

Hobbes -

Political Philosophy and Morality When we turn directly to Hobbes' political philosophy, we find that he employed as much of his theory of motion and his logic, as well as the method of geometry, as this subject would permit. Just as he looked to the concepts of motion and bodies to describe the nature of men, and particularly to describe human knowledge, so also he now analyzes the structure and nature of the state in terms of moving bodies. Moreover, his account of the state is the most impressive example of his conception of philosophy, for if philosophy is a matter of "reckoning, that is adding and subtracting, of consequences of general names," it is preeminently in his political philosophy that he exhibits his skill and rigor with the meanings of words.

What strikes one first about Hobbes' theory of state is that he approaches the subject not from an historical point of view but from the vantage point of logic and analysis. He does not ask, "when did civil societies emerge?" but asks rather, "how do you explain the emergence of society?" He is concerned to discover the *cause* of civil society, and in harmony with his general method sets out to explain the cause of the state by describing the motion of bodies. His thought about political philosophy resembles the method of geometry only in the sense that from axiomatic premises he deduces all the consequences or conclusions of his political theory, and most of these premises cluster around his conception of human nature.

The State of Nature Hobbes describes men, first of all, as they appear in what he calls the *state of nature*, which is the condition of men before there is any state or civil society. In this state of nature all men are equal and equally have the right to whatever they consider necessary for their survival. Equality here means simply that anyone is capable of hurting his neighbor and taking what he judges he needs for his own protection. Differences in strength can in time be overcome and the weak can destroy the strong. The "right of all to all" which prevails in the state of nature does not mean that one man has a right whereas others have corresponding duties. The word *right* in the bare state of nature is a man's *freedom* "to do what he would, and against whom he thought fit, and to possess, use and enjoy all that he would, or could get." The driving force in man is the will to survive, and the psychological mood pervading all men is fear, the fear of death and particularly the fear of violent death. In the state of nature all men are relentlessly pursuing whatever acts they think will secure their safety. The picture one gets of this state of nature is of men moving against each other, bodies in motion, or the anarchic condition Hobbes called "the war of all against all."

Why do men behave this way? Hobbes analyzes human motivation by saying that all men possess a twofold *endeavor*, namely *appetite* and *aversion*. These two endeavors account for man's motions to and from persons or objects, and have the same meanings as the words *love* and *hate*. Men are attracted to

what they think will help them survive, and they hate whatever they judge to be a threat to them. The words *good* and *evil* have whatever meaning each individual will give them, and each person will call *good* whatever he loves and *evil* whatever he hates, "there being nothing simply and absolutely so." Men are fundamentally egotistical in that they are concerned chiefly about their own survival and identify goodness with their own appetites. It would appear therefore that in the state of nature there is no obligation for men to respect others or that there is no morality in the traditional sense of goodness and justice. Given this egotistical view of human nature, it would appear also that men did not possess the capacity to create an ordered and peaceful society.

But Hobbes argued that several logical conclusions or consequences can be deduced from man's concern for his survival, among these being what Hobbes called *natural laws*. Even in the state of nature, men *know* these natural laws, which are logically consistent with man's principal concern for his own safety. A natural law, said Hobbes, "is a precept, or general rule, found out by reason," telling what to do and what not to do. If the major premise is that I want to survive, I can logically deduce, even in the state of nature, certain rules of behavior that will help me to survive. The first law of nature is therefore that every man ought to "seek peace and follow it." Now this law that urges me to seek peace is natural because it is a logical extension of my concern for survival. It is obvious that I have a better chance to survive if I help to create the conditions of peace. My desire for survival therefore impels me to seek peace. From this first and fundamental law of nature is derived the second law, which states that "a man be willing, when others are so too, as farforth as for peace, and defense of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down his right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself. . . ."

Obligation in the State of Nature If men know these and other natural laws even in the state of nature, do they have an obligation to obey them? Hobbes answers that these laws are always binding, in the state of nature as well as in civil society. But he distinguishes between two ways in which these natural laws are applicable in the state of nature, saying that "the laws of nature oblige *in foro interno*; that is to say, they bind to a desire they should take place: but *in foro externo*; that is, to putting them in act, not always." Thus, it isn't as if there were no obligation in the state of nature; rather, the circumstances for living by these laws in the state of nature are not always present. Men have a right to all things in the state of nature not because there is no obligation, but because if a man were modest, tractable, and kept his promises "in such time and place where no man else should do so, [he] should but make himself a prey to others, and procure his own ruin, contrary to the ground of all laws of nature, which tend to natural preservations." And even when men act to preserve themselves, they are not free from rational natural laws, for even in the state of nature they ought to act in good faith: ". . . if any man *pretend* somewhat to tend necessarily to his preservation, which yet he himself doth not confidently believe so, he may offend against the laws of nature."

Hobbes was aware that the logical outcome of egotistical individuals all deciding how best to survive would be anarchy, where there were "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. . . ." To avoid such a condition of anarchy, the chief cause of which is the conflict of individual and egotistical judgments of right, men, following the dictates of natural law, seeking peace, renounce some of their rights or freedoms and enter into a social contract and thereby create an artificial man, that great *leviathan*, called a *commonwealth*, or *state*.

The Social Contract The contract by which men avoid the state of nature and enter civil society is an agreement between individuals, "as if every man should say to every man, *I authorize 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 authorize all his actions in like manner.*" Two things stand out clearly in this contract. First, the parties to the contract are individuals who promise each other to hand over their right to govern themselves to the sovereign; it is not a contract between the sovereign and the citizens. The sovereign has absolute power to govern and is in no way subject to the citizens. Secondly, Hobbes clearly states that the sovereign can be either "this man" or "this assembly of men," suggesting that in theory, at least, his view of sovereignty was not identified with any particular form of government. It may be that he had a preference for a single ruler with absolute power, but he recognized the possible compatibility of his theory of sovereignty with "democracy." But whatever form the sovereign would take, it is clear that Hobbes saw the transfer of the right to rule from the people to the sovereign as both absolute and irrevocable.

Hobbes was particularly anxious to demonstrate with logical rigor that sovereign power is indivisible. Having shown that in the state of nature anarchy is the logical consequence of independent individual judgments, he concluded that the only way to overcome such anarchy is to make a single body out of the several bodies of the citizens. The only way to transform multiple wills into a single will is to agree that the sovereign's single will and judgment represent the will and judgment of all the citizens. In effect, this is what the contract says when men agree to hand over their right to govern themselves. The sovereign now acts not only on behalf of the citizens but *as if* he embodied the will of the citizens, thereby affirming an identity between the wills of the sovereign and citizens. Resistance against the sovereign by a citizen is therefore illogical on two counts, first because it would amount to resistance to himself, and secondly, to resist is to revert to independent judgment, which is to revert to the state of nature or anarchy. The power of the sovereign must therefore be absolute in order to secure the conditions of order, peace, and law.

Civil Law versus Natural Law Law begins only when there is a sovereign. This is a logical truism, for in the judicial or *legal* sense, a law is defined as a command of the sovereign. It follows that where there is no sovereign, there is no law. To be sure, Hobbes affirmed that even in the state of nature men have knowledge of

the natural law, and in a special sense the natural law is binding even in the state of nature. But only after there is a sovereign can there be a legal order, because only then is there the apparatus of law in which the power of enforcement is central. Without the power to enforce, said Hobbes, covenants are "mere words." Hobbes identifies law with sovereign command and makes the additional point that "there can be no unjust law."

Nowhere does Hobbes' severe authoritarianism express itself in more startling form than when he argues that there can be no unjust law. It appears that justice and morality begin with the sovereign, that there are no principles of justice and morality that precede and limit the acts of the sovereign. Hobbes affirmed this in a notable passage: "To the care of the sovereign, belongeth the making of good laws. But what is a good law? By good law, I mean not a just law: for no law can be unjust." Hobbes gives two reasons for saying no law can be unjust: first, because justice means obeying the law, and this is why justice comes into being only after a law has been made and cannot itself be the standard for law; secondly, when a sovereign makes a law, it is as though the people were making the law, and what they agree upon cannot be unjust. Indeed, the third natural law Hobbes speaks of is "*that men perform their covenants made,*" and he indicated that this is the "fountain of justice." Hence, to keep the contract in which you agreed to obey the sovereign is the essence of Hobbesian justice.

It is evident that Hobbes forces the reader to take each word seriously and "reckon" all the "consequences" that can be deduced from it. If law means the sovereign's command and if justice means obeying the law, there can be no *unjust* law. But there can be a *bad* law, for Hobbes was enough of an Aristotelian to recognize that a sovereign has a definite purpose "for which he was trusted with the sovereign power, namely, the procuration of *the safety of the people*; to which he is obliged by the law of nature, and to render an account thereof to God. . . ." But even in such a case, where the sovereign has commanded a "bad" law, the citizens are not the ones to judge it as such, nor does this justify their disobedience. The sovereign has the sole power to judge what is for the safety of the people; if the people disagreed with him, they would revert to anarchy. If the sovereign engages in iniquitous acts, this is a matter between the sovereign and God, not between the citizens and the sovereign. And because he feared anarchy and disorder so deeply, Hobbes pushed his logic of obedience to the point of making religion and the church subordinate to the state. To the Christian who felt that the sovereign's command violated the law of God, Hobbes gave no comfort but insisted that if such a person could not obey the sovereign, he must "go to Christ in martyrdom. . . ."

With these bold strokes, Hobbes altered the course of philosophy. He was among the first to apply the methods of science to the study of human nature, providing novel explanations for human knowledge and moral behavior, departing also from the medieval notion of natural law, and arriving in the end at a highly authoritarian concept of sovereignty. Although Hobbes did not win widespread approval in his day, and even though there is much in his philosophy to question and criticize, his enduring influence was assured by the precision of his formulation of the problems of philosophy.