

# Hobbes views on political roles in leviathan

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The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy states that the history ' of political thought is replete with attempts to provide a satisfactory account for political obligation' . Hobbes's Leviathan epitomises this as he brings forward a rational argument for the existence of an absolute sovereign, as ' political obligation' is argued to be in the best interests of the subject. A strong political authority within this seminal text is argued to be a solution to the contemporary turmoil which existed in England contemporarily and as a force which is capable of preventing future chaos. Hobbes argues the importance of political obligation and an ' absolute sovereign' through his compelling theories and insights on the state of nature, the social contract, religion and freedom. In order to provide a strong and comprehensive account for the purpose of the Leviathan, this investigation will briefly explore the contemporary socio-political chaos which existed and use this as a foundation to explore Hobbes's social and political ideas.

As Jean Hampton notes in Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition, ' every political philosopher is influenced by the economic, social, and political events of their time, and Hobbes's work was particularly responsive to the political turmoil of his day' . Since his birth, Hobbes bore witness to civil war and social disorder, and his publications aimed to provide a philosophical explanation and a political solution for the contemporary chaos. Hobbes was born in 1588, shortly before the Spanish Armada were sent to attack England during the war with the Netherlands. During his early years, a civil war within France came to light amid the strong tensions between the Protestant Huguenots and the Catholic monarchy. During his adult years the ' Thirty Years War' continued to destroy Europe from 1618 to 1648, this was

particularly an important event as it saw European nations battle over the power balance within the region and over religious disputes. Whilst this destructive battle continued, ' England itself was plunged into civil war and disorder from 1642 to 1649' as there was a deeply entrenched dichotomy between Parliamentarians and Royalists . Oliver Cromwell waged war against Ireland, Scotland and Holland during the years of his protectorship, and two other wars occurred between England and the Netherlands in 1665 and 1672 . It was amid these chaotic events Hobbes brought forward his compelling ideas on civil science and his defence of an absolute sovereign power.

The worsening political climate forced Hobbes to flee from in England to France in 1640. King Charles I ' found himself obliged to stand by while his advisers were arrested and his regime denounced' . This was a frightening event for advocates of absolute authority; Roger Maynwaring was executed under parliamentary order due to his preaching and commitment to the absolute power of Kings . Hobbes in a letter to John Aubrey stated that himself and Maynwaring's views were similar and feared that he may experience the same punishment. In Brief Lives, Aubrey notes that ' then thought Mr. Hobbes, ' tis time now for me to shift for my selfe, and so withdrew into France and resided at Paris ' . He continued to work on the application of ' scientific principles to civic life' whilst in France. At this time De Cive was made and published in Latin in 1642, it was later published in English under the title Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society in 1651. In 1651 also, at a time when England was a republic, Hobbes returned from France and published his most seminal text, the Leviathan.

The Leviathan built on his previous ideas (brought forward in *De Cive*) as well as the existing philosophical defences for absolute rule. Hobbes felt a stronger need to confront the ' conflict between Parliament and Crown' due to the existing political condition of England . At this time, ' the New Model Army had been successfully mobilised, the King had been executed, Parliament had passed acts to abolish the monarchy and the House of Lords, and Cromwell had established the Commonwealth' . Amid this turmoil, great debates existed questioning ' the legitimacy of regicide', ' the authority of Cromwell's regime and whether it was right to take the oath of ' engagement' to be faithful' to this authority . Quentin Skinner in *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* argues that these pressing questions caused Hobbes to make ' subtle but significant changes' . For example, Hobbes modifies his definition of liberty within the Leviathan. In *De Cive*, Skinner notes that Hobbes ' offers a clear and simple definition of liberty' in order to counter the existing ' republican' arguments against absolute government. Liberty is defined here as ' nothing other than the absence of impediments to motion' and ' however absolute a sovereign power maybe, our subjection to it cannot be equated with servitude' . This definition takes a subtle but evocative change in Leviathan, as Hobbes defines liberty ' not simply as the absence of impediments to motion but the absence of external impediments' also .

Skinner notes that this was an important historical moment as Hobbes distinguishes between liberty and power. Hobbes, as Skinner notes, identifies liberty to consist of ' the absence of impediments to action on the one hand, and, on the other, the capacity to act', in essence, intrinsic limitations such as fear, which leads to the submission to an absolute sovereign, may take

away our power but only external obstacles can take away our liberty . This is a compelling understanding of freedom. It challenges the existing republican notions by offering an alternative understanding; ‘ the presence of freedom is construed entirely as absence of impediments rather than absence of dependence’ . When considering the national and international conflict of the time, the denouncement of the monarchy and the development in Hobbes’s philosophy, it is clear that Hobbes’s aimed to ‘ set out the rational grounds for obedience’ through the Leviathan . ‘ Given this kind of violent turmoil, it is not surprising that a philosopher should come to hold a view of human beings as creatures who will, if unchecked, inevitably behave violently toward one another’ . This leads me onto explore this pessimistic view of mankind presented by Hobbes within the Leviathan.

Through the Leviathan Hobbes explores the physical and intrinsic characteristics of man and aims to provide an explanation for why these characteristics can lead to conflict within society. According to Hobbes, ‘ analyzing the complicated physical structure of a human being helps us to understand not only how the parts of the human “ engine” work but also what fundamental desires and motivations each human being possesses intrinsically, in virtue of the way one’s body functions’ . These ‘ intrinsic motivations’ play an important part in understanding the purpose of the Leviathan as they lay the foundation for Hobbes’s ‘ moral and political conclusions’, as Hobbes argues these natural characteristics have the capacity to lead to social chaos .

Power is an important concept which Hobbes explores within his analysis of mankind. As mentioned earlier, Hobbes distinguishes between liberty and power in that liberty is clearly absence from restraint and ‘ the capacity to act’ . Power on the other hand equates to happiness as it is defined as the ‘ present means to attain some future apparent good’ . This means that ‘ power’ according to Hobbes is based on the ability to obtain what you desire; this is consistent with his views on happiness as he considers felicity to be the ability to secure the reoccurrence of pleasure:

‘ Felicity is a continual progress of the desire from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the latter. The cause whereof is that the object of man’s desire is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time, but to assure forever the way of his future desire. And therefore the voluntary actions and inclinations of all men tend not only to the procuring, but also to the assuring of a contented life, and differ only in the way, which ariseth partly from the diversity of passions in diverse men, and partly from the difference of the knowledge or opinion each one has of the causes which produce the effect desired’ .

Here, Hobbes explains that felicity depends on the ability to secure the means of ongoing enjoyment. Hobbes means us to understand this as ‘ a desire for personal advancement that is somehow biologically intrinsic and that is so strong in us that when we cannot see it satisfied by the reality of our own powers and abilities in the world, we lie to ourselves and inflate those powers and abilities’ . Despite the diversity in desires Hobbes identifies here, he claims there to be a natural desire for ‘ a contented life’ which is

ongoing. Within this theory a compelling distinction can be seen between the two forms power takes: 'natural power' being the abilities that one has to begin with such as 'extraordinary strength, good looks, prudence, practical skill, eloquence or generosity', whilst 'instrumental powers' are 'acquired through the use of natural powers or through luck; they are means and instruments to acquire more, for example riches, reputation, friends, and the secret working of God which men call good luck'. As mankind is regarded to have a 'perpetual and restless desire for power after power, that ceseath only in death', it is this pursuit of ongoing enjoyment which perpetuates competitiveness amongst individuals within society. Hobbes argues this not to be a consequence of greed but claims this desire for power to indentify a natural need to ensure self preservation as there is a finite amount of recourses available which provide pleasure. Therefore, individuals are in constant competition to secure recourses. The identification and analysis of this characteristic shows the Leviathan to carry the purpose of indentifying the natural traits which contribute to social conflict.

It is important to note that there are important developments made within the Leviathan on humanity that build on the ideas from previous texts. Within the Leviathan, Hobbes 'wished to make his account for conflict more plausible and persuasive'. Through the idea of self preservation, Hobbes argues that men have the right to whatever they believe will secure self preservation, but is careful to note that this right will not extend over all things. This way of thought is noted to only occur after conflicts have begun; therefore enabling an individual to believe that he has a legitimate claim to entitlement after or during competitive struggles. This is important because

once ‘ people begin to claim this right, there is competition for every object and conflict between them can only escalate in frequency and intensity’ . Though this is different from his earlier notions within De Cive Chapter 1 (section 10) and The Elements of Law, as in the earlier publications, he suggests a natural claim of entitlement which immediately extends to all things. In The Elements of Law he claims that ‘ everyman by nature hath right to all things, that is to say, to do whatsoever he listeth to whom he listeth, to possess, use, and enjoy all things he will and can’ . He continues to note that:

‘ For seeing all things he willeth, must therefore be good unto him in his own judgment [...] and we have made him judge thereof [...] it followeth that all things may rightly also be done by him’ .

Hampton captures the problems with this premise and the need for adjustment in stating that ‘ it is very strained to maintain that before warfare has begun every human being will conclude that all things in the world are useful to him in his efforts to survive, and thus that he should have a liberty-right to all things’ . The ‘ advantage of his Leviathan account in Chapter 13 is that he [an individual] can start from a much more limited entitlement claim’, therefore advocating the more plausible premise of there being a progressive claim to things that are essential to one’s survival. This is a significant development in Hobbes’s political theory as it confirms that part of the purpose of Leviathan was to provide a more plausible account for desire and competition . This leads me on to discuss Hobbes’s state of nature thesis as this is synonymous with his understanding of mankind.



The state of nature theory is gripping because it not only builds on the natural characteristics of man put forward by Hobbes, but it also provides a rational account for conflict. The state of nature is a hypothetical political argument which Hobbes uses to emphasize the importance of an absolutist sovereign power. Without the presence of such a force, he claims that the innate desire for power and self preservation would lead to a state of progressively aggressive competition. This process would instil fear and paranoia within the minds of individuals causing them to be restricted by their fear of invasion:

‘ In such condition 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; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’ .

Here, Hobbes suggests the existence of a liberal paradox within the state of nature. As individuals would be free to fulfil their desires without any political or legal restriction, there would be no constitutional form of protection in place to defend individuals ‘ against a common enemy, nor against the injuries of one another’ . In essence, despite the fact that individuals would possess complete liberty to do as they please, they would be held back by the fear of others and the paranoia evoked by the absence of protection offered by political sovereignty. Meaning that fear of attack will prevent

individuals from exercising their freedom. Therefore, the importance of an absolute political authority is connected to freedom within the state of nature as Hobbes explains that in order to receive protection from a common enemy or the 'injuries of one another', one must commit their 'will' to the existing political authority. This leads me on to explore the role of the absolute sovereign power as it is the natural characteristics of mankind, in having a constant desire for power, and the intensified competition within the state of nature which reinforces the importance of having strong political leadership within society.

On investigating the role of the sovereign power within the Leviathan, it is clear that the purpose of the text is to provide a convincing justification for political authority. As Skinner notes 'Hobbes believed that in the Leviathan he had articulated a theory of political obligation capable of offering comfort to surviving royalists'. Hobbes presents the existence of an absolute political power as a solution to social conflict and a protector from foreign threats. Hobbes argues this through his social contract theory. He claims that all individuals within a society must submit their liberty to the absolute sovereign power:

'I authorise and give up my right of governing my selfe, to this man, or assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorise all his actions in like manner'

On this point, Hobbes provides a convincing justification for political authority as he notes that 'in the act of our submission consisteth our obligation and our liberty'. In relating this understanding back to the liberal

paradox stated earlier within this investigation, Hobbes shows that in the act of committing to political authority, individuals become free from fear and paranoia evoked by the state of nature. More importantly, we see that 'the idea of consent as the only source of lawful government is fully compatible with a strong defence of absolute sovereignty and the duty of non-resistance'. Here Hobbes argues that the act of authorisation begins with the individual submitting their 'will' to the sovereign power to obtain protection from the state of nature and to direct our individual aims toward a common benefit. The natural characteristics outlined by Hobbes come as a result of our liberty (that is freedom from intrinsic on external restraint); leaving individuals with the freedom to pursue their desires and compete against others, this process then sets a strong basis for ongoing conflict and quarrel. According to the Hobbesian social contract, this freedom must be submitted to the sovereign power to obtain social stability, as this process would then illustrate the submission of the 'right of using their own discretion to secure their safety'. Once this 'transfer of right' takes place, there are two specific obligations the people have to their representative(s). Firstly 'the duty to 'own' their actions and those of any third party for whom they may have been authorised to act' and the other is 'the duty not to interfere with the execution of their commission, since the right to act as they think best in discharging their task is precisely what has been voluntarily handed over to them'.

Our liberty and judgment must be submitted to the sovereign, making the people of society the 'authors' of the sovereign's actions, this would cause the sovereign to act toward a common benefit as it 'gives them a single will

and voice, thereby converting them into one person, the person of the state'. The submission of the 'will' by the people to their sovereign power is the key component of the Hobbesian social contract as it also suggests that the more power given to a political authority, the further away society would be from the state of nature. Even though this great amount of unquestionable power being vested in the sovereign may lead to a tyrannical ruler, Hobbes firstly argues that it is better to be under tyrannical rule than be in the state of nature as actions are still made under a common benefit model and the people of society are responsible for the development of a tyrannical ruler due to Hobbes's theory of 'attributed action'. The actions of the sovereign are 'nothing more than the acts of the individual members of the multitude'; 'they have the positive duty to 'own' whatever actions their sovereign may undertake in seeking their safety and contentment', therefore, if rebellion was to occur it would prove to be illegitimate and self-contradictory, 'for they will be opposing themselves'. These Hobbesian paradigms of the social contract, the state of nature and attributed action provide a compelling defence for absolute leadership. More importantly, it advocates the importance of the surviving monarchists and challenges the existing Parliamentary cause by 'invoking analysis of what it means to authorise a representative'. Therefore, the purpose of the Leviathan was to provide a rational justification for absolutism and to provide a credible attack on the Parliamentary effort.

This leads me onto discuss Hobbes's views on religion, as some of the conflicts that occurred during Hobbes's lifetime were motivated by religious means. Religious liberty for example 'was a principle objective in the

revolutionary programme' during the English Civil War ; as Wood notes, his dedication to explaining the function of the ' Christian Commonwealth' within the Leviathan ' reflects not only his anger at theological critics but, above all, his conviction that religion has been a major cause of civil war' . For this reason Hobbes's ' main objective in the discussion of religion was to demonstrate that true Christianity requires obedience to a secular authority' as ' a man cannot serve two masters', this is due to the fact that this could cause a subject to question the authority of an absolute ruler . Hobbes does not subscribe to the divine right theory. This is because he notes the process of authorisation to be the result of submission of the will by the multitude, rather than by divine appointment. Theoretically this religious premise contrasts with the Hobbesian argument. The divine right theory stipulates that the power of King has been given by God, and that ' the subjects are totally subordinated to him as God's representative on earth', this means that the ' ruler is God's agent' rather than the author of the multitude . In addition, this religious dynamic gives subjects the right to rebellion (if God perceives the ruler to be an unworthy agent) . Again, this theoretically contrasts with the Hobbesian argument; under Hobbes's social contract model rebellion is noted to be self-contradictory and illegitimate. Therefore, conflicts driven by religious means are less likely to occur as subjects give up the right to rebel and submission to an absolute political authority takes precedence. Hobbes's theory of authorisation and his non-subscription to the divine right theory presents the Leviathan as a demonstration of the importance of political obligation over religious commitment.

To conclude, the purpose of the Leviathan was to make a compelling justification for political authority. Arguably, the conflict which occurred during his lifetime inspired his political philosophy; hence his pessimistic view of mankind. Therefore, Hobbes can be noted to offer a solution to the contemporary turmoil through this seminal text. Hobbes's theories of mankind are consistent with his social contract. His understanding of man, as a power hungry and competitive creature, needs protection from foreign threat and other members of society. The role of the absolute sovereign power is to offer protection in exchange for the submission of rights and judgment by the multitude. This process of submission authorises the political power and legitimises the state as they share one voice and one common directive, therefore reducing the chance of social conflict or rebellion as these rights have already been submitted. On analysing religion, the characteristics of man, the state of nature and the freedom, Hobbes was not only capable of developing an insightful defence for absolutism, but he was also capable of developing a compelling solution to social disorder.