

The role of fear in hobbes' political thought



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Born on the day of the invasion of the Spanish Armada, Thomas Hobbes said himself that he was born a twin with fear. Living with the turmoil of the ongoing English civil war, Hobbes lived in fear and uncertainty. When he became convinced that the English parliament was going to turn against King Charles I, Hobbes fled to France, where he later wrote Leviathan, his most significant work, regarded as one of the most influential political and philosophical texts from the 17th century. In this work, and, more broadly, in Hobbes' political thought, the effects of fear play an observably pivotal role in the formulation of his theories. It is clear that Hobbes perceives and applies fear, both as a catalyst of chaos and as a force of good. Referencing human nature, Hobbes argues that in the trivial anarchical society, people would live with constant fear, which in turn would make them conduct criminal acts for the sake of their own survival or wellbeing. He also underlines that a certain amount of fear for the Leviathan, the supreme ruler, is needed to create loyalty and to maintain respect. Therefore, fear plays a significant but versatile role in Hobbes' political thought.

From the principles of self-preservation, and through his distinction between law of nature and right to nature, Hobbes founded the basic principles of his political thought. He expressed that the fear of death and compromise of personal safety, survival and security would surpass any other. From this premise, Hobbes then derived that the nature of mankind was brutish and individualistic, unless governed by a strong central power. Hobbes stated that in the chaotic anarchical society that would eventually emerge in the absence of such a governing central power, the life of men would be characterized by continual fear and would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish,

and short" (Hobbes, 82). With an inherent scarcity of resources, a perpetual conflict would emerge, placing every individual in society against one another. Hobbes stated that this conflict would then be hard to end as no human possesses complete physical or mental superiority, and from an aggregate standpoint, humans are to be considered as very equal in strength and capacity. He furthers this argument by applying it to the honoring of contracts. Hobbes argues that in an anarchist society, contracts and covenants would not be honored, or would only be honored for a brief period of time. If either party would then suspect the other of planning to break the contract, they would act preemptively. Therefore, it is clear that Hobbes places significant value on fear and its effect in human decision-making, and attributes much of the tumultuousness and uncertainty to the prominence of fear, in the absence of a strong centralized ruling power.

Hobbes postulated that in order to maintain safety and peace, the people would need to sacrifice a number of freedoms and liberties, and to respect the authority of the Leviathan. Highly authoritative and omnipotent, the Leviathan is depicted as a leader that has an uncompromised legitimacy, so long as he serves to protect and govern his people, and as a leader who is free to govern in a manner of absolutism. Hobbes states that the order of the Leviathan should always be obeyed, lest it conflicts with personal survival, and unless the Leviathan no longer serves to protect his people. Therefore, it is clear that Hobbes holds that the people should, to a certain extent, fear their leader, in ways that solidify their loyalty to, and respect for, the Leviathan. Under the fear that they would be persecuted for uncivilized acts only acceptable under the rule of anarchy, the people would then refrain

from committing these acts, and would be able to coexist. Therefore, it is clear that the Leviathan takes on an intimidating role as well, incentivizing people to obey the laws set forth. Hence the fear is redirected from the constant immediate fear of survival, described by Hobbes as an inextricable component of the anarchy, to the possible intervention of the Leviathan.

The concept of fear is illustrated in Leviathan as a tradeoff. By accepting the supreme and absolute rule of the strong central leader, the people can exchange the ongoing sentiment of insecurity and fear of survival for one of fearful respect for their leader. However, the fear of chaos and anarchy outweighs that of tyrannical rule, and therefore, according to Hobbes, it is logical for the people to support the rule of the Leviathan. So long as there is no immediate threat to survival, and so long as a governmental power can work to reduce this threat, then the rule of that power is legitimate, such is the perception of Hobbes. Therefore, it seems that Hobbes is keen to justify any power that actively works to uphold order and civilized customs. Perhaps this was inspired by the many years Hobbes spent living in the chaos of the English civil war. However, this pardoning and justifying view of the government and its power came to inspire the majority of his political thought. The question one can ask today however is how Hobbes' perception would have changed had he formulated his theories in the context of today, with respect to the many instances of abuses of power witnessed over the past centuries after his death.

Works Cited Hobbes, Thomas, and Richard Tuck. Leviathan. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. Print.