otherwise it is just a headless mass. It is worth noting here that there is no distinction made between civil society and the state – they are as one. Liberals tend to reject this preferring to differentiate state from society to protect civil society and individuals against the state. This may appear to be a strange non-sociological view of society composed of dissociated individuals held together only by contract. However, this is not meant to be a realistic view – simply a logical view.

Law

Law, itself, becomes the command of the properly constituted sovereign who has power to enforce it. Freedom is only possible in an ordered civil society where law is maintained. Power is the most important element. This offended royalists because it implied that if the king could not keep order sovereignty could reside in Parliament if it could do so. Where there is no power according to Hobbes, there is no legitimacy. If one's sovereign cannot keep peace there is no obligation to obey.

Hobbes thinks all this will work reasonably well so long as most people believe it is in their interest to obey and do so. Some will try to get the benefit of having everyone else obeying and not to do so themselves i.e. they get security and freedom at the same time (something we all would like). But as long as these remain the minority, it will still work. However, it is important that the sovereign should be able to punish those who break the law. There is an assumption here that we are all rational enough to recognize that some freedom and self rule must be alienated in order to get security and that is the best deal one can get.

Morality:

The stance Hobbes takes that there are no moral obligations outside civil society and state has worried commentators as well as the view that law emanates from the sovereign alone. Nothing is seen logically to limit state authority. In what sense is this a reasonable but perhaps very limited view of law? Could one accept that there is no morally binding force outside the state? How could one cope with the Nuremberg Trials?

The fusion of civil society and state:

Hobbes, unlike Locke, postulates that if the sovereign is removed, society falls apart. There appears to be no glue cementing social bonds apart from a rationalistic and self interested contractual agreement of all to obey a sovereign. Can such a mechanistic view of man and society be no more than a severe warning as to the dangers of disobedience and excessive and emotional political argumentation? How persuasive is this view?

Religion:

It is interesting that what worried the 17th century more than the concept of unlimited sovereign arbitrary power was Hobbes' final position on the Church and religion.

He treats this in section 4 of the Kingdom of Darkness. He believes that the trouble and strife of the 16th and 17th centuries were due to different interpretations of Christianity. Unfortunately, here he recognized that the problem is that it is impossible to prove anything at all, at least logically, or for certain. Here was an area where knowledge and precise usage of language i.e. philosophy could not penetrate. Religion therefore is a contradiction of knowledge, it is a belief in something that cannot be known – at least in philosophical terms. But he felt it was useful and desirable and that it sprang from the prudent fear of what is beyond the power of reason and prudence to decipher. We fear the unknown and therefore we worship it. Religion concerns faith not reason. He was prepared to accept the rational postulate that God could be seen as a prime mover and initiator of all movement and the universe – but nothing really doctrinal follows from this.

However, religion is practically very useful and in a Christian community the word of God had to be interpreted. This could either be done by each individual or some established authority. However, total anarchy would result from everyone interpreting, therefore some one body had to do so. Before he wrote the Leviathan he indicated that the Anglican Establishment would interpret God's laws, but in the Leviathan he concluded that the one sovereign power would have to do so – thus rolling Church and state together. This does not mean, however, that Hobbes wanted a dogmatic or totalitarian type of society – far from it, he appears to have favoured independency which advocated that the state should establish some general structure of the faith but allow different groups their own doctrinal interpretations. He seems to have disliked all the crazy dogmatists trying to impose their particularistic doctrinal views on everyone which they had no way of proving. Hence it would seem a mistake to interpret Hobbes as wanting any powerful ideological or religious control. He is not advocating Godly Princes (such as Calvin and Luther) and he did not approve much of the Scottish Presbyterians. How seriously he took all these religious debates is very questionable, although one writer (Hood) interpreted him as a protestant theologian due to his separation of faith and reason.

Hence with Hobbes there is no Ayatollah Khomeini position. Nor is there any idea about creating a new type of man or transforming souls – despite Leviathan's comprehensive authority. Hobbes appears to have a more

negative view of the state – powerful and sovereign but fairly limited to keeping order, maintaining contracts and preventing civil war.

Interpretations:

Michael Oakeshott: Argues that Hobbes is trying to establish maximum civil freedom or intellectual freedom which had been curbed by churches and guilds and societal institutions of the medieval period. He was outraged that Galileo was condemned by the Church. However, this thesis has to be judged against Hobbes' support for the necessity of the censorship of ideas both printed and oratorical so that order be maintained. There is also the problem that absolutism is no real protection of civil liberties and the universities had been purged by all powerful governments in the 17th century. Can one have civil freedom protected without any political freedom?

Sheldon Wolin: Sees Hobbes as trying to establish civil security and freedom at the expense of political freedom. There is nothing in Hobbes to suggest citizens should be encouraged to participate in politics and he does not feel that civic virtue and participation strengthens states. A sense of common life is absent snapping continuity between present and past. Reality appears as an arbitrary construction of the human mind "Armed with the right method and opportunity man could construct a political order as timeless as a Euclidean theorem". Wolin questions whether this is a genuinely political analysis as such – he feels politics is absent. Clearly this depends on his conception of politics and the political. Wolin has a liberal view of politics – that it is about conflict resolution – the exchange and conciliation of conflicting views, values and interests. This in fact demands a more pluralist view of society – which is totally absent in Hobbes. Wolin also feels this architectonic view of politics and society, this abstracted view, is vision rather than politics and this type of approach drives out and leaves no room for the political. One could question whether the quest for certainty is relevant for politics because certainty closes down debate and an exchange of views and opinions.

He also questions where the power of the Leviathan is to come from – private power would be needed to support this kind of authority. He concludes that Hobbes has pitted himself against political society and has eroded the genuinely & distinct conception of "the political" . However, Hobbes' work is meant to be abstract and logical rather than empirical – so is his critique is simply based on a rejection of Hobbes entire method?

C.B. MacPherson: Associates Hobbes with the rise of a market economy and views him as a "possessive individualist" along with Locke In his opinion Hobbes's view of human nature is a reflection of "bourgeois" man – acquisitive, individualistic and competitive. His stress on the sovereign state as an anti-dote to interfering social entities like the Church and guilds might support this argument. In this sense the idea of individual freedom is to pursue economic goals unhindered by medieval moral and religious rules. However, against this it might be noted that although Hobbes assumes everyone has a right to property as a means of survival he by no means

restricts the sovereign from re-distributing it if the way it operated physically endangered the people or the state.

As MacPherson views both Hobbes and Locke as theorists of “possessive individualism” both are often seen as liberal thinkers. Yet to what extent is Hobbes a liberal thinker? His support of absolute sovereignty and the necessity of obedience do not seem liberal in the political sense, but his individualism and desire for civic freedoms could perhaps support an argument for economic liberalism. Indeed, is there perhaps a case for viewing Hobbes as a precursor of the New Right i.e. strong state, strong law and order but competitive market, free economy with each individual pursuing his own ends in a relatively unlimited way?

International Society

Is there now a case for viewing the international community as in a state of nature with no authority to keep the peace? Or at least no authority with any power to do so? Yet would we accept a Hobbesian conclusion? It worth noting that Kant has a different idea as to how to achieve "perpetual peace".