

Hobbes' leviathan and the birth of the liberal tradition



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A liberal is someone who believes in the primacy of liberty as a socio-political value. Liberalism posits freedom a priori, and thus within its tradition the burden of proof rests on those who would limit or somehow restrict individual freedom. Definitions of freedom within the liberal tradition diverge into two main conceptions. Negative liberty posits that individuals are free to the extent that they can pursue separate ends without being coerced, and in the absence of interference or constraints. Those who espouse a conception of positive liberty have a somewhat stronger vision of what constitutes freedom. To these liberals, freedom constitutes acting in accordance with one's will in such a way as to realize and actualize one's true, human purpose. Both of these conceptions of liberty find it necessary to justify any restrictions on individual freedom. This need for justification arises most immediately in the context of any political system which exercises the authority to limit individual freedom of action. Even in the most free and fair political context there exists a mechanism in place to maintain a system of rules that regulate individual behavior. Such mechanisms include systems like consent, coercion, or physical force. Hobbes puts forth social contract theory as a system of restrictions on liberty that satisfies the moral requirements of a liberal philosophy. His justification hinges on consent as a mechanism that rational people, in the state of nature, can employ to choose certain restrictions on liberty. In this paper, I will put forth an interpretation of Leviathan that situates Hobbes squarely within the tradition of liberal philosophy. As a modern political philosopher, Hobbes is concerned not with putting forth a theory of how humans ought to be, but rather a description of how they are. In this way he diverges from ancient schemes such as Aristotle's, which puts forth virtue-ethics as an account of how we should act.

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Hobbes argues that morality is derived from the appetites and aversions of mankind. " Whatsoever is the object of any man's Appetite or Desire; that is it which he for his part calleth Good: and the object of his Hate, and Aversion, Evil," (Hobbes, 120). It seems evident to Hobbes that humans consider the categories of Good and Evil only insofar as they correspond to our individual desires. What we desire, and therefore what we consider to be Good or Evil, arises not from any consideration of the interests of other or society at-large, but from the particular passions that individuals possess by nature. Men appeal alternatively to their reason or to customs of action in discerning the morality of an action, since they lack an objective standard: " grown strong, and stubborn, they appeale from custome to reason, and from reason to custome, as it serves their turn; receding from custom when their interest requires it, and setting themselves against reason as oft as reason is against them," (Hobbes, 166). Such a scheme of action Hobbes labels the State of Nature. Attendant in the circumstances of the State of Nature is the constant anticipation of conflict. Individual desires and passions are contingent, and the State of Nature lacks an independent arbiter capable of mediating conflicts between individual ends. Lacking security to defend his life other than brute strength, man in the state of nature lives in constant fear: Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withall, (Hobbes, 186). This state of war is what leads Hobbes' famous description of life before government as " solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short," (Hobbes, 186). Insecure, men in the State of Nature are led by their rationality to take on the famous Social Contract, <https://assignbuster.com/hobbes-leviathan-and-the-birth-of-the-liberal-tradition/>

forfeiting some of their individual liberty for the sake of establishing peace and order. It is the revolutionary principle that men take on limitations to their own liberty both rationally and freely which most firmly places Hobbes within the realm of liberal philosophy. Thus men lift themselves out of a state of competition where they live in constant fear of losing their lives with the mechanism of consent. The primary objective of a rational man in the State of Nature is to seek a sort of peace with other men that will enable his self-preservation. This leads him to realize that “ no man require to reserve to himself any Right, which he is not content should be reserved to every one of the rest,” (Hobbes, 215). Morality, then, takes on a perfunctory character. According to the first Law of Nature, established in light of the social contract between men, to be moral is for men to “ perform their covenants made: without which ...we are still in the condition of war,” (Hobbes, 201-2). Still, men remain inherently selfish individuals concerned with the pursuit of their own ends. It is necessary, according to Hobbes, to establish an independent party capable of mediating between men with competing ends, who ensures that they adhere to covenants made. At this moment, the Leviathan is born. The Leviathan is the institution of the social contract that ensures its stability even in light of the competing and selfish ends of men. As the party impartial to any of the particular interests of men, he ensures that justice is achieved by honoring the contracts amongst them, thus elevating them beyond the State of Nature. The Leviathan derives its power from the sum-total of individuals who enter into the social contract together, and thus stands above any of them by representing the interests of all, and not any one. Hobbes describes the Leviathan, saying: And in him consisteth the essence of the Common-wealth; which (to define it) is One person, of whose acts a <https://assignbuster.com/hobbes-leviathan-and-the-birth-of-the-liberal-tradition/>

great Multitude, by mutual Covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the Author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their Peace and Common Defense," (Hobbes, 228). Such a description, of a supreme being who possesses a power greater than any individual, but who is nonetheless exempt from the tenets of the social contract, may strike the reader as justifying a totalitarian sort of rule. However, we can rescue Hobbes from this accusation by considering both the intellectual context of his ideas, and his particular conception of liberty. Hobbes' ideas were revolutionary in their time for their departure from justifying the role of government as serving its own purpose, whether that purpose was God's, the church's, or someone else's. He conceives of government as deriving its authority and purpose from the populace. As such, the Leviathan is meant to be an individual who executes the law for the protection and betterment of all individuals, and follows standards that those individuals set out for themselves. By liberty, Hobbes has in mind a particular conception of freedom as the absence of obstacles to the " preservation of his own nature." Liberty is not the ability to pursue whatever particular ends an individual might desire, for his fundamental right of nature is only to protect his own life, (Hobbes, 189). An ability to pursue particular passions, regardless of their consequences for others, would reposition man firmly within the State of Nature, where he is trapped by the contingency of actions. Thus, the exact liberty that Hobbes' Leviathan offers is a relief from the oppressively un-free circumstances of the State of Nature, where he can pursue any end so long as it does not infringe on another's ability to do the same. Works Cited

Hobbes, Thomas. Leviathan. C. B. Macpherson, Ed. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968.

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