

Hobbes features of sovereignty philosophy essay



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Thomas Hobbes, in his argument acknowledges the reasons as to why we need a higher authority, to which we will all be subjects. He goes on to explain how disorganized life would be without the existence of such an authority. He gives a clear and detailed insight on how the state would be without a higher authority in control, while also revealing the numerous problems that people would face in such a scenario. He strongly suggests that for people to get out of this state of fear and insecurity they should surrender their natural rights to an entity with higher power and consequently, this authority will provide them with security both internally and externally. However, he suggests that as a pre-requisite for this model to function as expected, sovereignty to the higher power should be absolute, and as a result, this authority will have the mandate to stipulate all the laws and principles that will govern the organization of life of these people. Therefore, a review of the key features of sovereignty for Hobbes, and how they follow from his argument concerning the state of nature has been conducted here-in.

Hobbes, through his key features of sovereignty desires to set life on a securely reasonable basis to render the society secure from self-destruction. Owing to the thinking and acting of human beings and his experience from the English Civil War, Hobbes is of the opinion that the traditional community and individualism cannot meet the primary purpose of ensuring a safe existence for all its members. He sees changes occurring in society because of religious differences and individualism. That in a way he tends to attack whatever is already in existence, with his greatest concern being to ensure that these changes occur on the most secure and reasonable basis.

According to him, religious differences and capitalism are the major threats of stability in society. He gives an insight into politics, through our understanding of the natural world. (Hobbes 1968, p. 226-27)

From his assumptions as regards the nature of people, he considers about the origins of a state. He proposes a reasonable analysis-how to construct properly functioning states, based on the general nature of human beings, which according to him they are the key features of sovereignty. In the first place, using the new mechanical mould of the natural world in understanding human psychology, he understands the nature of people as largely driven by great involuntary urges to possess more and more of power, an urge that only ceases after death. Therefore, in a bid to control the action of individual's as regarding their restless and continuous craving for power, it is only wise to agree and set up a central authority that will govern the actions of each individual accordingly. Theses would go a long way in reducing greed for power by some individuals.

Secondly, human beings also have other mechanically driven urges like security and fear of death in case of attacks. Whereas, every one desires to feel at ease and enjoy physical pleasure, something which forces people to obey a common authority. At an individual level, it would be hard to guarantee your own safety and peace of mind as regards impending danger (Coleman 1972, p. 6). Therefore, as a means of solution to this fear, an agreement to come together under the authority of a common state would be the only viable solution to this looming danger. Since the central authority can pool together its resources to ensure that its subjects are safe,

something which would have been impossible individually. This will ensure collective benefits for the masses.

Bearing in mind the nature of people as eternally motivated by desire for power and greed, then without some order in society then we would exist in what Hobbes refers to as a state of nature. Every one would be against the other in the continuous pursuit for power. There would be no laws and principles, nor would there be a system of justice to offset fairness and equality. Since such a society would allow everything, consequently, forces of the struggle to survive would end up ruling such a community and its people. There would be so much damage, hostility and fear. Therefore, according to Hobbes, the idea of complete freedom from political ruling would just lead to chaos. Death, fear and poverty would replace the sanity, because there is no form of business nor would any movement take place and the whole society would be in total disarray.

Thomas Hobbes believes that sovereignty is a general natural law that human beings get to know of through the exercise of reason. Hobbes bases his political theories on a pseudo-historical explanation of how states came into existence. He argues that the idea of sovereignty is fundamental to the formation of any particular state or authority. He considers the political changes and their effects on the people at the time. For instance, he considers the European dictatorship and even declarations to the privileges that kings enjoyed. According to him, developing political illumination and the American and French revolutions led to some huge and lasting changes in political talk. In his opinion, the division caused by these revolutions and the dictatorship at the time was useful in some way. He tries to embed the <https://assignbuster.com/hobbes-features-of-sovereignty-philosophy-essay/>

existing ideas of dictatorship onto a reasonable explanation for the state from its conception, in the form of the initial modern social contract dispute (Beitzinger 1972, p. 33).

The social contract ideology dates back to the times of Plato, but it was Hobbes who actually grafted it into politics. In his argument, Hobbes reveals that the idea of a state originated, at a time when a group of men made an agreement between themselves to give up most of their natural rights to a single authority, a process through which the supreme authority of their commonwealth, as referred to as by Hobbes was established. This formed a natural law, whose rules also applied to the generations that followed.

Implying that a commonwealth or state would constitute a group of people and their descendants, who would be equally and permanently, subjected to its supreme powers. Hobbes perception of control is an answer to the problem of uncertainty and brutality in the state of nature. Through the mutual contract between the people by giving up their rights, they create a higher authority which guarantees their security both of life and property. This sovereign authority created is above the law and cannot be stopped from functioning. Clearly indicating the need for a superior power to govern the people or else there would be chaos all over in order to gain more power over the others and individuals would live in the state of nature.

According to Hobbes, sovereignty power is bearing the burden of an individual person for all those who are its subjects. It also involves powers to formulate laws, judge disagreements, rewarding and punishing subjects and appointing legislators. The act of people giving up their individualism to the ruler deprives them of their rights to make moral judgments or even criticize

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the ruler, since the very subjects themselves apparently do everything done by the supreme. In actual sense, individuals give up their rights to judge whether the supreme power is working towards meeting the very goals that led to its establishment, as the supreme is the overall. This is virtually the biggest drawback of Hobbes' theory, for it seems contradictory why individuals should establish a commonwealth, which will later on deprive them of the very power to question its actions (McCormick, 2008, p. 3).

He uses the term person to imply agency. In that, the assumption is that the commonwealth has the mandate to act as the agent of the subjects and therefore with such powers, it can make contracts with other third parties on behalf of its subjects. Therefore, anything the state does is deemed to have been carried out at the request of its people. However, the sovereign should never breach the contract, since the contract is not an agreement to obey a particular individual, but the ruler is also bound by the contract just like the subjects themselves. This implies that the subjects can actually revoke a contract which is not beneficial to them, if in agreement. Hobbes says that this is because the people opt to give up their rights to make contracts and also in terminating them without the ruler's consent. Therefore, even without the sovereign's consent, they can terminate a contract that is not at all beneficial to them. But generally, the sovereignty is supreme, incontestable, and unchallengeable.

The sovereignty should be indivisible-that none of the crucial elements of the sovereignty can be separated from the others (Strauss 1953, p. 167). All the control of sovereignty should be within the same body, which serves to prevent any kind of rebellions or splits within the same government. The

sovereignty should enjoyed unconditional power of the State, both eternal and superior to the rules. His idea of sovereignty is completely tradition from the way he represents it as something that an individual can own and even pass it to the descendants as some form of possession. As regards the state of nature, Hobbes wants to depict a new society that abhors civil fighting as compared to individuals living in the state of nature. He insists that mutiny is not justifiable since sovereignty is not about obedience to a person, and for that reason, any kind of disobedience towards the sovereignty cannot dissolve the tie. This is due to the fact that the bond just exists between the subjects and there is no connection between the sovereignty and its subjects.

Hobbes sees the return to a state of nature in cases of war. Without the existence of any external rules, the state of nature is the unavoidable outcome of human beings acting normally, basically under the influence of emotions. He begins his study with the person outside of society and allots to that person rights to do whatever he wishes and can obtain by use of force. This aspect of being completely free from any expected control leads to a situation where there is order morally-a state of nature. The concept of political assumption begins with the free people living outside any civil force symbolizes a drastic re-orientation of the traditional political thoughts, because as of now an important feature of the state will be how the rights that the individuals possessed before the establishment of a civilization will be administered. This observation embraces that there is no ordinary justice and no social order is present in the community before the people finally create one. Existence of society follows existence of individual life and rights:

to do things how one wished, as there were no laws governing the people (Hume 1953, p. 43).

Hobbes further argues that the state of nature comes to an end when people realize the need to form a society, other than continue killing each other.

This understanding of the importance of a community comes by nature and does not necessitate education or scriptural illumination. Individuals have enough rationale to understand this on their own, a process governed by the Laws of Nature. This understanding is because of reason, based on an individual's self-interests. Through this awareness, a state emerges through an intentional agreement between those in a state of nature, by agreeing to appoint a third party or independent body to rule them. They give up all their influence for the sovereign achievement of the independent body by agreeing to obey whatever the Sovereign stipulates. The contract is only among those who are being governed. The Sovereign cannot be held accountable as it is not a party to the contract. Therefore, all the powers of the contract are bestowed upon the sovereign, who is not accountable to the subjects, unless the ruler so wishes to take the responsibility. This portrays the previous state of the people during the state of nature. How they enjoyed absolute power to do anything without being answerable.

(Molesworth, 1839, p. 2)

Under the state model, the major aspect is the contractual duty of the members to the agreement, each of whom is bound to obey equally. There is no room for class differences based on wealth and origin. There are no traditional ranks engaged with family customs being brought to an end. This leaves the sovereign law as the only force guiding human behaviour. The

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obligation of each subject to the sovereign law is the fundamental matter in this political life. The sovereign laws determine what is permissible and what is forbidden as opposed to the state of nature, where individuals are not governed by any rules, they do as they please. In the state, what is not forbidden is permissible. Hence there is liberty and the subjects can do their work with minimal intrusion from the state and others.