

SELECTED REVIEW OF THOMAS HOBBS' *LEVIATHAN*¹

Thomas Hobbes' system, as elucidated in *Leviathan* (1668), is about bringing stability and security to the human existence so that society may develop and prosper. In *Leviathan*, humans enter into social contracts amongst themselves, then designate a sovereign to which they pay "simple obedience." The sovereign may exist in a mélange of forms: whether individual, representative legislature, or in a much larger sense, the entire society. More important than the identity of the sovereign is the notion that it possesses capacity and legitimacy to protect its people from outside threat and prevent internal disputes. From *Leviathan*, it may be concluded that in "the state of nature" or the "war of all, against all" the human existence would atrophy from resulting conflict. The purpose of this essay will be to explain Hobbes' idea of government (system) by discussing: (1) Theory of Method and Language, (2) Theory of the State of Nature, and (3) Sovereign as an Authoritarian.

Method and Language

The explanation of method and language used by Hobbes are intended to establish regularity in a world he is trying to prove is regular. The previous logic of the old order was the world, like the authority of kings, was sacred and was to remain static and unchallenged. If Hobbes can establish that the world is a regular place then science will be the best method to acquire knowledge about it. In Chapter 4. [paragraph 1], Hobbes explains that the "most notable and profitable invention of all was speech" and without it there would not exist society, contract, or peace (16). The purpose of speech is to transfer mental discourse into a comprehensible means where others can understand the will of an individual. This can then be communicated through speech for mutual help of others. If we communicate with each other using words and reasonably understand each other's will, then we can begin to make obligations. The ability to understand each other initiates the creation of social contracts, which are vital in creating stable society—that is to say that if we can agree on language, then there must be much more that we agree upon. Hobbes cautions that speech can

¹ Hobbes, Thomas. 1668. *Leviathan*. Hackett Publishing Company.

be ambushed by using language that is deceitful, false (lies), harmful and insulting (16-17). Moreover, in Chapter 5, Hobbes argues that language should be “snuffed and purged of ambiguity” to prevent any improper reasoning or confusion (26). Language is the first step to establish order given the importance that humans possess the ability to communicate effectively—absent ambiguity—amongst each other. Without this basic requirement further advance is stunted, if not impossible. Language, nonetheless is the integral part of *Leviathan*. The prior political order Hobbes challenged believed its legitimacy was established by God and therefore was not open to question. The previous order thought the world should remain scared and not consumed for self-interest. However, Hobbes thought it acceptable to develop the world in such a way to benefit humans and better their condition. The world was not some magical place, but rather a regular place that could be studied mechanically and explained by matter and motion. Using this mechanical (scientific) method to study the world, Hobbes would be able to develop knowledge from human reason and not because the old political order determined it was that way. The world we experience daily is a regular place and if the proper method is used, then it can be understood. In Chapter 5, Hobbes prescribes a method to mechanically study the world that is to take apart a complex whole and study its parts by imposing names (fixing language to bring order), getting a “good and orderly method” to play with variables (playing close attention to the consequences) and then paying close attention to the result which creates laws to be regarded as agreements. This process allows things that were once in contention to be settled, which will create less constraint on reasoning when other ideas are evaluated later. The purpose of method is to understand laws of social order and to control people’s behavior. Hobbes’ thought that if humans could answer questions about the world in this way, then political questions could be answered using the same method, which like science would produce answers that were universally true and accepted much like geometry. Science develops knowledge and once knowledge is established it cannot be disputed. In geometry, there is no dispute over a three-sided shape being called anything other than a triangle. Any person who attempted to call a triangle a square would simply be foolish. This type of universally accepted idea was the same

Hobbes thought would lead humans to agreement and calm differing opinions over political authority, which if unresolved would (in his time) cause civil war or in the state of nature, destroy society. An agreement now is one that will not require amendment later and this method becomes the mechanism by which Hobbes uses to justify later arguments in *Leviathan*.

State of Nature

All men are created equal, but without maintaining the social contract between individuals, the entire plan to create order and stability can become unglued. Such a deterioration would plummet humans into the state of nature. The state of nature is void of guarantees. Being the most able, whether of mental or physical fortitude, does not increase one's chances of survival. Thus, the most beneficial action to promote survival is mutual cooperation. To use a line from "game theory", it would be better to cooperate and progress society, than to defect and lose it all. No person is so weak that he cannot take down the strong or that a person is so invincible that they can enjoy life without external threat. The state of nature can be imagined as any situation lacking order; not "ordered chaos", but the most imaginatively virulent and desolate venue. The crux of Hobbes' explanation is that where people live without government capable of regulation their conduct, there will be enough actual conflict or fear of conflict, that no person will have enough security in possession of any good to make life fruitful. As Hobbes' describes the state of nature:

"Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man...men live without security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish...In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain...no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building...no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death..." (76).

The human desire of retaliation to which Hobbes' cautions about in Chapter 14 [paragraph 4, p. 80] is incredibly dangerous and poses a significant detriment to the stable foundation of society. That is to say that if two people

desire the same thing and each cannot both enjoy them, then they become rivals destined to destroy each other by deprivation of life, liberty, and of goods that one has acquired; which would eventually result in the death of one of those rivals. The diffidence (mistrust) that can result between two people further complicates the social contract between others by spreading mistrust between individuals to the point that no person can reasonably secure himself from attack from someone else. This insecurity among people leads "good" individuals to take aggressive action (at times preemptively) because they must deter aggression since inaction create the perception of weakness. In paragraphs 6 & 7 (p. 81), Hobbes states that the principal causes of quarrel are competition, diffidence, and glory; and, respectively cause invasion for gain, the need for safety, and to create a reputation. When humans live without a sovereign, in the state of nature, under the aforementioned conditions, life is desolate and is a war against and amongst all. Hobbes compares these conditions to inclement weather, which is not a shower or two, but in severity for many days. Additionally, this war does not necessarily have the conditions of constant fighting, but rather the constant fear or threat of violence or death, which is to say, there is never any peacetime. In this war, "the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (76). Accordingly, there is an absence of morality: there is not right and wrong, no law and order, or even possessions. The fear of violent death, which is ubiquitous in the state of nature, compels that men seek peace among each other. To escape the state of nature, humans must form social contracts, establish societal constraints, then determine the capacity of a sovereign. The underpinning objective of the social contract is to surrender the right to everything, universally present in the state of nature, in order for life to be worthwhile. For example, if one person agrees not to tramples another garden and vice versa, then society can progress. If we can agree on science and not to trample each other's property, then there is hope to escape the state of nature.

After the agreement on social contracts, then the identity of the sovereign is necessary. As aforementioned the sovereign may exist in different forms, but the most important characteristics is rule by popular consent. In surrender of their right to everything, individuals pay obedience to the sovereign in turn for

the guarantees of protection and stability in a volatile world. If the sovereign has the power and the will to protect us, we owe obedience. The sovereign must not only be able to codify law, but enforce adherence thereto, adjudicate upon infraction, and render punishment accordingly. Without such legitimate authority, there would be no compelling demand to obey the agreed upon authority. Once the members of a society have instituted a sovereign, they cannot change the form of government, nor can the sovereign forfeit power; the social contract is not between him and his subjects, but among the subjects themselves. The sovereign is obliged only by the law of nature, and answerable to God. If the sovereign acts in such a way that is inconsistent with God's word, then it is not enough to believe that he is wrong, but one must know that is definite.² However, since the state of nature is awful, having a sovereign that favors our personal interest fails in comparison with our fear of what will happen if we do not have covenants. Yet, if the sovereign can no longer protect you, then your consent can be voided.

The state of nature does not simply imply a constant struggle between individuals, but that does not necessarily mean that it is everyone v. everyone all the time. In Chapter 8 [paragraph 15], Hobbes describes that humans have "desire of power, of riches, of knowledge, and of honour" (41). Power is driven by desire, but the desire for power can be dangerous to the stability of society. In the quest for "goods" of this life, there is no capable end that will satisfy human desire, which is to say the humans will never be satisfied. Power is just the present means of a person to attain goods. When a certain amount of power is accumulated, the ongoing power-seeking can lead to desire for power over others. Presumably, this is necessary in the occasion of competition with others for something desired, which can require superiority over others in an ability. This competition may be good or bad depending on its intent. For example, healthy competition can lead humans to cooperate over the fear of death, but unhealthy would lead to fighting. The natural man, which has escaped the state

² The conflicted relationship between the omnipresent and vacant role of God in *Leviathan* must be acknowledged. Humans retain the seeming right to establish their own morality or moral decision-making, whether obtained by natural or divine origin. Such an action would obscure God's role. Yet paradoxically, devotes the entire "Part III: Of a Christian Commonwealth" to the nature and role of God in the foundation of society. *Leviathan* was once under quite strict scrutiny, following the English Restoration, of tending to atheism.

of nature, would be wary of power struggles, but always aware that cooperation depends solely on the risk one is willing to take. Under the *Leviathan*, humans should know that power struggles could lead to the breaking of covenants that after all, are vital since humans need each other to prevent death. Even in the presence of a sovereign, individuals will still continue to crave power, since life without desire is meaningless or indifferent. It is natural for people to desire power, but reasoning leads to seeking peace through agreement.

Authoritarian Sovereign

Although a sovereign, in Hobbes' view requires absolute authority, occasions do exist where a sovereign possessing absolute authority is improper. In a proper scenario, per se wartime, the sovereign requires nearly unlimited power to guarantee protection, yet once obtained should leave the rest of your life alone. In Chapter 21 [paragraph 6], Hobbes states that it is impossible for a commonwealth in the world to regulate all the actions and words of men because humans have the reasoning to do what is "most profitable to themselves" (138). Also, Hobbes mentions in the same paragraph that the sovereign should allow individuals liberty "to buy, and sell, and otherwise contract with one another, to choose their own abode...diet...trade of life...and institute their children" (138). A sovereign cannot require you to commit certain acts such as to kill yourself. However, the sovereign has the ability to put you to death if you break a law to wit death is a justifiable punishment, but a sovereign cannot deprive you of life forcibly. Individuals have liberty (liberty of subjects) to act in their own best interests in certain behavior and the sovereign should be "praetermitted" to them. Hobbes' sovereign could be oppressive and strict as to attempt to interfere into areas that are unnecessary, but that would be unnecessary. Chances are the sovereign is most concerned about maintaining security from external threats. It would be a fool's errand to argue that Hobbes' sovereign is concerned about the trivial things of diet, living arrangements, and commerce. However, in a modern sense governments worry about these things much more than in the *Leviathan*.³ The sovereign is an authoritarian and not

³ M. Foucault calls this the government of life itself, or biopower. Hobbes' sovereign is legal, not biopolitical. Biopolitics interferes in the minutia of life.

totalitarian. If the sovereign told you specifically what to do and how to act, then perhaps, he would be a totalitarian, but Hobbes would reject a totalitarian sovereign since it would resemble too much of the old order he was trying to sever ties with. People have the reasoning to make up their own minds and surely do not need someone telling them exactly what to do. Therefore, an authoritarian is a better explanation of sovereign's ruling style in Hobbes' view. The sovereign (in *Leviathan* and in the present) wants (but really needs) us to engage in commerce to generate tax revenue. Without tax revenue, the country is poor and the threat of risk is increased. In the *Leviathan*, a poor country meant weakness and perceived weakness can lead to invasion from a neighbor, and result in what humans fear most—death. But regardless of the era of comparison, the sovereign wants people to be prosperous and happy. If the individual is prosperous and happy, then so too will be the sovereign.

Conclusion

Any effective form of government should offer stability and in return, individuals should offer simple obedience. Individuals and government have a relationship, sort of a quid pro quo, in which exists the mutual relationship between protection and obedience. A major underpinning of Hobbes' arguments in *Leviathan*, rests on the idea of government by consent. Before his writing, government by a divine-right monarchy existed on the idea that God set up the order and authority, including the authority of the king; therefore, obeying God and the king were one in the same. Therefore, you are expected to play a certain role in society, for example, if the government told you to be a peasant farmer then that was your place in society and if you cannot accept that, then you are disobeying the authority of God. In direct contrast, Hobbes reasoned that government is by our consent. We agree to follow the government, because after all, we created it. In the latter reasoning, people are equal to each other and acknowledge that terrible events can happen, given that evil of human nature, including conflicts, will destabilize and cause the self-destruction of society. Developing a society is not up to God, but we are left with clues about how to establish an existence that is contrary to the state of nature. Hobbes' acknowledges that the whole social order can come unglued at any time, such as

the authority of the church and monarch were in question during his time, but that we cannot rely on God and would best be served by our own reasoning. After all, its up to us to create our existence from a hostile world. Doubtless, Hobbes is very mechanical in creating a stable society, but states in Chapter 5 [paragraph 20] “reason is the pace; increase of science, the way; and the benefit of mankind, the end” (26). Human design is the only way to create a stable, prosperous existence and anything less would be detrimental to the whole design of government.

The whole objective of *Leviathan* is to get us to think about a new way to interpret the world, since the old convention was crumbling. Hobbes uses language and reasoning to offer a new interpretation of the world, not one that is dominated by the old order, but a new one that we can shape and create to our own will. In this new interpretation, human reason replaces God’s will since it had become obscure (God does not talk to use and Hobbes warns about those who claim to know the will of God). In the old logic, nature was sacred and could not be improved, but in Hobbes’ view nature exists for human consumption and to use in the pursuit of your self-interests. Language and method create understandings that lead to science and ultimately result in knowledge. If we can all agree that a three-sided figure in geometry is called a triangle, then we can reasonably agree that science is the model and thus, reasonable politics must follow. Through reasoning, we can all consent to social contracts amongst each other and in turn, consent to a sovereign. Through consent, we can avoid the state of nature. But we must be cautious even in the presence of covenants and in the agreement over the capacity of government because evil in society will remain, and because of that—humans will remain in a de facto a war of all against all.