

Thomas Hobbes (1588 -1679)

Thomas Hobbes is really the first Englishman who wrote comprehensively on political philosophy and made valuable contributions to it. He is one of the most controversial and important figures in the history of western political thought. His status as a political thinker was not fully recognised until the 19th century. The philosophical radicalism of the English utilitarians and the scientific rationalism of the French Encyclopaedists incorporated in a large measure Hobbes mechanical materialism, radical individualism and psychological egoism. By the mid-20th century Hobbes was acclaimed as “probably the greatest writer on political philosophy that the English speaking people have produced”. According to Micheal Oakeshott, “the Leviathan is the greatest, perhaps the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language”.

Hobbes lived at a time of great constitutional crisis in England when the theory of Divine Right of Kings was fiercely contested by the upholders of the constitutional rule based on popular consent. It is he who for the first time systematically expounded the absolute theory of sovereignty and originated the positivist theory of law. Though he was not a liberal, modern commentators believe that his political doctrine has greater affinities with the liberalism of the 20th century than his authoritarian theory would initially suggest. From a broad philosophical perspective, the importance of Hobbes is his bold and systematic attempt to assimilate the science of man and civil society to a thoroughly modern science corresponding to a completely mechanistic conception of nature.

His psychological egoism, his ethical relativism and his political absolutism are all supposed to follow logically from the assumptions or principles underlying the physical world which primarily consists of matter and motion. Hobbes was prematurely born in 1588 in Westport near the small town of Malmesburg in England at a time when the country was threatened by the impending attack of the Spanish Armada.

His father was a member of the clergy (vicar) near Malmesburg .His long life was full of momentous events.

He was a witness to the great political and constitutional turmoil caused by English civil war and his life and writings bear clear imprint of it. After his education at Oxford, Hobbes joined as tutor to the son of William Cavendish, who was about the same age as Hobbes. The association of Cavendish family lasted, with some interruptions until Hobbes' death. Through his close connection with the royal family he met eminent scholars and scientists of the day such as Bacon Descartes, Galileo etc. His first publication was translation in English of Thucydides History of the Peloponnesian War in 1629. Besides just before he died, at the age of 86, he translated Homer's Odyssey and Iliad into English. The important works of Hobbes include De Civie and the Leviathan.

Hobbes' political philosophy in the Leviathan (1651) was a reflection of the civil war in England following the execution of Charles I. According to William Ebenstein the Leviathan is not an apology for the Stuart monarchy nor a grammar of despotic government but the first general theory of politics in the English language' What makes Leviathan a masterpiece of philosophical literature is the profound logic of Hobbes' imagination, his power as an artist. Hobbes recalls us to our morality with a deliberate conviction, with a subtle and sustained argument. State of nature and Human nature Hobbes' political theory is derived from his psychology which in turn is based on his mechanistic conception of nature.

According to Hobbes', prior to the formation of commonwealth or state, there existed state nature. Men in the state of nature were essentially selfish and egoistic. Contrary to Aristotle and medieval thinkers, who saw human nature as innately social, Hobbes viewed human beings as isolate egoistic, self interested and seeking society as a means to their ends. Unlike most defenders of absolute government, who start out with the gospel for inequality, Hobbes argues that men were naturally equal in mind. This basic equality of men is a principal source of trouble and misery. Men have in general equal faculties; they also cherish like hope and desires. If they desire the same thing, which

they cannot both obtain, they become enemies and seek to destroy each other.

In the state of nature, therefore men are in a condition of war, of every man against every man and Hobbes adds that the nature of the war consists not in actual fighting “but in the known disposition there to” force and fraud the two cardinal virtues of war, flourish in this atmosphere of perpetual fear and strife fed by three Psychological causes: competition, diffidence and glory. In such a condition, there is no place for industry, agriculture, navigation, trade; there are no arts or letters; no society, no amenities of civilised living, and worst of all, there is continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’. According to Hobbes, there can be no distinction between right and wrong in the state of nature.

Any conception of right and wrong presupposes a standard of conduct, a common law to judge that conduct and a common law giver. Again there is no distinction between just and unjust in the state of nature, for where there is no common superior, there is no law and where there is no law there can be no justice. Hobbes asserted that every human action, feeling and thought was ultimately physically determined. Though the human being was dependent on his life, on the motion of his body he was able to some extent, to control those motions and make his life. This he did by natural means, ie, by relying partly on natural passions and partly on reason.

It was reason, according to Hobbes, that distinguished human beings from animals. Reason enabled the individual to understand the impressions that sense organs picked up from the external world, and also indicated an awareness of one’s natural passions. He mentioned a long list of passions, but the special emphasis was on fear, in particular the fear of death, and on the universal and perfectly justified quest for power. `` Hobbes contended that life was nothing but a perpetual and relentless desire and pursuit of power, a prerequisite for felicity. He pointed out that one ought to recognise a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for power after power that ceased only in death. Consequently, individuals were averse to death;

especially accidental death for it marked the end of attainment of all felicity.

Power was sought for it represented a means of acquiring those things that made life worthwhile and contented. The fact that all individuals sought power distinguished Hobbes from Machiavelli. Hobbes observed that human beings stood nothing to gain from the company of others except pain. A permanent rivalry existed between human beings for honor, riches and authority, with life as nothing but potential warfare, a war of every one against the others. Hobbes human relationships is as those of mutual suspicion and hostility. The only rule that individuals acknowledged was that one would take if one had the power and retain as long as one could. In this "ill condition" there was no law, no justice, no notion of right and wrong. Thus according to Hobbes, the principal cause of conflict was within the nature of man.

As mentioned earlier, competition, diffidence and glory were the three reasons that were quarrel and rivalry among individuals. "The first, make the men invade for Gain; the second, for safety and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves Masters of other men's persons.... the second to defend them; the third, for trifles....." In a state of nature, individuals enjoyed complete liberty, including a natural right to everything, even to one another's bodies. The natural laws were not laws or commands. Subsequently, Hobbes argued that the laws of nature were also proper laws, since they were delivered in the word of God. These laws were counsels of prudence.

Natural laws in Hobbes' theory did not mean eternal justice, perfect morality or standards to judge existing laws as the Stoics did. It is clear from above observations that what is central to Hobbes' psychology is not hedonism but search for power and glory, riches and honor. Power is, of course, the central feature of Hobbes' system of ideas. While recognising the importance of power in Hobbesian political ideas, Michael Oakeshott wrote thus: "Man is a complex of power; desire is the desire for power, pride is illusion about power, honour opinion about power

life the unremitting exercise of power and death the absolute loss of power“

Thus Hobbes in his well known work, 'The Leviathan' has presented a bleak and dismal picture of the condition of men in the state of nature. However, Hobbes does not extensively discuss the question of whether men have actually ever lived in such a state of nature. He noted that the savage people in many places of America have no government and live in the brutish and nasty manner. John Rawls thinks that Hobbes' state of nature is the classic example of the "prisoner's dilemma" of game – theoretic analysis. Social contract After presenting a horrible and dismal picture of the state of nature, Hobbes proceeds to discuss how man can escape from such an intolerably miserable condition. 'In the second part of the Leviathan, Hobbes creates his commonwealth by giving new orientation to the old idea of the social contract, a contract between ruler and ruled.

Hobbes thus builds his commonwealth, 'the only way to erect such a common power as may be able to defend them (i.e. men) from the invasion of foreigners and the injuries of one another. is to confer all their power and strength upon one Man or upon one Assembly of men that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices unto one will the sovereign himself stands outside the covenant. He is a beneficiary of the contract, but not a party to it. Each man makes an agreement with every man in the following manner' "I authorize and give up my right of governing myself to this man or to this assembly of man on the condition that thou give up thy right to him, and authorise all his actions in like manner. This is the generation of that great Leviathan or rather (to speak more reverently) of that mortal god, to which we owe under the immortal God, our peace and defence.'

It is clear from the above statement that no individual can surrender his right to self-preservation. In order to secure their escape from the state of nature, individuals renounce their natural rights to all things, and institute by common consent, a third person, or body of persons, conferring all rights of him for enforcing the contract by using force and keeping them all and authorising all his action as their own.

According to Hobbes, the social contract institutes an office which may be held by one man or an assembly of men but which is distinct from the natural person of the holder. By the transfer of the natural rights to each man, the recipient becomes their representative and is invested with authority to deliberate, will and act in place of the deliberation will and action of each separate man. The multitude of conflicting wills is replaced, not by a common will but a single representative will. According to William Ebenstein, Hobbesian, social contract is made between subjects and subjects and not between subjects and sovereign. The sovereign is not a party to the contract, but its creation.

This contract is a unilateral contract in which the contracting individuals obligate themselves to the resultant sovereign. Then again it is an irrevocable contract where the individuals contract themselves into a civil society, they cannot annul the contract. They cannot repudiate their obligation. Repudiation of a contract is an act of public will of the individuals which they had surrounded at the time of the original contract. Thus Hobbesian contract is a social and not governmental contract. In this conception of social contract, the sovereign cannot commit any breach of covenant because he is not a party to it. By participating in the creation of the sovereign the subject is author of all the ruler does and must therefore not complain of any of the rulers' actions, because thus he would be deliberately doing injury to himself.

Hobbes concedes that the sovereign may commit iniquity but not "injustice or injury in the proper signification", because he cannot by definition, act illegally; he determines what is just and unjust and his action is law. Nature and attributes of state The heart of Hobbes' political philosophy is his theory of sovereignty. He was not the first to use the term sovereignty in its modern sense. It is beyond dispute that before and after Thomas Hobbes the doctrine of sovereignty has been defended by various scholars on various grounds. Hobbes was perhaps the first thinker to defend the sovereignty of the state on scientific grounds. Hobbes freed the doctrine of sovereignty of limitations imposed by Jean Bodin and Hugo Grotius. Hobbes saw the sovereign power as undivided, unlimited, inalienable and permanent.

The contract created the state and the government simultaneously. The sovereign power was authorised to enact laws as it deemed fit and such laws were legitimate. Hobbes was categorical that the powers and authority of the sovereign has to be defined with least ambiguity.

The following are some of the major attributes of Hobbesian sovereign.

1. Sovereign is absolute and unlimited and accordingly no conditions implicit or explicit can be imposed on it. It is not limited either by the rights of the subjects or by customary and statutory laws.
2. Sovereignty is not a party to the covenant or contract. A sovereign does not exist prior to the commencement of the contract. Contract was signed between men in the state of nature mainly to escape from a state of war of every man against every man. The contract is irrevocable.
3. The newly created sovereign can do no injury to his subjects because he is their authorised agent. His actions cannot be illegal because he himself is the sole source and interpreter of laws.
4. No one can complain that sovereign is acting wrongly because everybody has authorised him to act on his behalf.
5. Sovereign has absolute right to declare war and make peace, to levy taxes and to impose penalties.
6. Sovereign is the ultimate source of all administrative, legislative and judicial authority. According to Hobbes, law is the command of the sovereign.
7. The sovereign has the right to allow or takes away freedom of speech and opinion.
8. The sovereign has to protect the people externally and internally for peace and preservation were basis of the creation of the sovereign or Leviathan.

Thus Hobbesian sovereign represents the ultimate, supreme and single authority in the state and there is no right of resistance against him except in case of self-defence. According to Hobbes, any act of

disobedience of a subject is unjust because it is against the covenant. Covenants without swords are but mere words. Division or limitation of sovereignty means destruction of sovereignty which means that men are returning to the old state of nature where life will be intolerably miserable. By granting absolute power to the sovereign, some critics went to the extent of criticising Hobbes as the 'spiritual father of totalitarian fascism or communism'

However, William Ebenstein in his well-known work 'Great Political Thinkers' has opposed this charge on following grounds. Firstly, government is set up according to Hobbes, by a covenant that transfers all power. This contractual foundation of government is anathema to the modern totalitarians

Secondly, Hobbes assigns to the state a prosaic business; to maintain order and security for the benefit of the citizens. By contrast, the aim of the modern totalitarian state is anti-individualistic and anti-hedonistic.

Thirdly, Hobbesian state is authoritarian, not totalitarian. Hobbes' authoritarianism lacks one of the most characteristic features of the modern totalitarian state: inequality before the law, and the resultant sense of personal insecurity.

Fourthly, Hobbes holds that the sovereign may be one man or an assembly of men, whereas modern totalitarianism is addicted to the leadership principle. The Hobbesian sovereign is a supreme administrator and law giver but not a top rabble rouser, spellbinder, propagandist, or showman.

Fifthly, Hobbes recognises that war is one of the two main forces that drive men to set up a state. But whenever he speaks of war, it is defensive war, and there is no glorification of war in the Leviathan.

By contrast, totalitarians look on war as something lightly desirable and imperialist war as the highest form of national life. Thus it is clear from the above observations that Hobbes' theory of sovereignty is the first systematic and consistent statement of complete sovereignty in the

history of political thought. His sovereign enjoys an absolute authority over his subjects and his powers can neither be divided nor limited either by the law of nature or by the law of God. Hobbes' Leviathan is not only a forceful enunciation of the theory of sovereignty but also a powerful statement of individualism. As Prof. Sabine has rightly pointed out; in Hobbesian political philosophy both individualism and absolutism go hand in hand. Granting absolute and unlimited power to the state is, in essence, an attempt to provide a happy and tension free life to the individuals.

The Leviathan of Hobbes has been regarded as one of the masterpieces of political theory known for its style, clarity and lucid exposition. He has laid down a systematic theory of sovereignty, human nature, political obligation etc. Hobbes saw the state as a conciliator of interests, a point of view that the Utilitarian's developed in great detail. Hobbes created an all powerful state but it was not totalitarian monster. Hobbes is considered as the father of political science: His method was deductive and geometrical rather than empirical and experimental. His theory of sovereignty is indivisible, inalienable and perpetual. Sovereign is the sole source and interpreter of laws. Before and after Hobbes, political absolutism has been defended by different scholars on various grounds. Hobbes was perhaps the first political thinker to defend political absolutism on scientific grounds.

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