

this objection contends that self-government is essential to the development of a mature citizenry ("self-government" here meaning, of course, that the ultimate responsibility *ought* to rest with the people).

The political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes

Not all philosophers have believed that the imposition of authority is the worst possible social evil. **Thomas Hobbes is an example of a philosopher who preferred the evils of absolute power to the evils of life in a society that did not contain such an authority.** It is easy to account for the Hobbesian dread of living in a country without a powerful sovereign. Born in 1588 (prematurely, it is said, when his mother was frightened by the report of the Spanish Armada), Hobbes lived through some of the most unsettled years in English history. He witnessed the rebellion against King Charles in 1642, resulting in civil war, and finally was forced to flee to the Continent, where he remained in exile for eleven years. But he was not safe there either. In danger of assassination by his political enemies, he returned to England only to see his writings condemned as subversive. In 1662, on the threat of imprisonment, he was ordered to refrain from further publication about social and political problems. Against this background of turmoil, it is **understandable that what Hobbes feared most of all was a chaotic society.** In such a society no one's life or property or family could be safe. The only way to assure domestic tranquillity lay in *compelling* people to obey the laws of the society, and in *pun-*

ishing them if they did not. But laws are only as effective as the enforcing agency makes them. A sovereign without absolute power to enforce laws is no sovereign at all in the last analysis, according to Hobbes; for he/she cannot settle disputes which may arise among the citizenry unless he/she has such authority. In order to have a peaceful society, it is therefore required that the ruler have absolute control over it. Whatever abuses arise from his/her possession of such power, the society will nevertheless remain a peaceful one—and hence the abuses of such power are to be preferred to living in chaos.

It might be asked in questioning Hobbes's outlook, "Why should a society without an absolute authority necessarily be chaotic?" **Hobbes's answer depends almost entirely upon a psychological theory about the nature of people.** According to this view, a person is by nature selfish and egoistic. He/she is motivated by selfish desires that require satisfaction if he/she is to be happy. For example, all of his/her actions can be explained in terms of the attempt to gratify some desire, such as the desire for sex, for food, for shelter, for fame, for riches, and so forth. If people lived alone, or in small groups, this fact would not have important implications; but when they band together into larger and larger groups, it becomes of paramount significance in explaining their conduct toward each other. For two or more men may have desires that they want to satisfy, yet cannot because the desires are incompatible. Two men may desire the same woman, and therefore (assuming monogamy) both cannot be satisfied. As a result, when men herd together in large organizations, conflicts

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will break out among them in the effort to satisfy their desires at the expense of others. Life becomes a battle in which the strong will win—but only temporarily; for even the strong will finally succumb in the conflict (a defeated person may organize a group against the victor, for instance). This is the picture of the life of “natural man,” or (as Hobbes calls it) the picture of “life in the state of nature.” In a famous sentence, Hobbes sums up the horrors of such an existence, telling us that the life of man in the state of nature “is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Such a state of affairs cannot continue indefinitely if people are to survive. The development of what we call “society” is a way of ending “the war of each against all.” People finally realize that in order to survive the conflicts of the state of nature, they must abandon all efforts to satisfy their egoistic impulses. **Society is thus a compromise** that people enter into; in order to achieve peace, they must give up the attempt to satisfy their desires. No person wishes to compromise; every person would rather satisfy his/her desires, but the compromise is necessary if he/she is to survive.

Hobbes is one of the most important of the political theorists who used the theory of the “social contract” to explain society and the basis of a person’s obligations within society. **The compromise, or “covenant,” as Hobbes calls it, consists of an agreement among people to abide by a certain set of rules, or “conventions.”** These constitute what we now call the “laws of the society.” People agree to abide by these laws in order to avoid being harmed in conflicts that would rage

were there no laws in existence. But, as Hobbes points out, laws are effective if, and only if, they are enforced. And the enforcing agency can do so only if it is granted absolute power. If it does not have such power, then it cannot prevent conflict. On this ground, Hobbes argues that the sovereign authority of any nation must be absolute.

Hobbes also suggests that the sovereignty be in the hands of one person—a king. In this respect, he is a monarchist. His reasons for advocating monarchy over other forms of government, such as oligarchy or aristocracy, are these: If the sovereign consisted of a group, then this group might have conflicts within itself. Thus the power of enforcement would be divided, and instead of a peaceful society, conflict would again break out. On the other hand, a monarch cannot be divided against himself. Secondly, a single ruler has more secrecy of counsel. Large groups invariably develop “leaks,” and important information may filter down to the people, again causing dissension among them. Finally, a monarch’s decisions are “only as inconstant as human nature, but a group has that plus the inconstancy of number.” For instance, the absence or presence of a few people can alter the decision that a government will take in framing laws. This can never happen with a monarch. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that the monarch will work for his own good at the expense of the public welfare. As Hobbes puts it, “The king is only as rich as his country.”

Although the power of the monarch is to be absolute, Hobbes also wishes to grant (perhaps this is an inconsistency) the subject certain “liberties.” These liberties he

defines as "those things the subject may justly refuse to do even though commanded by the sovereign."

Since sovereignty is created by a covenant, or contract, the subject retains all those natural rights that cannot be transferred by covenant. To put it differently, since the subject has entered into the contract to preserve and protect his life, he is entitled to refuse to obey the sovereign when to do so would place his life in danger. For instance, the monarch's command to the subject to kill, wound, or maim himself, or not to resist those who assault him, can be justly disregarded by the subject. Further, he is not bound to testify against himself in a criminal action (it was around this time, incidentally, that the historical precedent of the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was established). A command for dangerous military duty may be refused if the intention of the sovereign in issuing it is not to preserve the peace (but no man can justly object to defending his country when it is attacked by an outside aggressor). Liberty does not include the defense of any man against the sovereign. Thus rebellion is *always* unwarranted, according to Hobbes; and, similarly, protection of a criminal from the officers of the law is likewise unjust (this tenet has also come down to us from Hobbes and is embodied in most legal codes). People always have liberty to defend their lives against the sovereign; but if they are offered a pardon and refuse, then they are unjust. In a controversy with the sovereign, the subject has the right to sue (another provision that is found in American law). The obligation of the subjects to the sovereign lasts only so long as the sovereign is able to protect

them: "The end [i.e., the purpose] of obedience is protection." Thus, a prisoner captured by the enemy has the liberty to become an enemy subject if the sovereign is unable to protect him/her.

The powers of the sovereign are imposing. According to Hobbes, no subject can make a new covenant or rebel against the monarch (provided that the monarch is capable of protecting him/her). No breach of the covenant is possible by the sovereign, for according to the Hobbesian theory, he has not contracted with his subjects. They have agreed among themselves to abide by certain laws and have appointed the sovereign the agency for enforcing such laws. Once appointed, he has absolute authority. It follows from this that a dissenting minority must now acquiesce to the dictates of the sovereign or be destroyed. Further, no matter how the sovereign behaves, he cannot—by definition—act unjustly toward anyone. "Just" behavior consists, according to Hobbes, in abiding by the laws of the community; but since the sovereign makes the law, whatever he does will be law; hence in a significant sense the ruler is above the law and cannot violate it. The sovereign has an absolute right to control all opinions (for it is his decision whether or not the expression of an opinion will cause chaos in the commonwealth). Further, he is to make all civil laws and also to adjudicate disagreements involving the law. He has the power to make peace or war with other nations and to levy taxes in order to conduct such wars.

Criticism of Hobbes

Since the above doctrine is composed of a psychological theory about the nature of

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humans and also a political theory about who should govern society, each of these parts should be evaluated separately.

Some philosophers have interpreted Hobbes as attempting to give a true description of the *origin* of society. According to this interpretation, Hobbes is asserting that people originally lived in groups without laws regulating their behavior. When it was discovered that life led in this way turned into a war of each against all, people fabricated an agreement among themselves to give up the satisfaction of their egoistic impulses in order to achieve peace. When Hobbes is thus interpreted, the theory may be attacked on the grounds that there is no historical or anthropological evidence to support it. The earliest information we have about primitive humanity comes only after people had reached a fairly high degree of social organization. What life was like before societies were formed, nobody knows; hence there is no reason to accept Hobbes's imaginative portrayal of "life in the state of nature" as being accurate.

But such an interpretation of Hobbes is exceedingly superficial and misses the main significance of the theory. Hobbes is not trying to give an exact historical or anthropological account of the development of societies; instead, he is trying to give a **philosophical justification for the existence of a certain type of government.** In other words, the notion of the social contract is an analogy designed to illustrate the basis of political allegiance, to show us why we should obey the law. Whether or not people in fact behaved in this way at some early historical moment is irrelevant to the significance of his ac-

count. **What is important is his analysis of human nature and the necessity of having an absolute authority in order to curb the excesses of human nature.** In part, therefore, his account may be regarded as psychological, in part as philosophical. Let us treat each of these independently, beginning with the psychological theory.

The Hobbesian view is that people are basically motivated by the drive to satisfy their desires. From this, he infers that people are by nature egoistic. Is the inference justified? Suppose we grant that people are motivated by desire, does it then follow that all their desires are egoistic? The answer depends in part upon what is meant by saying that people are motivated by desire. To begin with, one might mean that it is the nonrational aspects of human beings that motivate them, namely, that emotions, feelings, and attitudes cause people to act as they do, not reason. So one might hold, as both Hume and Hobbes do, that although reason can reveal various alternatives for possible conduct, and also something about the probable consequences of selecting any of the alternative courses of action, reason does not itself initiate action. The choice of a given alternative or of a given course of action is—according to this view—a matter of emotion or feeling. Now if this is what one means by the phrase "people are motivated by desire," it does not follow that all desire is egoistic. People may indeed be motivated only by nonrational factors—but these, such as the feeling of sympathy, may motivate them to act for the good of others. On the other hand, one might mean by the phrase "people are motivated by desire" that people are always motivated to act for their own inter-

ests, and theirs only (regardless of whether it is reason or emotion that so motivates them). But if this is what Hobbes intends, it can be seen that from a psychological standpoint Hobbes is incorrect. People may desire to contribute to the happiness of others as well as to their own. Do we not often sacrifice our interests for the interests of our families, wives, husbands, children, country? This can be put by saying that some of our desires are "altruistic" rather than "selfish." We sometimes desire to contribute to the well-being of others, and if so, it is false that all desires are egoistic. What makes Hobbes's psychological account of human nature attractive is his vacillation between these two different accounts of motivation; but if we accept the former, egoism does not follow from it; and if we accept the latter, egoism is clearly false. Suppose, however, that we did accept the latter, i.e., the position that all people are motivated by egoistic desires (i.e., desires that work only for their own advantage), would it follow then that only the creation of an absolute authority would make for peaceful living in a society? The answer here again seems to be no.

Human interests are diversified and they change from time to time. A ruler who is given absolute power will generally not reflect this change in people's interests but will impose his/her own standards upon them. What seems required for satisfactory living in society is not that there should be *no* conflict at all within the society, but only that the amount of conflict should not be such as to make certain other goals impossible of achievement. The Hobbesian view would rule out all conflict, but it would also prevent the

realization of many fundamental desires. A sovereign power that does not have absolute authority may yet have enough authority to eliminate most conflicts and still allow for the satisfaction of a wide range of interests. For this reason, it does not seem requisite—as Hobbes's account suggests—that absolute authority is necessary in order to achieve a good society. We may thus reject the philosophical part of the theory as well as the psychological part.

Hobbes's political philosophy is essentially an expression of defeatism: it is a "peace at any price" philosophy. On this ground alone, it would be unacceptable to people of a less submissive temper. Compare, for example, the ringing words of Patrick Henry, "Give me liberty or give me death!" or those of Thomas Jefferson, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants!" **Hobbes, in attempting to avoid the evil effects of internecine conflict, was willing to submit to the evils of tyranny and to surrender liberty in return for security.** For him, these were the only choices that a citizen faced. But as Locke was to show, these were not the only alternatives; it was possible to have both law and order and the absence of tyranny.

The political philosophy of John Locke

It is accurate to say that **John Locke was the theoretical architect of democracy as it exists in the Western world today.** His ideas, as expressed in his famous *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, were influ-

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