

Hobbes (1588-1679): absolute power, state sovereignty, individual rights and liberty

1. Introduction: roots of political science; social contract and natural rights; moral order subsumed in political order, resting on a single natural right of self-preservation; state of nature; Hobbes claims that absolute power is compatible with individual liberty.
2. Parallel states of nature: nations versus individuals, sovereign nation-states and the 1648 Settlement of Westphalia, preemptive strikes (getting in first) versus right of self-preservation, European imperialism.

“It may be perceived what manner of life there would be where there were no common power to fear, by the manner of life which men ... degenerate into, in a civil war.” (ch.13: para.11) “The estate of man can never be without some incommodity or other, and ... the greatest that in any form of government can possibly happen to the people in general is scarce sensible, in respect of the miseries and horrible calamities that accompany a civil war.” (18:20) “The law of nations and the law of nature is the same thing.” (30:30)
3. Hobbes’ method: science modelled on geometry; deductive vs. experimental method, introspection.

“The skill of making, and maintaining Common-wealths, consisteth in certain rules, as doth Arithmetic and Geometry; not (as Tennis-play) on practice only” (20:19). “Wisdom is acquired not by reading of books but of men... He that is to govern a whole nation must read in himself, not this or that particular man, but mankind.” (Intro:4)
4. Man on his own, a creature of passion, served by reason; hedonism, materialism.

“Reasoning is nothing but *reckoning* (that is, adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the *marking* and *signifying* of our thoughts” (5:2). “Reason is not, as sense and memory, born with us, nor gotten by experience only, as prudence is, but attained by industry, first in apt imposing of names, and secondly by getting a good and orderly method” (5:17) “The world is corporeal, that is to say, body, and hath the dimensions of magnitude, namely length, breadth and depth; also every part of body is likewise body and hath the like dimensions; and consequently every part of the universe is body” (46:15). Sensation is “caused ... by the pressure, that is by the motion, of external things upon our eyes, ears and other organs” (1:4).
5. Moral relativity.

“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*” (6:2). “*Good* and *evil* are names that signify our appetites and aversions, which in different tempers, customs, and doctrines of men are different” (15:40).
6. Man in company: forever in competition, mistrustful, desiring glory.

“If all things were equally in all men, nothing would be prized” (8:1). Happiness (“felicity”) “is a continual progress of the desire from one object to another” (11:1). “I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death” (11:2). “From this diffidence [lack of trust] of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable as anticipation; that is, by force or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long till he see no other power great enough to endanger him; and this is no more than his own conservation requireth” (13:4)
7. Man in the state of nature.

“During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man” (13:8). “In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently ... 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” (13:9). “To this war of every man against every man this also is consequent, that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice.” (13:13)
8. The right of nature: the freedom to do whatever is necessary to preserve one’s life.

“Every man has a right to every thing, even to one another’s body” (14:4).
9. What impels man to leave the state of nature?

“The passions that incline men to peace are fear of death, desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a hope by their industry to obtain them. And reason suggesteth convenient articles of peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement.” (13:14) “For the thoughts are to the desires as scouts and spies, to range abroad and find the way to the things desired” (8:16).
10. Precepts (rules) of reason, for self-preservation in society:
 1. Seek peace.
 2. Be prepared to give up your natural right to everything, provided others are too, by covenant.
 3. Keep your promises, contracts, covenants; origin of justice.

“The bonds of words are too weak to bridle men’s ambition, avarice, anger, and other passions, without the fear of some coercive power” (14:18). “When a covenant is made, then to break it is unjust” (15:2). “Before the names of just and unjust can have place, there must be some coercive power to compel men equally to the performance of their covenants, by the terror of some punishment greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their covenant; ... and such power there is none before the erection of a commonwealth” (15:3).

11. The social contract or covenant.

“I authorise and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him and authorise all his actions in like manner” (17:13)

12. Other precepts of reason: gratitude, modesty (fitting in with others), mercy, humility, equity, etc., altogether nineteen/twenty summed up in “the one sentence, approved by all the world, *Do not that to another, which thou thinkest unreasonable to be done by another to thyself*” (26:13, also 14:5).

13. The precepts of reason (for self-preservation in society) = Laws of Nature = moral virtues. Natural laws “have been laws for all eternity, and are called not only natural but also moral laws, consisting in the moral virtues, as justice and equity and all habits of the mind that conduce to peace and charity” (26:37). “But yet if we consider the same theorems [precepts] as delivered in the word of God, that by right commandeth all things, then are they properly called laws” (15:41).

14. To be effective the laws of nature need the coercive power of the state.

“For the laws of nature ... of themselves, without the terror of some power to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like. And covenants without the sword are but words and of no strength to secure any man.” (17:2) “The only way to erect such a common power ... is [for men] to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills ... unto one will” (17:13). “This done, the multitude so united in one person is called a commonwealth. This is the generation of that great Leviathan, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that mortal God, to which we owe ... our peace and defence.” (17:13)

15. Part Two (chapters 17-31), “Of Common-wealth”, a manual for would-be rulers.

“I recover some hope that one time or other, this writing of mine may fall into the hands of a sovereign who will ... , by the exercise of entire sovereignty, in protecting the public teaching of it, convert this truth of speculation into the utility of practice” (31:41).

16. Leviathan, the state, a great big artificial man whose death is civil war:

“There is nothing on earth to be compared with him. He is made so as not to be afraid. He seeth every high thing below him; and is king of all the children of pride” (28:27 quoting from Job 41:33-4).

“Nature (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the art of man, as in many other things, so also in this imitated, that it can make an artificial animal. (...) [B]y art is created that great Leviathan called a common-wealth or state ... which is but an artificial man, though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended.” (Intro:1)

Note 1. Mechanical view of motion, like a watch.

2. Hobbes' juridical state, of laws, rights, contracts, obligations; not about the economy.

3. Historical context: Civil war in England 1642-9, during which Hobbes lived in Paris; *Leviathan* published 1651; anti-republicanism; Hobbes' own religious belief unclear, accused of atheism.

17. Monarchy versus rule by an assembly; the good of the people; liberty of subjects (self-defence implies liberty of judgement?); negative freedom (without hindrance); the state appoints priests, dictates the form of religious worship and the content of religious education.

“For no king can be rich, nor glorious, nor secure, whose subjects are either poor or contemptible or too weak through want or dissension to maintain a war against their enemies” (19:4). “The good of the sovereign and people cannot be separated” (30:21). “A good law is that which is needful for the good of the people” (30:20). “The use of laws ... is not to bind the people from all voluntary actions, but to direct and keep them in such a motion as not to hurt themselves by their own impetuous desires” (30:21). “Every subject is author of every act the sovereign does” (21:7, also 17:13). “When therefore our refusal to obey frustrates the end for which the sovereignty was ordained, then there is no liberty to refuse; otherwise there is” (21:15). “By safety [of the people] is not meant a bare preservation but also all other contentments of life, which every man by lawful industry, without danger or hurt to the common-wealth, shall acquire to himself” (30:1).

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