

# HOBBS'S THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE: A WARNING TO LIBERTARIANS



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**ANTOINE  
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To anyone who favours a political system which rests upon goodwill, community, co-operation versus competition, Thomas Hobbes' writings are depressing. Far from the "noble savage" of Rousseau's idolised state of nature, Hobbes offers a vision of human nature reminiscent of a perpetual inner city riot, or the worst excesses of the Thirty Years War.<sup>1</sup> His analysis of civilisation concludes that its main benefit is order maintained by the rule of the Sovereign's law. Yet Hobbes is no advocate of fascism, nor of totalitarianism. C. B. Macpherson wrote of Hobbes:

Individualism, as a basic theoretical position, starts at least as far back as Hobbes. Although his conclusion can scarcely be called liberal, his postulates were highly individualistic.<sup>2</sup>

Macpherson goes on to consider two difficulties which Hobbes's theory of human nature: that the theory has appeared unacceptable, and that Hobbes was guilty of a logical error in attempting to deduce moral obligations from empirical postulates of fact: from "is" Hobbes attempts to deduce "ought". These objections seem to me bizarre, in the sense that Hobbes's account could only be "unacceptable" if it was manifestly false. In addition, if a political philosopher is guilty of a logical error by basing a theory of what ought to be on reality, I shudder to think what Mr Macpherson thinks we should base political thought on. Perhaps Marxist delusions about aristocracy, or the poetry of William Blake would make "logically valid" points of departure for political theory, if such is the view of critics of Hobbes, no wonder he is unpopular.

More relevant to a modern reader of Thomas Hobbes's *The Leviathan* is the question: how could anyone offer a theory of absolutist rule, without subscribing to an organicist theory of

society and whilst retaining a belief in a government of far fewer powers than that of the present day United Kingdom. Another problem is that if the Sovereign is Absolute, then "who watches the watchman?"

## PART I: Hobbes's Conception of Human Nature

Hobbes's method in the *Leviathan* is to define the principles of human action, to progress hence to an account of human motivation and so to a theory of how to organise human society. An essential feature of this chain of analysis is that Hobbes has an atomistic conception of human society, based on his study of physics.<sup>3</sup> Having rejected organicism, Hobbes proceeds to advance the view that humans were impelled into motion by the mechanical effects of our senses. These were not supposed to be merely reflex actions, Hobbes contends that humans use their volition to guide their actions away from those situations which are harmful, and towards those which are beneficial. Hobbes uses the terms appetite and aversion to describe the conflicting impulses.<sup>4</sup>

Hobbes then makes a series of propositions about human appetites:<sup>5</sup> some appetites are innate, such as the desire for food. Most are derived from experience. Appetites for certain things change over time, although people cease to live if they cease to have appetites, and there is no necessary uniformity of appetites between different people. This means that there is unlikely to be agreement between everyone over what level of riches, power, diet etc is most appropriate to the satisfaction of each individual's appetites. This has serious consequences for egalitarianism, if one remembers that Hobbes is an societal atomist: the pursuit of egalitarianism will satisfy some more than others, therefore destabilising the project from its very conception.

A person's power is defined as "his present means, to obtain some future apparent Good".<sup>5</sup> He then distinguishes between natural power (talents) and instrumental power (instruments to the acquisition or preservation of power, e.g. money). However, in presenting this distinction at the start of chapter 10, Hobbes is adding the notion that power is measured in relation to others.<sup>6</sup> Just as appetites may have different strengths in different people, so the desire for power may be unequal in different people. This can be illustrated by elections where certain people frantically attempt to win the votes of others, many people have a firm commitment to exercising their vote, but other abstain, not out of principle, or dissatisfaction with the available candidates, but simply because other possible activities, such as relaxing in front of a television set, or working extra hours, are more appealing.

Hobbes then states that power is not merely the ability to satisfy future appetites, but that ability in excess over that of others. An illustration might be a group of people at an auction room. Power would be measured by the extra financial backing to bid for a certain lot, over possible rival bidders for that lot. In the auction room scenario, having the means to reach an auctioneer's estimate price is neither necessarily sufficient, nor, as in a case where competition is weak, is it necessarily required.

This claim about the necessity of one person's power competing with others' powers is a vital link in Hobbes' argument: if competing power is a necessary component of human nature, then given that universal agreement on a wide range of desirable goals is impossible, conflict must be inevitable if no restraint is brought to bear on human appetites. There is therefore a necessary choice to be made between freedom and security. Bertrand de Jouvenel, described the two positions as "securitarian" and "libertarian".<sup>7</sup>

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## PART II:

### Hobbes's Argument for The Absolute Sovereign

Hobbes attempts to argue the case for the Absolute Sovereign with two distinguishable agendas in mind, one negative, the other positive. The negative agenda is to list a number of errors which Hobbes observes in the political debate in England of the time. The errors are held to be: i. that a tyrant may be lawfully put to death; ii. that a prince may be deposed by other men; iii. that the king is administrator of, not superior to the people; iv. that individuals have the right to question the laws of kings. Hobbes' positive programme is to justify the Absolute Sovereign as: undivided, unlimited, and in control of the appointment of the succession.

Hobbes's denunciation of errors is based on what he regarded as the catastrophe the English Civil and the execution of King Charles I for treason and rebellion against the Crown.<sup>8</sup> His argument is therefore utilitarian and based on experience. Hobbes visiting contemporary Britain would probably argue in favour of the present form of parliamentary democracy, because it too, is preferable to civil war. However, Hobbes does not believe the Absolute Sovereign has any business trying to engineer a better society. He would refer to his theory of human nature and point to the diversity of human appetites to oppose State welfare programmes, State censorship for moral purposes (political subversion would be punished). In this respect it is important not to attribute to the word "Absolute" a late twentieth century meaning. In the seventeenth century, the punishment of moral delinquency was regarded as an ecclesiastical concern. Poverty relief was restricted to suppressing rebellions or disaster relief. On the one hand this means a less "caring" State, but on the other hand, given that the Sovereign is unlimited in the areas of responsibility it has acquired, it means that the Absolute Sovereign is not totalitarian in the way government welfare agencies could become.<sup>9</sup>

Hobbes' willingness to support an Absolute Sovereign should therefore be seen in the light of a very small central government compared with that of the present day. Raymond Polin writes:

On moral issues, the Sovereign's laws are silent, as soon as these issues do not threaten the peace and concord of the State [...] nearly everything which concerns morality is not in the public domain, but in the private domain. In short, according to Hobbes [...] the Sovereign may not legislate on purely moral issues.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION:

### Does Human Nature Justify an Absolute Sovereign?

Hobbes's reply will infuriate almost everyone. Those who see human nature as perfectible, if not already good, will not accept the case for the Leviathan if they are individualists. Therefore, Hobbes is upsetting to democratic liberals, anarchists and those socialists who do not favour totalitarianism. Conversely, supporters of "top-down" social reform, such as Bolshevik Communists, Fascists and bourgeois paternalists, would like to have the Absolute Sovereign to replace the competition for power by the lower classes, by an organicist sense of belonging, possibly even of "community".

Hobbes will have none of this. The reason there has to be a sovereign power is because not only is competition inevitable, but men have roughly equal power to kill one another and therefore the balance between fear and appetite may tilt either way at any time. This is a "cold war" between individuals, rather than between states, Hobbes calls this potential for conflict (as well as outbursts of violence) "the State of War". In what must be his most often quoted passage, Hobbes graphically describes the alternative to a sovereign power:

In such a 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, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.<sup>11</sup>

Hobbes is relevant, because the approach he takes to the purpose of government is based on a "worst case scenario". It is hard to dispute Hobbes's conclusions when one considers the state of Western democratic societies and compares them with such places as Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, all of which are less democratic, but where the government, by promoting civil order and security ahead of civil rights and pluralism, have seen some success in creating a stable society where it is at least possible to argue that people enjoy a greater good, than in the USA, the land of the free where no law abiding citizen dare walk alone after dark. Who needs a curfew in our inner cities?

Hobbes cannot be ignored, but to anyone who cares about liberty, he is deeply unsatisfying, particularly because there seems to be no mechanism for dealing with a Sovereign who is incompetent or unwilling to discharge his duties to his subjects: to preserve order and peace. Macpherson suggests that it is unfair to criticise Hobbes for not providing a theory for overthrowing an oppressive regime, arguing that:

It is like complaining that the British [...] Constitution is inadequate because it does not stipulate procedures in case of civil war. No constitution can be expected to do so, for if civil war breaks out the constitution has already failed.<sup>12</sup>

This defence seems to me to be weak: if we can't blame Hobbes for failing to provide us with a better course of action than cutting the Absolute Sovereign's head off for failing in his covenant, where does that leave the regicides who cut off King Charles' head? They must have been justified all along.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Hobbes lived through the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), although the worst ravages were in the territory of the Holy Roman Empire, this was as good an illustration of a weak sovereign power as could possibly be imagined. The devastation of Central Europe at this time would have provided empirical weight to any demand for a strong sovereign power. For an account of the cost of that war, see: J. F. C. Fuller, *Decisive Battles of the Western World*, Volume I (ed J. Terraine), Paladin, London, 1970; pp. 496-497. To take an abstract view of human nature at the time would have been as difficult as in 1947, for someone who had seen newsreel of Nazi death-camps.
2. C. B. Macpherson, *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962; p. 1, also pp. 81-82.
3. Albert Schatz, *L'Individualisme Économique et Social*, Librairie Armand Colin, Paris, 1907; p. 47: "The fundamental concept is nothing other than movement: the relations between things are essentially a transfer of energy from one to the other." [my translation]
4. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London, 1651; (edited by C. B. Macpherson), Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1985; Chapter 6, p. 23.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33 of the Editor's Introduction.
6. *Ibid.*, Chapter 8, p. 35.
7. Bertrand de Jouvenel, *Du Pouvoir: Histoire Naturelle de Sa Croissance*, Editions du Cheval Ailé, Geneva, 1947; p. 414.
8. Paul Johnson, *The Offshore Islanders*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1972; pp. 192-194, for a contrary assessment of the Civil War to that of Hobbes.
9. The behaviour of certain social workers in Cleveland, following allegations of child abuse in 1986, is an example of a "benign" State agency exercising its powers in an oppressive manner.
10. Raymond Polin, Hobbes, *Dieu et Les Hommes*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1981; p. 231. [my translation]
11. *Leviathan*, op. cit., Chapter 13, p. 62.
12. *Ibid*, Editor's Introduction, p. 62.