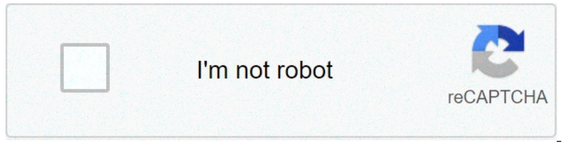

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Thomas hobbes philosophy on government

First published Tue Feb 12, 2002; substantive revision Mon Apr 30, 2018 The 17th Century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes is now widely regarded as one of a handful of truly great political philosophers, whose masterwork Leviathan rivals in significance the political writings of Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls. Hobbes is famous for his early and elaborate development of what has come to be known as “social contract theory”, the method of justifying political principles or arrangements by appeal to the agreement that would be made among suitably situated rational, free, and equal persons. He is infamous for having used the social contract method to arrive at the astonishing conclusion that we ought to submit to the authority of an absolute—undivided and unlimited—sovereign power. While his methodological innovation had a profound constructive impact on subsequent work in political philosophy, his substantive conclusions have served mostly as a foil for the development of more palatable philosophical positions. Hobbes’s moral philosophy has been less influential than his political philosophy, in part because that theory is too ambiguous to have garnered any general consensus as to its content. Most scholars have taken Hobbes to have affirmed some sort of personal relativism or subjectivism; but views that Hobbes espoused divine command theory, virtue ethics, rule egoism, or a form of projectivism also find support in Hobbes’s texts and among scholars. Because Hobbes held that “the true doctrine of the Lawes of Nature is the true Morall philosophie”, differences in interpretation of Hobbes’s moral philosophy can be traced to differing understandings of the status and operation of Hobbes’s “laws of nature”, which laws will be discussed below. The formerly dominant view that Hobbes espoused psychological egoism as the foundation of his moral theory is currently widely rejected, and there has been to date no fully systematic study of Hobbes’s moral psychology. Hobbes wrote several versions of his political philosophy, including The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic (also under the titles Human Nature and De Corpore Politico) published in 1650, De Cive (1642) published in English as Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society in 1651, the English Leviathan published in 1651, and its Latin revision in 1668. Others of his works are also important in understanding his political philosophy, especially his history of the English Civil War, Behemoth (published 1679), De Corpore (1655), De Homine (1658), Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England (1681), and The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance (1656). All of Hobbes’s major writings are collected in The English Works of Thomas Hobbes, edited by Sir William Molesworth (11 volumes, London 1839–45), and Thomae Hobbes Opera Philosophica Quae Latina Scripsit Omnia, also edited by Molesworth (5 volumes; London, 1839–45). Oxford University Press has undertaken a projected 26 volume collection of the Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes. So far 3 volumes are available: De Cive (edited by Howard Warrender), The Correspondence of Thomas Hobbes (edited by Noel Malcolm), and Writings on Common Law and Hereditary Right (edited by Alan Cromartie and Quentin Skinner). Recently Noel Malcolm has published a three volume edition of Leviathan, which places the English text side by side with Hobbes’s later Latin version of it. Readers new to Hobbes should begin with Leviathan, being sure to read Parts Three and Four, as well as the more familiar and often excerpted Parts One and Two. There are many fine overviews of Hobbes’s normative philosophy, some of which are listed in the following selected bibliography of secondary works. 2. The Philosophical Project Hobbes sought to discover rational principles for the construction of a civil polity that would not be subject to destruction from within. Having lived through the period of political disintegration culminating in the English Civil War, he came to the view that the burdens of even the most oppressive government are “scarce sensible, in respect of the miseries, and horrible calamities, that accompany a Civill Warre”. Because virtually any government would be better than a civil war, and, according to Hobbes’s analysis, all but absolute governments are systematically prone to dissolution into civil war, people ought to submit themselves to an absolute political authority. Continued stability will require that they also refrain from the sorts of actions that might undermine such a regime. For example, subjects should not dispute the sovereign power and under no circumstances should they rebel. In general, Hobbes aimed to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between political obedience and peace. 3. The State of Nature To establish these conclusions, Hobbes invites us to consider what life would be like in a state of nature, that is, a condition without government. Perhaps we would imagine that people might fare best in such a state, where each decides for herself how to act, and is judge, jury and executioner in her own case whenever disputes arise—and that at any rate, this state is the appropriate baseline against which to judge the justifiability of political arrangements. Hobbes terms this situation “the condition of mere nature”, a state of perfectly private judgment, in which there is no agency with recognized authority to arbitrate disputes and effective power to enforce its decisions. Hobbes’s near descendant, John Locke, insisted in his Second Treatise of Government that the state of nature was indeed to be preferred to subjection to the arbitrary power of an absolute sovereign. But Hobbes famously argued that such a “dissolute condition of masterlesse men, without subjection to Lawes, and a coercive Power to tye their hands from rapine, and revenge” would make impossible all of the basic security upon which comfortable, sociable, civilized life depends. There would be “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; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” If this is the state of nature, people have strong reasons to avoid it, which can be done only by submitting to some mutually recognized public authority, for “so long a man is in the condition of mere nature, (which is a condition of war,) as private appetite is the measure of good and evill.” Although many readers have criticized Hobbes’s state of nature as unduly pessimistic, he constructs it from a number of individually plausible empirical and normative assumptions. He assumes that people are sufficiently similar in their mental and physical attributes that no one is invulnerable nor can expect to be able to dominate the others. Hobbes assumes that people generally “shun death”, and that the desire to preserve their own lives is very strong in most people. While people have local affections, their benevolence is limited, and they have a tendency to partiality. Concerned that others should agree with their own high opinions of themselves, people are sensitive to slights. They make evaluative judgments, but often use seemingly impersonal terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to stand for their own personal preferences. They are curious about the causes of events, and anxious about their futures; according to Hobbes, these characteristics incline people to adopt religious beliefs, although the content of those beliefs will differ depending upon the sort of religious education one has happened to receive. With respect to normative assumptions, Hobbes ascribes to each person in the state of nature a liberty right to preserve herself, which he terms “the right of nature”. This is the right to do whatever one sincerely judges needful for one’s preservation; yet because it is at least possible that virtually anything might be judged necessary for one’s preservation, this theoretically limited right of nature becomes in practice an unlimited right to potentially anything, or, as Hobbes puts it, a right “to all things”. Hobbes further assumes as a principle of practical rationality, that people should adopt what they see to be the necessary means to their most important ends. 4. The State of Nature Is a State of War Taken together, these plausible descriptive and normative assumptions yield a state of nature potentially fraught with divisive struggle. The right of each to all things invites serious conflict, especially if there is competition for resources, as there will surely be over at least scarce goods such as the most desirable lands, spouses, etc. People will quite naturally fear that others may (citing the right of nature) invade them, and may rationally plan to strike first as an anticipatory defense. Moreover, that minority of prideful or “vain-glorious” persons who take pleasure in exercising power over others will naturally elicit preemptive defensive responses from others. Conflict will be further fueled by disagreement in religious views, in moral judgments, and over matters as mundane as what goods one actually needs, and what respect one properly merits. Hobbes imagines a state of nature in which each person is free to decide for herself what she needs, what she’s owed, what’s respectful, right, pious, prudent, and also free to decide all of these questions for the behavior of everyone else as well, and to act on her judgments as she thinks best, enforcing her views where she can. In this situation where there is no common authority to resolve these many and serious disputes, we can easily imagine with Hobbes that the state of nature would become a “state of war”, even worse, a war of “all against all”. 5. Further Questions About the State of Nature In response to the natural question whether humanity ever was generally in any such state of nature, Hobbes gives three examples of putative states of nature. First, he notes that all sovereigns are in this state with respect to one another. This claim has made Hobbes the representative example of a “realist” in international relations. Second, he opined that many now civilized peoples were formerly in that state, and some few peoples—“the savage people in many places of America” (Leviathan, XIII), for instance—were still to his day in the state of nature. Third and most significantly, Hobbes asserts that the state of nature will be easily recognized by those whose formerly peaceful states have collapsed into civil war. While the state of nature’s condition of perfectly private judgment is an abstraction, something resembling it too closely for comfort remains a perpetually present possibility, to be feared, and avoided. Do the other assumptions of Hobbes’s philosophy license the existence of this imagined state of isolated individuals pursuing their private judgments? Probably not, since, as feminist critics among others have noted, children are by Hobbes’s theory assumed to have undertaken an obligation of obedience to their parents in exchange for nurturing, and so the primitive units in the state of nature will include families ordered by internal obligations, as well as individuals. The bonds of affection, sexual affinity, and friendship—as well as of clan membership and shared religious belief—may further decrease the accuracy of any purely individualistic model of the state of nature. This concession need not impugn Hobbes’s analysis of conflict in the state of nature, since it may turn out that competition, diffidence and glory-seeking are disastrous sources of conflicts among small groups just as much as they are among individuals. Still, commentators seeking to answer the question how precisely we should understand Hobbes’s state of nature are investigating the degree to which Hobbes imagines that to be a condition of interaction among isolated individuals. Another important open question is that of what, exactly, it is about human beings that makes it the case (supposing Hobbes is right) that our communal life is prone to disaster when we are left to interact according only to our own individual judgments. Perhaps, while people do wish to act for their own best long-term interest, they are shortsighted, and so indulge their current interests without properly considering the effects of their current behavior on their long-term interest. This would be a type of failure of rationality. Alternatively, it may be that people in the state of nature are fully rational, but are trapped in a situation that makes it individually rational for each to act in a way that is sub-optimal for all, perhaps finding themselves in the familiar ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ of game theory. Or again, it may be that Hobbes’s state of nature would be peaceful but for the presence of persons (just a few, or perhaps all, to some degree) whose passions overrule their calmer judgments; who are prideful, spiteful, partial, envious, jealous, and in other ways prone to behave in ways that lead to war. Such an account would understand irrational human passions to be the source of conflict. Which, if any, of these accounts adequately answers to Hobbes’s text is a matter of continuing debate among Hobbes scholars. Game theorists have been particularly active in these debates, experimenting with different models for the state of nature and the conflict it engenders. 6. The Laws of Nature Hobbes argues that the state of nature is a miserable state of war in which none of our important human ends are reliably realizable. Happily, human nature also provides resources to escape this miserable condition. Hobbes argues that each of us, as a rational being, can see that a war of all against all is inimical to the satisfaction of her interests, and so can agree that “peace is good, and therefore also the way or means of peace are good”. Humans will recognize as imperatives the injunction to seek peace, and to do those things necessary to secure it, when they can do so safely. Hobbes calls these practical imperatives “Lawes of Nature”, the sum of which is not to treat others in ways we would not have them treat us. These “precepts”, “conclusions” or “theorems” of reason are “eternal and immutable”, always commanding our assent even when they may not safely be acted upon. They forbid many familiar vices such as iniquity, cruelty, and ingratitude. Although commentators do not agree on whether these laws should be regarded as mere precepts of prudence, or rather as divine commands, or moral imperatives of some other sort, all agree that Hobbes understands them to direct people to submit to political authority. They tell us to seek peace with willing others by laying down part of our “right to all things”, by mutually covenanting to submit to the authority of a sovereign, and further direct us to keep that covenant establishing sovereignty. 7. Establishing Sovereign Authority When people mutually covenant each to the others to obey a common authority, they have established what Hobbes calls “sovereignty by institution”. When, threatened by a conqueror, they covenant for protection by promising obedience, they have established “sovereignty by acquisition”. These are equally legitimate ways of establishing sovereignty, according to Hobbes, and their underlying motivation is the same—namely fear—whether of one’s fellows or of a conqueror. The social covenant involves both the renunciation or transfer of right and the authorization of the sovereign power. Political legitimacy depends not on how a government came to power, but only on whether it can effectively protect those who have consented to obey it; political obligation ends when protection ceases. 8. Absolutism Although Hobbes offered some mild pragmatic grounds for preferring monarchy to other forms of government, his main concern was to argue that effective government—whatever its form—must have absolute authority. Its powers must be neither divided nor limited. The powers of legislation, adjudication, enforcement, taxation, war-making (and the less familiar right of control of normative doctrine) are connected in such a way that a loss of one may thwart effective exercise of the rest; for example, legislation without interpretation and enforcement will not serve to regulate conduct. Only a government that possesses all of what Hobbes terms the “essential rights of sovereignty” can be reliably effective, since where partial sets of these rights are held by different bodies that disagree in their judgments as to what is to be done, paralysis of effective government, or degeneration into a civil war to settle their dispute, may occur. Similarly, to impose limitation on the authority of the government is to invite irresoluble disputes over whether it has overstepped those limits. If each person is to decide for herself whether the government should be obeyed, factional disagreement—and war to settle the issue, or at least paralysis of effective government—are quite possible. To refer resolution of the question to some further authority, itself also limited and so open to challenge for overstepping its bounds, would be to initiate an infinite regress of non-authoritative ‘authorities’ (where the buck never stops). To refer it to a further authority itself unlimited, would be just to relocate the seat of absolute sovereignty, a position entirely consistent with Hobbes’s insistence on absolutism. To avoid the horrible prospect of governmental collapse and return to the state of nature, people should treat their sovereign as having absolute authority. 9. Responsibility and the Limits of Political Obligation When subjects institute a sovereign by authorizing it, they agree, in conformity with the principle “no wrong is done to a consenting party”, not to hold it liable for any errors in judgment it may make and not to treat any harms it does to them as actionable injustices. Although many interpreters have assumed that by authorizing a sovereign, subjects become morally responsible for the actions it commands, Hobbes instead insists that “the external actions done in obedience to [laws], without the inward approbation, are the actions of the sovereign, and not of the subject, which is in that case but as an instrument, without any motion of his own at all” (Leviathan xlii, 106). It may be important to Hobbes’s project of persuading his Christian readers to obey their sovereign that he can reassure them that God will not hold them responsible for wrongful actions done at the sovereign’s command, because they cannot reasonably be expected to obey if doing so would jeopardize their eternal prospects. Hence Hobbes explains that “whatsoever a subject…is compelled to do in obedience to his sovereign, and doth it not in order to his own mind, but in order to the laws of his country, that action is not his, but his sovereign’s.” (Leviathan xlii. 11) This position reinforces absolutism by permitting Hobbes to maintain that subjects can obey even commands to perform actions they believe to be sinful without fear of divine punishment. While Hobbes insists that we should regard our governments as having absolute authority, he reserves to subjects the liberty of disobeying some of their government’s commands. He argues that subjects retain a right of self-defense against the sovereign power, giving them the right to disobey or resist when their lives are in danger. He also gives them seemingly broad resistance rights in cases in which their families or even their honor are at stake. These exceptions have understandably intrigued those who study Hobbes. His ascription of apparently inalienable rights—what he calls the “true liberties of subjects”—seems incompatible with his defense of absolute sovereignty. Moreover, if the sovereign’s failure to provide adequate protection to subjects extinguishes their obligation to obey, and if it is left to each subject to judge for herself the adequacy of that protection, it seems that people have never really exited the fearsome state of nature. This aspect of Hobbes’s political philosophy has been hotly debated ever since Hobbes’s time. Bishop Bramhall, one of Hobbes’s contemporaries, famously accused Leviathan of being a “Rebell’s Catechism.” More recently, some commentators have argued that Hobbes’s discussion of the limits of political obligation is the Achilles’ heel of his theory. It is not clear whether or not this charge can stand up to scrutiny, but it will surely be the subject of much continued discussion. 10. Religion and Social Instability The last crucial aspect of Hobbes’s political philosophy is his treatment of religion. Hobbes progressively expands his discussion of Christian religion in each revision of his political philosophy, until it comes in Leviathan to comprise roughly half the book. There is no settled consensus on how Hobbes understands the significance of religion within his political theory. Some commentators have argued that Hobbes is trying to demonstrate to his readers the compatibility of his political theory with core Christian commitments, since it may seem that Christians’ religious duties forbid their affording the sort of absolute obedience to their governors which Hobbes’s theory requires of them. Others have doubted the sincerity of his professed Christianity, arguing that by the use of irony or other subtle rhetorical devices, Hobbes sought to undermine his readers’ religious beliefs. Howsoever his intentions are properly understood, Hobbes’s obvious concern with the power of religious belief is a fact that interpreters of his political philosophy must seek to explain. 11. Hobbes on Women and the Family Scholars are increasingly interested in how Hobbes thought of the status of women, and of the family. Hobbes was one of the earliest western philosophers to count women as persons when devising a social contract among persons. He insists on the equality of all people, very explicitly including women. People are equal because they are all subject to domination, and all potentially capable of dominating others. No person is so strong as to be invulnerable to attack while sleeping by the concerted efforts of others, nor is any so strong as to be assured of dominating all others. In this relevant sense, women are naturally equal to men. They are equally naturally free, meaning that their consent is required before they will be under the authority of anyone else. In this, Hobbes’s claims stand in stark contrast to many prevailing views of the time, according to which women were born inferior to and subordinate to men. Sir Robert Filmer, who later served as the target of John Locke’s First Treatise of Government, is a well-known proponent of this view, which he calls patriarchalism. Explicitly rejecting the patriarchalist view as well as Salic law, Hobbes maintains that women can be sovereigns; authority for him is “neither male nor female”. He also argues for natural maternal right: in the state of nature, dominion over children is naturally the mother’s. He witnesses the Amazons. In seeming contrast to this egalitarian foundation, Hobbes spoke of the commonwealth in patriarchal language. In the move from the state of nature to civil society, families are described as “fathers”, “servants”, and “children”, seemingly obliterating mothers from the picture entirely. Hobbes justifies this way of talking by saying that it is fathers not mothers who have founded societies. As true as that is, it is easy to see how there is a lively debate between those who emphasize the potentially feminist or egalitarian aspects of Hobbes’s thought and those who emphasize his ultimate exclusion of women. Such debates raise the question: To what extent are the patriarchal claims Hobbes makes integral to his overall theory, if indeed they are integral at all? The secondary literature on Hobbes’s moral and political philosophy (not to speak of his entire body of work) is vast, appearing across many disciplines and in many languages. The following is a narrow selection of fairly recent works by philosophers, political theorists, and intellectual historians, available in English, on main areas of inquiry in Hobbes’s moral and political thought. Very helpful for further reference is the critical bibliography of Hobbes scholarship to 1990 contained in Zagorin, P., 1990, “Hobbes on Our Mind”, Journal of the History of Ideas, 51(2). Journals Hobbes Studies is an annually published journal devoted to scholarly research on all aspects of Hobbes’s work. Collections Brown, K.C. (ed.), 1965, Hobbes Studies, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, contains important papers by A.E. Taylor, J.W. N. 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