

Human equalities according to hobbes



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Thomas Hobbes lays his political foundation on the explicit assumption that men are equal in strength and prudence. Strength refers to bodily strength, and it is equal among men because each individual theoretically has the capability of killing any other individual. Prudence is a sort of crude cause-and-effect reasoning that experience confers to people, and experience is gotten through “ time, [and] equally bestowes on all men, in those things they equally apply themselves unto” (87). Finally, out of these two equalities he derives the “ equality of hope in the attaining of our Ends” (87), which means that people have equal hope or ambition in attaining their goals. Despite the fact that he builds his philosophy on several basic equalities, he still advances arguments against Democracy and for Monarchy. Monarchy he defines in the usual way, as a government ruled by one man. Democracy is “ an Assembly of All that will come together” (129); in other words it is an Athenian type of popular democracy, where any person with an interest may participate in the governing assembly. In considering the possibility of private interests superseding public interests, Hobbes’ arguments against democracy and for monarchy take into account equality of hope for attaining one’s ends, but his support of monarchy contradicts equality of prudence and his support of government by acquisition is inconsistent with equality of strength. Hobbes’ support of monarchy is consistent with his idea of equal hope, as he addresses private ambition in both monarchy and democracy. In Hobbes’ philosophy, people are equally ambitious; all people have equal hope in attaining their individual ends. Thus, both monarch and democratic assemblymen will necessarily be anxious to “ procure the private good of himself,” and furthermore prefer to satisfy the private good over the public good. A concrete example he raises is the practice of enriching one’s

flatterers and favorites at public expense, which both monarchs and assemblymen may do. Thus, Hobbes addresses equally the possibility of corruption in both forms of government, monarchy and democracy. However, his espousal of monarchy hinges on the argument that a monarch's corruption will do less damage, because a monarch's "private interest is the same with the publique" (131). After all, he argues, a King can only be rich if his subjects are rich. While this may be rationally true in the long run, one can hardly trust a monarch to be rational enough to recognize this fact. There is no reason not to expect a monarch to short-sightedly plunder his subjects for his own immediate gain, neglecting long-term stability. Furthermore, Hobbes argues that with the case of governing assemblies, the public good is not as aligned with the private good of the assemblymen. However, this argument seems to be directed more towards the Aristocratic form of government, where only a part of the populace may be admitted to the ruling assembly. In a Democracy as Hobbes himself defined it, anyone "that will" may participate in the assembly. In this case, the public good is always identical with the private good, for the rulers and the subjects are in fact one and the same. In addition, there can actually be no favorites or flatterers that try to curry favor with the assembly; all men can wield power directly from within the assembly itself. In addition, any excessive pursuit of private good is always subject to the scrutiny and veto of fellow democrats. Private interests are balanced against each other in a democracy in a way that does not exist in monarchy. Thus, although Hobbes' arguments are consistent with his assumption that people have "equality of hope in attaining of...Ends," his argument that private and public interests are best aligned in a Monarchy fails for its inconsistency with the structure of

<https://assignbuster.com/human-equalities-according-to-hobbes/>

Democracy as he defines it. Furthermore, favoring monarchy over democracy seems to defy Hobbes' assumption that all men are equal in Prudence. For Hobbes, Prudence is the process of learning from one's experience: "Sometime a man desires to know the event of an action; and then he thinketh of some like action past, and the events thereof one after another; supposing like events will follow like actions...Which kind of thoughts, is called...Prudence" (22). It thus seems odd that he would rather entrust the commonwealth to one person, whose prudence we would have no especial reason to trust, than entrust the commonwealth to a multitude of people's various prudences summed together. After all, if "Prudence is...contracted from the Experience" (23), then surely many people's experiences added up would be more useful in judging what decisions to make. Hobbes' answer to this objection would probably be akin to his argument regarding "Reason," a higher and more infallible version of Prudence: "No one mans Reason, nor the Reason of any one number of men makes the certaintie; no more than an account is therefore well cast up, because a great many men have unanimously approved it" (32). In other words, just because a lot of people agree with something doesn't make it right. Instead, a "Judge" or arbitrator should be chosen by dissenting parties to settle disputes. In a democratic government one has the option of abiding by the assembly's majority instead of submitting to the judgment of a single arbitrator (or monarch). There is no reason to suppose that the arbitrator's prudence would be superior in Hobbes' world of equal prudence, so bringing in a monarch is as illogical as bringing in an arbitrator. One might actually argue that in fact, the more people approve an account, the more likely mistakes will be corrected, and the more likely it will be correct in the end.

Otherwise, there would be no logic in double-checking accounts. Thus, in light of equality of prudence, a democracy would seem to be more favorable. There is one loophole by which Hobbes' defense of monarchy may be brought into alignment with his equality of Prudence. The definition of Prudence also specifies that men are only equal in "things they equally apply themselves unto" (87). That is to say, a person who applies himself to ruling may be as good at ruling as a carpenter who applies himself equally to carpentry is at carpentry. Thus, if Hobbes could have proposed some sort of mechanism by which a monarch would apply himself to leadership and ruling and therefore gain Prudence in it, then it might make sense to entrust ruling to a professional ruler rather than carpenters, bricklayers, and people in general. Without such a mechanism, however, entrusting governance to a monarch who could devote himself to anything else betrays Hobbes principle that people are equal in Prudence. Finally, Hobbes' justification of sovereignty by acquisition really amounts to justifying monarchy by force and violates his original principle of equality of strength. Hobbes outlines two ways a commonwealth might be established: either through institution or through acquisition. If people were really equal in strength, as Hobbes says, the state of nature and perpetual anarchy would last forever until people realized that their best interest was peace and agreed to come together to institute a government. Endorsing a government instituted by an assembly where a "Multitude of men do Agree, and covenant, every one, with every one, that to whatsoever Man or assembly of Men, shall be given by the major part, the Right to Present the Person of them all...every one, as well as he that Voted for it, as he that Voted against it" (121) would be akin to endorsing democracy. No matter what the final form of the government

becomes, the institution of it was through a democratic assembly and vote. The other option is establishment by force, which is “ when men singly, or many together by plurality of voices, for fear of death, or bonds, do authorize all the actions of that Man, or Assembly, that hath their lives and liberty in his Power” (138). However, one must note that there can be no such thing as commonwealth by acquisition in the case of Democracy. In a Democracy, all people can participate equally in the government, so there cannot be a political distinction between conquering people and vanquished people. If, hypothetically, a Democracy were to conquer another people, and then let the “ vanquished” people participate in the democratic assembly, then those people would immediately gain power and therefore not be the vanquished any longer. Only in the case of Monarchy or Aristocracy can one man or assembly of men subjugate the non-governing peoples of a commonwealth. Thus, in justifying the two ways commonwealths are created, Hobbes’ is really drawing a line between monarchy (or aristocracy) acquired by force, and democracy as represented by the democratic process of commonwealth creation. In Hobbes’ world, monarchy is at least just as good as the democratic process, despite the fact that supporting a monarchy acquired by force violates the principle of equality of strength in a way that supporting a commonwealth by institution might not. Hobbes paints commonwealth by acquisition as equally legitimate to commonwealth by institution, because in both cases, people consent to be governed because they are afraid, either of a particular Man or Assembly, or of each other. However, one person forcefully extracting a people’s consent to dominate them clearly depends on his strength in a way that the democratic process does not; the would-be monarch and his forces must have greater strength than the people he’s

trying to conquer. If people truly had equality in strength, then no such conquering should be possible; someone should always be able to assassinate the would-be monarch. On the other hand, the democratic process is consistent with equality of strength since every person's vote is equal as their strengths are supposed to be. As noted before, supporting monarchy by institution would be equivalent to supporting democracy since institution is through a democratic process. Thus, supporting a monarchy by acquisition violates Hobbes' principle of equal strength in a way that democracy, or even monarchy by institution, does not. If we allow, as Hobbes suggests, that a commonwealth covenanted by force is as good as democratic agreement, then we negate the stated principle of equal strength and there would be no limit to the number of legitimate covenants that could be contracted by coercion of the stronger over the weaker. Hobbes advances a number of other arguments in favor of monarchy over democracy, such as the facts that a monarch cannot disagree with himself and assemblies are subject to inconstancy due to fluctuating attendance. However, these are more structural arguments and do not especially touch on the underlying principles of equality of strength, prudence, and hope, and thus we will not touch upon them here. His most specific and major argument in favor of monarchy is consistent with equality of hope, because he at least considers equally the possibility that monarchs and assemblymen might favor their own private interests over public interests, despite arguing illogically that public and private interests are more aligned in a monarch than in democratic assemblymen. However, his endorsement of monarchy calls into question whether trusting governance of the commonwealth to one man's experience over a multitude of people's experiences is consistent with the

<https://assignbuster.com/human-equalities-according-to-hobbes/>

idea that people are equal in prudence. Finally, his argument that a commonwealth by acquisition, which logically applies only monarchies and aristocracies, is just as good if not better than a commonwealth by democratic institution is not consistent with the idea that people are equal in strength. Since commonwealths were commonly acquired by force, one must call into question Hobbes' entire assumption that people are equal in strength. Without that key assumption, covenants might always be established by domination of the stronger, and Hobbes' entire philosophy degenerates into the maxims of "rule of the stronger" and "might makes right." References: Hobbes, Thomas. Tuck, Richard (ed). Hobbes: Leviathan: Revised Student Edition. Cambridge University Press: 1996.